
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

GOP's Tea Party faction and its relation to big business

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April 6, 2011 — A [front-page story in last Thursday's New York Times](#) purported to have uncovered an “odd alliance”: a non-profit group affiliated with the Tea Party running a PR campaign closely aligned with the interests of a gigantic Indonesian paper company. This confluence of “seemingly disparate interests,” wrote reporter Mike McIntire, was surprising because “the Tea Party movement is as deeply skeptical of big business as it is of big government.”

McIntire is a skilled “follow-the-money” reporter — indeed, Remapping Debate has [previously praised his investigative work](#) — and last week's story carefully connected the dots between the Institute for Liberty, the Tea Party group, and Asia Pulp & Paper, the Indonesian corporation. But the piece was an example of something all too common in American political journalism: an impressive display of fact-finding dropped into a confused conceptual frame. In this case, the confusion was about the relationship between the Tea Party and business interests.

The Times's assertion of hostility between the movement and “big business” is not entirely without support. For example, the GOP faction is often identified with serious restrictions on immigration and a return to 19th-century monetary policy, two positions that are not embraced by many CEOs. Indeed, a [Bloomberg Businessweek story](#) last October, “Why Business Doesn't Trust the Tea Party,” reported that the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce endorsed Democrat Vincent Sheheen for governor over Nikki Haley, the Republican candidate identified with the Tea Party faction. Meanwhile, Tea Party groups like FreedomWorks have targeted prominent business figures [such as General Electric's chief executive officer Jeffrey Immelt](#).

But, as should be clear by now, the underlying motivation behind most Tea Party grievances is opposition to the kind of tax policies and economic regulations that were enacted during periods of progressive reform in the 20th century. When the movement opposes “big business,” it's because business has made some accommodation to, or forged some deal with, what Tea Partiers see as “big government” — that, in essence, it has sold out. Tea Party criticisms of the businesses that took part in TARP, or supported health care reform, can be understood this way. So can the criticisms of Immelt — hardly a liberal hero — as a “progressive CEO” who supported federal fiscal stimulus and a proposed cap-and-trade law.

When businesses are implacably *opposed* to government actions, on the other hand, they are likely to find Tea Party support. Tea Party boosters have objected to net neutrality rules and the BP escrow fund established after the Gulf oil spill; many hailed the Citizens United ruling that lifted limits on corporate

participation in politics. And, as has been widely reported, the billionaire libertarians David and Charles Koch have provided important funding for Americans for Prosperity, another organization claiming the Tea Party mantle. The case the Times was writing about last week — a company objecting to a tariff on its products — fits this profile perfectly. There is nothing “odd” or “unlikely” about it.

So with that frame in mind, what are some lines of reporting to which the Times and its peers might direct their impressive resources? Here are a few suggestions to get started:

- How many of the outfits that make up Washington’s robust influence peddling, corporate PR, and think-tank-for-hire sector now carry “Tea Party” branding? What sort of clients do they work for? Has the client base changed materially as the Tea Party movement has become a more visible part of the GOP?
- Do the members of the House and Senate Tea Party caucus claim to be skeptical of “big business”? If they do, are those claims supported by policy positions that would, if adopted, rein in the power of big business or otherwise conflict with the interests of big business? What do the sources of the campaign contributions received by caucus members reveal about member positions?
- What are the differences between the Tea Party movement and earlier, self-described “populist” movements? How do self-identified Tea Partiers understand and explain these differences? For example, the Seventeenth Amendment, allowing direct election of Senators, [was designed to reduce the influence of big businesses](#), which held sway in the back rooms where Senators were once chosen by party elites. Today, Tea Party supporters sometimes propose to repeal that amendment. How do they reconcile the difference?
- Is the Tea Party really the only self-described populist movement in the United States today? What about independent political parties? The GOP that is not “Tea Party flavored” may represent a political center as between the Tea Party faction and conservative or “centrist” Democrats, but some basic reporting on other parts of the political spectrum — especially parts that are less well-funded — might provide the public a broader and more accurate view of the range of policy options to consider.

Can you think of others, or have you seen stories that address these questions? [Let us know](#).

This content originally appeared at <http://remappingdebate.org/article/gops-tea-party-faction-and-its-relation-big-business>