Analytical Essay on The Tea Party: A Social Movement Analysis

The Tea Party (TPM) emerged in the American political sphere out of the ashes of the 2008 financial crisis. It was created out of conservative populist anger towards government bailouts of banks and the economic conditions, that had bestowed American society since the financial crisis had begun. Its emergence took many scholars by surprise, as before the crisis there had been no real indication of mass support for a movement of its nature within the populous. Initially the TPM protested for decreasing taxes, decreasing the national debt and decreasing government spending (Baker, 2015). By the 2010 elections to the house and congress, it was clear a political beast had emerged. This social movement analysis will look at three social movement theories (resource mobilisation, political process theory and framing) in order to better understand how the movement developed and how its mobilised support.

Resource mobilisation Theory (RMT) is a social movement spectrum of analysis that can be applied to TPM. The RMT model rejects the traditional view of collective behaviour and views social movements as “rational, institutional rooted, political challenges by an aggrieved group” (Buechler, 1993).

In layman’s term, RMT is used to look at the structure of grievances seen within society and then analyse what opportunities are available to the groups with those grievances. More contemporary theorists of RMT, point to the presence of SMO’s as being of vital importance for a social movement to be successful (McAdam, 1982). This is especially present in the early years of the social movement as SMO’s provide vital resources that are needed in order to mobilise support, as stated by McCarthy and Zald “dependence of movements upon external support for success”

Typically, in the realm of social movement theory, social movements are born with limited resources and infrastructure. On the contrary one of the most influential factors of the Tea Party success was the huge amount of resources it was able to accumulate and have access to at its conception.

The Tea Party had support from wealthy individuals, entrepreneurs and other conservative groups (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012). These donors according to Skocpol wanted the Republican party to shift even further to the right and with the emergence of the TPM saw an opportunity to mobilise mass support (Skocpol and Williamson, 102). Entrepreneurs such as the Koch brothers “indirectly” helped TPM in its mobilisation efforts, confirming McCarthy and Zald’s research that “grievances and discontent may be defined, created and manipulated by issue entrepreneurs and organisations” (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). The Koch brothers funded right-wing organisations such as FreedomWorks and Americans for prosperity, which both helped to mobilise support as well as offer vital resources to TPM (Mayer and Pullman, 2014). Scholars such as Jane Mayer point to FreedomWorks function of helping to create the “TeaPartyPatriots”, which encompassed an online grass-roots organisation that became a vital tool for local level mobilisation within the decentralised structure of TPM (Mayer, 2010). Other Scholars such as Pullman, suggest that FreedomWorks was vital in encouraging Tea Party members to run for entry level positions in the Republican party (Pullman, 2014). Therefore,

showing the effect of these SMO's on the success of Tea-Party campaigning in the 2010 election.

Alongside this, another key factor in TPM mobilisation efforts, that goes in line with RMT theory was the cultural support it received within American society and the Media. The media are known in political science to play an important role in moulding public opinion about specific events (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). When looking at media coverage of TPM one would expect it to conform with Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model of protest coverage, where the media are seen to confide to the interests of the elite and diminish the ideology of the protest party (Herman and Chomsky,1988). Or one would expect its coverage to confide with the historic perception of conservative social movement as being "ignorant' or intolerant" (Bell, 1963). However, this can't be said to be the case with TPM, the tea party within the media was portrayed as everyday grass-route Americans who have a grievance with the fiscal issues present in American Society (BoyKoff, 2011). For example, Fox news played a vital role in the dissemination of information for the TPM cause. Fox encouraged mobilisation through its endless coverage of TPM activity, as well as the promotion of TPM events (Rafail and McCarthy, 2018). Due to the decentralised nature of TPM, Television and radio had a vital role in provision of information to the various chapters of the tea party, that were geographically distant from one another (BoyKoff, 2011). The TPM was able to master the conservative news channels and therefore was able to mobilise support and resources from the common people who shared a grievance with the organisation. (Andrews and Caren, 2010)

Another social movement theory within the American school of thought is the political process model (PPM). Alongside the already spoken about RMT model, PPM tries to help us understand how social movements mobilise support. Taking from Neal Carens revision of Douglas McAdam's original conception of PPM. Caren points to three key factors that determine the success or failure of a social movement (Caren, 2007). Firstly the "political opportunity structure", which refers to the "openness or closure of the formal political system" (Meyer and Minkoff, 2004). Therefore, focusing on the climate social movements exist within as being a key component of predicting success. The second factor pointed to is the presence of "mobilisation structures within society". This incorporates a similar view held within the RMT model, where the success of a group is determined by how many pre-existing societal organisms, sympathise with the social movement's organisational goals (SMO's) (McAdam, 2001).

The final factor pointed to within the PPM model is "Framing", McAdam's original conception of "cognitive liberation" was scrapped in favour of the more contemporary factor of framing. Framing is not just a factor within PPM, but it also seen in the European model of social movement theory. Within PPM, framing refers to two conditions that groups have to meet in order to mobilise support. The First being the diagnostic frame, this asks that for a social movement to be successful the group has to describe their grievances to the population in a persuasive way. Secondly is the prognostic frame, where the social movement has to present an alternative way to the grievance they perceive (McAdam, 1996), this will be spoken about later within "Framing".

The Tea Party came into being as a reaction to a political threat in US society. Especially due to the backlash that came with the 2008 recession, resulting in TPM being able to take advantage and create a political opportunity that increased its level of membership and mobilisation.

After the 2008 financial crisis, the message from TPM members was for the government to

decrease the federal debt and federal spending. With the presence of a Democrat President and Congress, as well as a Republican party in a state of disarray, due to both the legislative and executive being dominated by Republicans. TPM was able to take advantage of the situation and appeal to supporters from both sides of the political spectrum. Therefore, showing that when there is clear conflict within the political and economic elite there is an opportunity for another group to come into being, therefore helping to increase mobilisation (Tarrow, 2011: 79). All these factors alongside TPM's rhetoric, which stated the government was not working for the common-people, allowed TPM to be able to mobilise mass support in all corners of American Society.

Another social movement arena of analysis I will examine in relation to TPM is 'framing'. As stated, frames are not just a conception of the European model but also the American model of SMT. Frames in the words of Snow "render events or occurrences meaningful to organise experience and guide action" (Snow et al, 1986). Framing theory revolves around various different factors, those being the injustice frame, prognostic frame, diagnostic frame, motivational frame and frame alignment (Snow et al, 1986).

The injustice frame that TPM employed according to scholars is the us vs them frame. The TPM successfully conveyed their rejection of the economic policies put forward by President Obama, which they claim went against "ordinary Americans" and went incline with the economic incentives of the Washington 'elites'.

Once a movement has diagnosed what the problem is (i.e the injustice frame). They must go about the task of conveying the perceived grievance to the public in order to mobilise support. The frames that Snow states can be used for this are the diagnostic frame, prognostic frame and the motivational frame (Snow and Benford, 1988). The diagnostic frame describes an "event or aspect of social life that is problematic and in need of altercation" (Snow and Benford, 1988), i.e. identifying who is responsible for the perceived grievance faced by a section of society.

Looking at the Tea Party, it is clear to see its conception was born out of populist anger towards government bailouts following the financial crisis. As a result of this the Tea Party assigned the majority of the blame to the Republican party and most notably President Barrack Obama. In response to Obama's state of the union address, Senator Mike Lee stated "where does the new inequality come from? The Government" (Koren, Resnick, 2014). Moreover, they also blame both the Republican's and Democrats for creating a society of distrust, where the government no longer represent the interests of the people. This goes in toe with a poll conducted by Scott Raumussen, where he shows that "41% of Tea Party members where declared as independent" (Raumussen, 2010). Therefore, showing the ability of TPM to promote its diagnostic frame on wider society, in a successful manner.

However, in terms of the prognostic frame, which is defined as "a proposed solution to the diagnosed problem, that specifies what needs to be done" (Snow et al, 1988). The TPM fails to adequately describe what the solution was. This can be attributed to the makeup of the TPM, which has at times lacked a clear voice due to its decentralised structure and lack of clear leadership. Instead there were many voices all competing for various different outcomes. The one belief that was held throughout however was the need for TPM members to get into office in the 2010 election (Skocpol, 2013).

The final frame that is included in Snow’s Framing theory, is the motivational frame. The motivational frame is “reform on a particular social issue requires a ‘call to arms,’ a way of framing an issue in such a way that ameliorative action becomes an option in the minds of the affected parties” (Lamertz, Martens & Heugens. 2003). The way that TPM created this frame was by fear. The Tea Party Patriots for example, state on their website that their mission is to keep the ‘American dream alive’ (TeaPartyPatriots.org, 2020). This clearly shows the use of rhetoric by the tea party and its associates to scaremonger the population into believing that the Tea Party is the only way to the “American Dream”. The rhetoric the tea party used was also a powerful tool for ‘the call to arms’, The TPM referred to themselves as “patriots”, and all those that opposed were “traitors” to the founding fathers and the constitution they created. Therefore, TPM with the use of fear which is documented as a favourable tool in changing people’s attitudes (Solomon, 2005), in order to motivate the populous to join their movement. So forth successfully creating a motivational frame.

To conclude, the SMT’s I have used to theorise the TPM, all to some degree explain how TPM was able to mobilise support and achieve its organisational goals. Starting with RMT, RMT successfully explains how access to resources distinguishes between successful and unsuccessful social movements. TPM was able to mobilise very quickly after its conception due to the vast amount of resources and logistical backing it received from SMO’s and sympathetic citizens.

PPM is also a SMT that successfully helps to identify reasoning behind TPM’s success. Building on the basis of “opportunity structure”, PPM helps to identify the political and economic climate within America that allowed TPM to rise. One could say that if there had been no resentment within the American public towards the main two parties or the economic conditions, they were blamed for then the TPM would not have mobilised as successfully.

Finally framing theory helped to distinguish what rhetoric was used by TPM to convince the public that their movement deserved their support and resources. With the use of rhetoric distinguishing the TPM as “Patriots” and the current system as the “Washington elite”, the tea party was able to mobilise disenfranchised citizens. However as stated in the essay, due to the decentralised structure of the TPM, there was no clear alternative to the system they stated was bad for America.

So forth, with the use of SMT’s, one can clearly see that the Tea Party was able to mobilise a vast amount of citizens, however was this just a reaction to the economic climate, with no clear policy? is it the Tea Party just a past example of the Brexit Party?.

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