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Assessing the tea party nationally and locally

Chris Cooper Gibbs Knotts OPINION • May 1, 2010

The **New York Times** recently published survey results detailing information about tea party supporters — who they are, what they believe and where they get their news. We applaud the Times reporters and editors for bringing systematic data to bear on this important movement in American politics, but we think they may be missing two key points.

First, each **tea party** chapter has a great deal of autonomy — perhaps more than the Democratic and Republican parties. Second, there is a difference between a supporter and an activist. The person indicating that they support the tea party when asked on a survey is likely very different than the person who shows up on a weekday to protest under the name of the tea party.

To better understand tea party activists in Western North Carolina, we attended the rally in Waynesville organized by the 9-12 project on April 15. We did not put together a systematic survey, but we listened to speeches, talked to many of the tea party members and we even took notes on the content of the signs displayed by protesters.

Of **course** we were only at one rally organized by one group, so we cannot weigh in on the content of the entire movement in Western North Carolina. We are not claiming that we have a deep or full understanding of the movement, but we thought readers might be interested in the thoughts of political scientists who had never attended a tea party event before.

What we witnessed on Tax Day follows fairly closely to the core values laid out on the Tea Party Patriots' Mission Statement — fiscal responsibility, constitutionally limited government and free markets. In fact, the largest category of signs held by tea party activists in Waynesville was about reducing **taxes** or spending. Signs extolling the virtues of liberty or freedom were the next most prevalent, followed by those advocating term limits and calls to kick incumbents out of office.

The political speeches largely conformed to these

themes. Tea party activists and speakers are clearly upset, but, at least on this day, their anger was mainly aimed towards what they viewed as the ever-expanding size of government. Their preferred solutions were reduced spending, lower taxes and term limits.

Like just about any political rally, we witnessed a number of candidate speeches — all Republicans stumping for votes in the upcoming May 4 primary. Dr. Dan Eichenbaum, Republican Party candidate for the 11th Congressional District and founding member of the Cherokee County 9-12 project, spoke to the group before heading to another tea party event in Asheville. All of the candidate speakers expressed sympathy with the tea party, but some candidates went further by using the words “we” and “us” when addressing the movement's supporters.

There have been many reports in the press of racially coded and sometimes explicitly racist language emanating from tea party activists. We cannot weigh in on whether these incidents occurred at other events, but we can say that we saw little, if any, evidence of racist or racially coded language on the steps of the courthouse in Waynesville. We heard no references to Obama's race — only to his policies. In fact, the only sign that mentioned race or nationality at all was one calling for illegal immigrants to leave the country. This was certainly not friendly language, but it was hardly the type of language that has been reported in other locations.

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In all, we found a political rally quite similar to others we have attended. We heard some speeches, saw some signs and witnessed candidates stumping for votes. Our takeaway from this meeting is that the tea party activists are clearly upset, but the focus of their anger — at least on this day in Waynesville, appears to be clearly within the bounds of civil debate.

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