Shift to the Right:

The Tea Party and Polarizing American Politics

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Abstract

The Tea Party entered US politics in a time of economic uncertainty, positioning itself far to the right of the conservative movement. Its highly conservative position has allowed it to provide a self-definition that stands in contrast to more moderate and liberal political views. To examine the Tea Party’s ability to polarize political prototypes, we manipulated the comparative context in which a Tea Party member advocated an extreme message ($N=92$). Conservatives experiencing self-uncertainty (for whom the message came from an ingroup minority) supported the extreme position and became more conservative when the message appeared in an intergroup context, as opposed to liberals whom were not influenced by the message. Results are discussed in terms of the ability for extreme ingroup minorities to polarize political prototypes under self-conceptual uncertainty.

Keywords: Uncertainty, Polarization, Minority Influence, Extremism, Self-categorization
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“A powerful coalition of Tea-Party-backed freshmen walks the halls of Congress, where they have unsettled the establishment and pushed their own party to the right. On the campaign trail, the support of Tea Party groups has helped launch campaigns and is a force candidates ignore at their peril.”—Rachel Streitfeld, CNN Political Producer, 2011

The “Tea Party” burst on the American political scene during the profound economic and social uncertainty provoked by the 2008 stock market plunge and ensuing global recession. Although a numerical minority, the Tea Party has attracted disproportionate media coverage due to the political impact of its promotion of a fiscally and socially conservative agenda that places it far to the right of establishment conservative and Republican ideology. Given the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty, will the Tea Party fragment conservative ideology, steer American politics further to the right, generate a centrist correction, rebalance politics to the left, or have no impact on American politics and political attitudes? In this article we draw on three related literatures (group polarization, minority influence, and uncertainty-identity theory) to derive and test the hypothesis that moderate conservatives experiencing self-uncertainty move further to the right when exposed to Tea Party rhetoric explicitly aimed at liberals.

According to social identity theory, group identification is a matter of defining and evaluating oneself in terms of the prototypical attributes of one’s ingroup, where prototypes capture shared ingroup attributes and accentuate ways in which the ingroup differs from relevant outgroups (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, &Wetherell, 1987; see Abrams & Hogg, 2010).
Predicated on this idea, the social identity analysis of group-based influence shows that people’s behavior conforms to such prototypes (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Hogg & Turner, 1987); and thus, ingroup prototypes are polarized away from relevant outgroups, often in the direction of more extreme ingroup positions (e.g., Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990; Hogg, Turner, & Davidson, 1999).

In the case of the Tea Party, the polarization prediction is that when moderate conservatives define themselves in contradistinction to the Tea Party they will polarize away from the Tea Party’s views and will thus become more moderate. When moderate conservatives do not focus on the Tea Party but only focus on liberals they will shift to the right and thus be more aligned with the Tea Party. There is however a potential complication here – the Tea Party is an active minority. Research on minority influence shows that active minorities may not directly influence majority views but do have a latent conversion effect on majority attitudes (Moscovici, 1980; see Martin & Hewstone, 2009), and this is particularly the case if the minority is consistent (Mugny, 1982) and is an ingroup rather than an outgroup minority (Crano & Seyranian, 2009). This generates the prediction that the Tea Party will have little effect on liberals’ attitudes as the Tea Party is an outgroup minority, but in contrast to the polarization prediction above, the Tea Party will ultimately shift moderate conservatives’ attitudes towards the right as the Tea Party comprises an ingroup minority for moderate conservatives.

The seemingly conflicting psychologies of polarization and of minority influence has been integrated by David and Turner (1999). They conducted a series of studies examining a minority faction’s ability to exert influence on a politically charged issue and showed that a minority group can exert direct and immediate influence under certain conditions. Specifically, moderate feminists exposed to a message from a radical pro-feminist group became more pro-
feminist in an intergroup context (contrast to anti-feminists) than in an intragroup context (moderate feminists). In the intragroup context, moderates moved away from the minority position to maintain a prototypical group position, while in the intergroup context, participants moved toward the ingroup minority because it maximized the differences between the ingroup and outgroup positions.

These findings point to a polarization-related social identity dynamic underlying minority influence. An ingroup minority has direct influence on the group to the extent that the minority provides a distinctive social identity with which the larger group can identify. In an intergroup comparative context an extreme ingroup minority provides a polarized ingroup prototype that accentuates intergroup distinctiveness – thus such a minority effectively influences the rest of the group to embrace its position and become more extreme.

Distinctive and extreme identities may be particularly attractive in times of uncertainty. According to uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2000, 2007, 2012) people find feelings of uncertainty, particularly about themselves, their identity and their own lives, aversive (cf. Van den Bos, 2009), and are motivated to reduce self-uncertainty. People effectively reduce self-uncertainty by identifying with self-inclusive groups, particularly groups that are subjectively prominent (Grant & Hogg, in press) in holding distinctive and sometimes extreme positions (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010). Extreme groups provide a prototype that is easy to understand because they strongly enforce ingroup norms that make obvious the boundaries of the group while prescribing their members’ attitudes and behaviors. Such groups tend to be high in entitativity (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996) and are well positioned to reduce the uncertainty of their followers (e.g., Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007).
The study reported here investigates how self-uncertainty affects the impact of an extreme political minority (the Tea Party) on the views of political moderates (liberals and conservatives) as a function of the social comparative context of the extremist minority’s message (intragroup versus intergroup). Self-identified conservatives and liberals read a speech given by a leader of the Tea Party. They were told that the speech had been given to a group of Republicans or to a group of Democrats (comparative context). Just before giving their evaluation of and support for the Tea Party message the participants were cognitively primed to feel more or less uncertain about themselves (self-uncertainty). We predicted that conservatives primed to feel self-uncertain and led to believe that the speech was targeted at Democrats would be most supportive of the message and would likewise be most likely to polarize toward the political orientation of the extreme group.

Method

A sample of 92 students (29 male, 63 female) at a public university in Texas provided data at two time points approximately one week apart. We excluded eight cases due to missing data or failure to perceive manipulations, yielding a final sample of 84 participants. At time 1, participants completed all baseline measures and one week later they received a survey containing the study manipulations and post-test measurements.

Baseline Measurements. Participants completed a measure of self-uncertainty adapted from previous work on uncertainty-identity theory (see Rast, Gaffney, Hogg, & Crisp, in press). This is a 10-item scale, ranging from 1 disagree strongly to 9 agree strongly, $\alpha=.92$ (e.g., “I am uncertain about my place in the world”). Next, participants completed a three-item measure of conservatism (1 very liberal, 9 very conservative), $\alpha=.90$ (e.g., “How would you describe your
general political views?”). Finally, participants completed demographic measures including political affiliation, sex, age, and whether or not they consider themselves religious.

**Tea Party Speech.** One week after completing baseline measurements, participants read a speech given by a leader of the Tea Party, in which the leader advocated a “return” to limiting government and social programs and a “return” to God in American politics.¹

**Context Manipulation.** We led participants to believe that the speech that they read was delivered to a group of Republicans (thus forming a relatively intragroup context for conservatives and an intergroup context for liberals) or to a group of Democrats (forming a relatively intergroup context for conservatives). After reading the speech and context manipulations, participants completed a series of three questions to ensure that they had read the speech (e.g., “To whom was this speech given?”). Correct responses for each question were summed to create one measure of how well participants understood the message.

**Uncertainty Prime.** Next, participants completed a high or a low uncertainty prime (Hogg et al., 2006; Hohman, & Hogg, 2011; Hohman, Hogg, & Bligh, 2010). The high uncertainty prime asked participants to list three things that make them feel uncertain about their lives and the low uncertainty prime asked participants to list three things that make them feel confident about their lives.

**Post-test Measurements.** Participants completed a six-item measure of support for the Tea Party’s message, which was created for this study (1 disagree strongly, 9 agree strongly), \( \alpha=0.94 \) (e.g., “Overall I agree with the message of this speech”; “America must incorporate a

¹ Note. Although this speech is the product of an actual Tea Party rally and was given by a real leader within the movement, we did not disclose the leader’s name.
discussion of God into politics”). They also completed a post-test measurement of conservatism, consisting of the same three items listed in the pre-test measure, $\alpha = .92$.

**Results**

**Background Variables and Controls**

Two regression analyses were performed with message support and post-test conservatism serving as the dependent measures. The regression of age, gender, and ethnicity did not reveal significant effects on either dependent measure, thus these variables were excluded from further analyses. Because the speech that participants read focused on religion in politics, we controlled for religion in subsequent regression analyses. Similarly, baseline measures of enduring self-uncertainty and party affiliation as well as attention paid to the context manipulation served as covariates in both regressions, and in all simple slopes analyses. All predictor variables were mean centered and interactions computed according to procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991).

**Message Support**

Hierarchical linear regression of the control variables (Step 1), the independent variables pre-test conservatism, uncertainty, and context (Step 2), the two-way interactions (Step 3), and the three-way interaction between the three independent variables (Step 4) was significant at Step 1, $R^2 = .34$, $F(4, 79) = 10.07, p < .001$. At Step 2 the regression was also significant, $R^2 = .39$, $\Delta R^2 = .05$, $\Delta F(3, 76) = 6.88, p < .001$, revealing only a main effect for pre-test conservatism where high conservatism was associated with greater support for the message than low conservatism, $\beta = .23, t(83) = 2.44, p = .02$. At Step 3 the regression was significant, $R^2 = .42$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $\Delta F(3$, 2)

Note. Religion was the only significant covariate in each regression ($p < .001; p = .017$, respectively).
The addition of the three-way interaction at Step 4 significantly increased the prediction of message support, $R^2 = .45$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $\Delta F(1, 72) = 3.68$, $p = .05$. In support of our predictions, the three-way interaction accounted for significant variance in message support, $\beta = .18$, $t(83) = 1.92$, $p = .05$ (See Figure 1). Simple slopes analysis revealed that conservatism was positively related to message support under high uncertainty in the Democrat context condition, $\beta = .57$, $t(83) = 3.51$, $p = .001$. Specifically, conservative participants induced to feel uncertain more strongly endorsed the Tea Party message in the Democrat (intergroup) context condition than did more liberal participants for whom this context was relatively intragroup. This effect was not present under low uncertainty, $\beta = .02$, $t(83) = .04$, $p = .98$. Neither context nor uncertainty as moderators yielded statically significant slopes, $ps > .08$.

Post-test Conservatism

We constructed the same regression model as the previous analysis to examine effects on conservatism. The regression was significant at Step 1, $R^2 = .12$, $F(4, 79) = 2.37$, $p = .05$ and Step 2, $R^2 = .59$, $\Delta R^2 = .47$, $\Delta F(3, 76) = 15.42$, $p < .001$. The only significant main effect was for pre-test conservatism where, unsurprisingly, conservative participants had the highest level of post-test conservatism, $\beta = .72$, $t(83) = 9.19$, $p < .001$. At Step 3 the regression was significant, $R^2 = .60$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $\Delta F(3, 73) = 10.97$, $p < .001$. The addition of the three-way interaction at Step 4 significantly strengthened prediction of post-test conservatism, $R^2 = .62$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\Delta F(1, 72) = 3.92$, $p = .05$. In support of our predictions, the three-way interaction accounted for a significant amount of variance in post-test conservatism, $\beta = .15$, $t(83) = 1.99$, $p = .05$ (See Figure 2).
Simple slopes analysis revealed that although pre-test conservatism was significantly related to post-test conservatism at each level of context and uncertainty, the relationship was weakest for participants low in uncertainty and in the Democrat context ($\beta=.41$, $t(83)=2.73$, $p=.008$) and in the Republican context under high uncertainty ($\beta=.68$, $t(83)=3.65$, $p<.001$). While the slopes for context were non-significant ($ps>.08$), there was a modest trend for uncertainty as the moderator, such that for conservatives in the Democrat context, high uncertainty was associated with higher levels of post-test conservatism than low uncertainty, $\beta=.28$, $t(83)=1.83$, $p=.07$. That is, uncertain conservatives in the intergroup context condition had the highest levels of post-test conservatism.

Discussion

The results of this experiment provide empirical evidence for a shift in both political attitudes and political conservatism after exposure to an extreme message from a numerically small political group. In line with research on polarizing prototypes (e.g., Abrams et al., 1990; David & Turner, 1999), our results showed that this extreme Tea Party message is most effective in an intergroup context and when message targets feel uncertain (Hogg, 2012). Only conservative participants, for whom the message source was an ingroup source, were affected by this message. Research on uncertainty-identity theory demonstrates that when faced with instances of uncertainty, people tend to identify with entitative groups, some of which may also espouse extreme ideology (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010). Our results provide evidence that when participants are uncertain, they not only support the relatively extreme message of an ingroup source, but also experience a shift in ideology that better aligns them with the source-
only in instances of an intergroup context when such an identification with the extreme wing allows the target to polarize away from an outgroup (Abrams et al., 1990).

Taking on both the values and attitudes of such groups may prove to be a powerful source of uncertainty reduction. In the case of attitudes, conservatives were most supportive of the message in a comparative intergroup context because polarizing away from an outgroup (Democrats) and toward the message of the extreme wing of their ingroup (the Tea Party) may have allowed for uncertainty reduction. While baseline conservatism was a strong predictor of post-test conservatism, this relationship was weakened for conservatives low in uncertainty and conservatives exposed to the extreme message in an intragroup context.

Our results provide evidence that not only is the comparative context important for support of relatively extreme messages and polarization of group prototypes, but so is the overall climate of uncertainty. It is important to keep in mind that our manipulations only examined the effect of a political message from a conservative social group, meaning resulting attitudes and prototypes impacted conservative participants (Hogg & Turner, 1987). Our findings suggest that conservatism, as a political ideology, is a group-defining feature, which is malleable under uncertainty (see also, Jost et al., 2007 for a related argument on uncertainty avoidance), particularly when it grounds one’s prototypicality in a specific group membership. In a time when the news is fraught with examples of economic uncertainty and instability, our results highlight how a political social movement may gain influence over moderate members of their political wing and polarize group prototypes, resulting in social change.
References


Figure 1

Message support as a function of pre-test conservatism moderated by context and uncertainty (± 1SD, respectively).
Figure 2

Post-test conservatism as a function of pre-test conservatism moderated by context and uncertainty (± 1SD, respectively).