

# TV'S TEA PARTY TRAVESTY

How ABC, CBS and NBC Have Dismissed and Disparaged the Tea Party Movement



A Special Report from the Media Research Center

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Tea Party movement launched one year ago, in response to the unprecedented expansion of government by President Barack Obama and congressional liberals, a massive increase in spending that will create economy-crushing fiscal burdens for future generations of taxpayers.

In that relatively brief period, the Tea Party has demonstrated it is a formidable political force. The pressure the movement brought to bear at the grassroots level put liberals on the defensive for much of the health care debate, and nearly succeeded in torpedoing the entire scheme in spite of Democrats' overwhelming congressional majorities. And Tea Party activists proved decisive in a string of electoral defeats for liberals, culminating in Republican Scott Brown's victory in the special election to succeed Ted Kennedy in the U.S. Senate.

So how have the supposedly objective media covered one of the biggest political stories in recent years? MRC analysts reviewed every mention of the Tea Party on the ABC, CBS and NBC morning and evening newscasts, Sunday talk shows, and ABC's *Nightline* from February 19, 2009 (when CNBC contributor Rick Santelli first suggested throwing a "Tea Party" to protest government takeovers) through March 31, 2010. Among the major findings:

#### **The networks first attempted to dismiss the Tea Party movement:**

- Given its demonstrated influence, network coverage of the Tea Party has been minuscule. Across all of their major programs, ABC, CBS and NBC aired a mere 61 stories or segments over a twelve month period, while another 141 items included brief references to the movement. Most of that coverage is recent; the networks virtually refused to recognize the Tea Party in 2009 (just 19 stories), with the level of coverage increasing only after Scott Brown's election in Massachusetts.
- Most of the networks' 2009 coverage was limited to individual Tea Party rallies: six reports on the April 15, 2009 "tax day" protests, along with five other brief mentions; just one report on the July 4 rallies; and six full reports on the September 12 rally on Capitol Hill, plus eight brief mentions.
- Such coverage is piddling compared to that lavished on protests serving liberal objectives. The Nation of Islam's "Million Man March" in 1995, for example, was featured in 21

evening news stories on just the night of that march – more than the Tea Party received in all of 2009. The anti-gun “Million Mom March” in 2000 was preceded by 41 broadcast network reports (morning, evening, and Sunday shows) heralding its message, including a dozen positive pre-march interviews with organizers and participants, a favor the networks never granted the Tea Party.

■ Network reporters were dismissive of the first Tea Party events in 2009. “There’s been some grassroots conservatives who have organized so-called Tea Parties around the country,” NBC’s Chuck Todd noted on the April 15, 2009 *Today*, but “the idea hasn’t really caught on.” On ABC’s *World News*, reporter Dan Harris warned viewers that “critics on the Left say this is not a real grassroots phenomenon at all, that it’s actually largely orchestrated by people fronting for corporate interests.”

### **By the fall of 2009, the networks had shifted to disparaging the Tea Party:**

■ After the September 12, 2009 rallies, the networks suggested the Tea Party was an extreme or racist movement. On CBS, *Face the Nation* host Bob Schieffer decried the “angry” and “nasty” Capitol Hill rally, while ABC’s Dan Harris scorned protesters who “waved signs likening President Obama to Hitler and the devil....Some prominent Obama supporters are now saying that it paints a picture of an opposition driven, in part, by a refusal to accept a black President.”

■ Overall, 44 percent of network stories on the Tea Party (27 out of 61) suggested the movement reflected a fringe or dangerous quality. ABC’s John Berman was distressed by “a tone of anger and confrontation” he claimed to find at the Tea Party convention in early February. In September, NBC’s Brian Williams trumpeted Jimmy Carter’s charge that the Tea Party was motivated by race: “Signs and images at last weekend’s big Tea Party march in Washington and at other recent events have featured racial and other violent themes, and President Carter today said he is extremely worried by it.”

■ While network reporters have strained to protect left-wing causes (such as the anti-war movement) with the outrageous acts of individual protesters, they were quick to smear the entire Tea Party based on isolated reports of poor behavior. On the night of the final vote on ObamaCare in March, for example, ABC’s Diane Sawyer cast Tea Partiers as out-of-control marauders, “roaming Washington, some of them increasingly emotional, yelling slurs and epithets.” CBS’s Bob Schieffer also cast a wide net, accusing “demonstrators” of hurling “racial epithets” and “sexual slurs,” and even conjured images of civil-rights era brutality: “One lawmaker said it was like a page out of a time machine.”

While the broadcast networks seldom devolved into the juvenile name-calling and open hostility evident at the liberal cable news networks, their coverage of the Tea Party’s first year reflected a similar mindset of elitist condescension and dismissiveness. Given how the networks have provided fawning coverage and helpful publicity to far-less consequential liberal protest movements, their negative treatment of the Tea Party is a glaring example of a media double standard. Rather than objectively document the rise and impact of this important grassroots movement, the “news” networks instead chose to first ignore, and then deplore, the citizen army mobilizing against the unpopular policies of a liberal President and Congress.

# TV's Tea Party Travesty

## How ABC, CBS and NBC Have Dismissed and Disparaged the Tea Party Movement

BY RICH NOYES, RESEARCH DIRECTOR  
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The Tea Party arose as a potent political movement in early 2009, a grassroots reaction to the massive government spending and interventionist policies of the new Obama administration and congressional liberals. On the February 19, 2009 *Squawk Box*, CNBC contributor Rick Santelli took aim at the just-announced policy of government-instigated mortgage modifications, handing taxpayer-funded aid to over-extended borrowers who might otherwise default. "The government is promoting bad behavior," Santelli proclaimed, by asking responsible borrowers "to subsidize the losers' mortgages."

"How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills?" Santelli challenged the traders standing near him at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. The crowd erupted in disapproval. "We're thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July," he exclaimed. "All you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I'm gonna start organizing."

The spontaneous reaction was about more than just burdening responsible taxpayers with the debts of their irresponsible neighbors. Less than one month in office, the Obama administration had already pushed through a \$787 billion "stimulus" package (the cost of which would later be estimated by the Congressional Budget Office at an even more extravagant \$862 billion), and would soon propose a massive new health care entitlement program and instigate a federal takeover of the General Motors and Chrysler automobile companies. The minor tax cuts in the stimulus bill notwithstanding, the inevitable consequence of such profligacy and intrusion into the free market would be much higher taxes, a bigger and more controlling government, and a further shifting away from America's tradition of individual freedom and personal responsibility.

The first T.E.A. Party (Taxed Enough Already) protests took place in various cities on February 27, 2009, just eight days after Santelli's rant. A major national protest was scheduled for April 15, "tax day," the deadline for filing federal income tax forms. After that event showed the Tea Party to be a major movement, pundits on MSNBC and CNN heaped on the invective. On the *Imus in the Morning* radio program, CNN contributor Paul Begala, a longtime

Democratic operative, blasted the protesters as “just a bunch of wimpy, whiny weasels who don’t love their country.” Begala snarled: “There are guys at Walter Reed who gave their legs for my country, and they’re whining because they have to write a check?” Later that night, CNN anchor Anderson Cooper cracked vulgar jokes about “tea-bagging” with resident political analyst David Gergen (Cooper apologized a few days later).

Over on MSNBC, Keith Olbermann derided the Tea Partiers as racists — “a bunch of guys who are just looking for a reason to yell at the black President.” Setting up a sinister spin that liberals would work to perpetuate, Olbermann darkly wondered: “What happens if somebody who’s at one of these things hurts somebody?”

But the liberal cable news networks, particularly MSNBC, barely even pretend to offer objective news these days. So what about the supposedly more traditional broadcast news operations at ABC, CBS and NBC? Did they cover the Tea Party from a professional, objective point of view, or did they reflect the left-wing hostility of their cable brethren? To find out, MRC analysts reviewed every reference to the Tea Party on the broadcast networks’ morning, evening and late-night news programs, plus the Sunday morning chat shows, from Rick Santelli’s first suggestion of a Tea Party on February 19, 2009 through March 31, 2010.

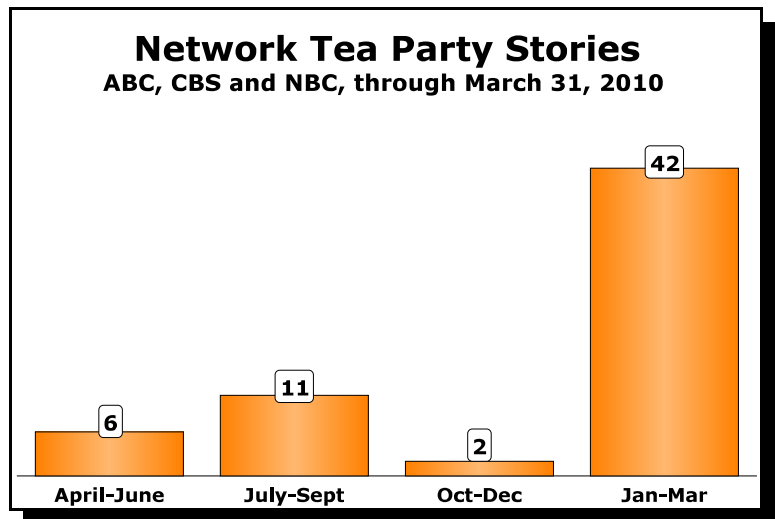
Despite shrinking audiences and a changing media landscape, these network programs still reach larger audiences than any other media outlet. During the first three months of 2010, ABC’s *World News*, the CBS *Evening News* and the NBC *Nightly News* reached an average of more than 24 million viewers each weeknight, while the network morning shows (*Good Morning America*, *The Early Show* and *Today*) combined to reach around 11 million. ABC’s *Nightline* had about 3.7 million viewers, while the three Sunday talk shows (*This Week*, *Face the Nation* and *Meet the Press*) had a combined audience of eight million people.

These numbers dwarf those of the supposed stars of the liberal cable networks. During the same period, MSNBC’s highest-rated program, *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, barely topped one million total viewers, while CNN’s ratings leader, *Larry King Live*, had an average audience of 771,000. (The Fox News Channel’s *O’Reilly Factor* was the top show among all cable news outlets, with an average viewership of 3.6 million.)

Using the Nexis data retrieval system plus the Media Research Center’s own News Tracking System (NTS), our researchers found 202 network stories that either mentioned the Tea Party or referred to a Tea Party event. Just 61 of those were actually full items (narrated field reports or interview segments) about the Tea Party; the remaining 141 were either brief mentions included in segments about other topics, or short items read by a news anchor.

While it wasn’t very much, ABC did offer the most coverage (32 stories), followed by NBC (19) and CBS (10). The 30-minute evening newscasts actually ran slightly more full items (28) than the networks’ multi-hour morning news programs (24). Oddly, the politically-oriented Sunday talk shows ran relatively few segments (8), and ABC’s *Nightline* produced just one in-depth item on the Tea Party in the past year.

These totals are incredibly small, given the impact of the Tea Party movement on American politics over the same period. And, remarkably, most of the network coverage (69%) actually aired in just the first three months of 2010. (See chart.) Apart from relatively slight coverage of two of the Tea Party's major rallies, the broadcast networks virtually refused to recognize the Tea Party's rise in 2009.



### *Giving Short Shrift to the Tea Party Rallies*

The three broadcast networks collectively produce more than 3,000 hours of news programming each year, which translates into tens of thousands of field reports, interview segments and news desk items. Yet during all of 2009, the networks carried just 19 stories on the Tea Party – seven on the evening newscasts, seven on the morning shows, four Sunday talk show segments, and one on *Nightline*. Another 48 stories or segments contained brief mentions of the Tea Party, for a total of 67 items that at least referred to the Tea Party in 2009.

Most of this coverage focused on Tea Party rallies, but the networks offered far less coverage to these anti-big government demonstrations than liberally-themed events in the past:

■ **Tax Day Rally, 2009.** Liberal rallies are often preceded by a wave of anticipatory publicity from the networks, which helps build interest in the event and further promotes the organizers' message. The anti-gun "Million Mom March" in 2000, for example, was heralded by 41 broadcast network reports (morning, evening, and Sunday shows) touting its message, included a dozen positive pre-march interviews with organizers and participants.

In contrast, the broadcast networks offered no coverage prior to the morning of April 15, the day of hundreds of coordinated "tax day" protests across the country. ABC's *Good Morning America* was the only network to even provide a full report that morning; CBS's *Early Show* said nothing at all, while NBC's *Today* included the news as an afterthought in a story about the Obama family getting a new dog. Each of the three broadcast networks aired a single full report that night.

The next morning, the protests – which saw a nationwide turnout of perhaps 600,000, according to SurgeUSA – were pretty much an afterthought on the network morning shows. All three broadcasts provided a brief re-cap as part of their April 16 news headlines, but none aired an in-depth story on the protests or what they stood for. As far as the evening newscasts

were concerned, it was a case of “one and done” – none followed up with additional coverage the next night.

The following Sunday, ABC’s *This Week* and NBC’s *Meet the Press* reviewed the protests with full segments during their journalist roundtables, while fill-in host Harry Smith contented himself to lobbing a couple of questions about the Tea Party event (“Is this unhealthy?”) to White House advisor David Axelrod on *Face the Nation*. After that, the networks ignored the Tea Party movement for two and a half months, with no additional references until July.

■ **The July 4, 2009 Protests.** A second wave of rallies in cities across the U.S. was virtually ignored by the three broadcast networks, who were instead providing wall-to-wall coverage of the death of pop star Michael Jackson. Only the *CBS Evening News* bothered to mention the events, in their July 4 broadcast; all of the other programs were silent.

■ **The September 12 Rallies.** The broadcast networks provided no rally coverage prior to Saturday, September 12, and – in spite of the event happening on a weekend of otherwise light news – the networks offered scarcely more coverage than they had in April. ABC’s *Good Morning America* aired full reports on both Saturday and Sunday, while NBC’s *Today* presented only a quick headline on Saturday with a longer analysis the morning after the march. CBS’s *Saturday Early Show* offered no mention of the 9-12 rally (although they did promote President Obama’s speech in Minneapolis to promote his health care plan), while *Sunday Morning* included a quick post-protest headline.

While ABC’s *World News* was pre-empted by college football, both the *NBC Nightly News* and *CBS Evening News* led with the rally on Saturday night, each airing a single story. On Sunday morning, CBS’s *Face the Nation* and ABC’s *This Week* each offered quick mentions of the protest in setting up segments on the broader health care debate, as did the three evening newscasts on Sunday. The total scorecard: six full reports, plus another eight brief mentions.

So how does the Tea Party’s coverage compare to rallies on behalf of liberal causes? As previously mentioned, the broadcast networks lavished extensive pre-rally publicity on the “Million Mom March” for more restrictions on gun rights in May 2000. ABC’s *Good Morning America* even moved their entire show to the White House for a special “Moms & Guns” broadcast two days before the march.

For the October 16, 1995 “Million Man March,” organized by the Nation of Islam, all three network anchors trekked to Washington for the event and devoted most of their evening newscasts (a combined 21 stories) to the rally, the speeches, and positive profiles of individual attendees. ABC’s Peter Jennings – who spared just 75 seconds for the rest of the day’s news – exulted how “for those who were here, it was an inspiration.” On CBS, Dan Rather touted: “It was a sea of people from one end of this Mall to another, and beyond – to make history, to witness history, to change history.”

In 2006, left-wing protests on May Day in favor of rights for illegal immigrants was the top story on the networks' morning and evening broadcasts. NBC's Brian Williams promised "comprehensive coverage tonight from coast to coast," leading off with reports from six correspondents positioned around the country. ABC's *World News* offered five reports, while the *CBS Evening News* aired two pieces on the protests, including soundbites from sympathetic U.S. Senator Barack Obama. Anchor Bob Schieffer trumpeted: "From coast to coast, from north to south, they wanted us to know what America would be like without them, and so millions of immigrants missed work, skipped school and marched in the streets. They want America to find a place for those who came here illegally...."



*NBC Nightly News, May 1, 2006*

Hours later on ABC's *Nightline*, anchor Terry Moran could scarcely contain himself as he recounted the protests in various cities: "Merely a few examples of the giant flex of immigrant muscle today....Hundreds of thousands of workers, their families and supporters, took over the city streets today in a massive demonstration of sheer numerical power. It was breathtaking."

In contrast, none of the three major Tea Party rallies in 2009 was built up in advance by network publicity, and the networks never deigned to deliver more than a single evening news story at a time to the cause. The total broadcast network evening news coverage of all three Tea Party events in 2009 amounted to just six stories, or less than one-third what those same networks devoted to the Million Man March alone.

### ***"The Idea Really Hasn't Caught On"***

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The celebratory, promotional tone that the networks employed in reporting on the liberal-themed events was nowhere to be found in their Tea Party coverage. Network stories about the April 15 rally were organized around the idea that the hundreds of thousands of protesters somehow comprised a phony movement, and did not accurately represent a public that was content with current tax policy – a convenient way of framing the issue that glossed over how the Obama administration had already pledged to raise taxes on high earners and was instigating huge spending programs that would inevitably require even greater tax increases.

On ABC's *World News*, reporter Dan Harris cast the event as a right-wing orchestration: "Cheered on by Fox News and talk radio, the hundreds of Tea Parties today were designed to protest the bailouts, the stimulus plan, and President Obama's budget....But critics on the left say this is not a real grassroots phenomenon at all, that it's actually largely orchestrated by people fronting for corporate interests." On the *CBS Evening News*, correspondent Dean Reynolds noted how a Tea Party organizer "insisted these events were non-partisan," but,



Reynolds maintained as if it were an embarrassment, “a fistful of rightward leaning Web sites and commentators embraced the cause.”

On the *NBC Nightly News*, Lee Cowan reported how “organizers insist today’s ‘Tea Parties’ were organic uprisings of like-minded taxpayers from both parties,” but “some observers suggest not all of it was as home-grown as it may seem.” Those “some observers” turned out to be one observer, NBC News White House correspondent Chuck Todd: “A lot of the sentiment is about organizing anti-Obama rallies, getting conservatives excited about the conservative movement again.”

Earlier that morning on *Today*, Todd had insisted that there was little of importance going on anyway: “There’s been some grassroots conservatives who have organized so-called Tea Parties around the country, hoping the historical reference will help galvanize Americans against the President’s economic ideas. But, I tell you, the idea hasn’t really caught on.”

In their evening reports, both ABC and CBS also tried to dispute the premise of the protest: “While the Boston Tea Party in 1773 was about taxation without representation, critics point out that today’s protesters did get to vote — they just lost. What’s more, polls show most Americans don’t feel overtaxed,” ABC’s Harris argued. CBS’s Reynolds agreed: “There is not all that much passion about high taxes in the country at large right now. Gallup this week found 61 percent of Americans see their federal income taxes as fair.”

As noted earlier, only the *CBS Evening News* even bothered to mention the July 4 protests. Covering that event, reporter Terrell Brown largely stuck to the same script that the networks had used in April, casting the Tea Parties as a life preserver for “desperate” Republicans: “Similar so-called Tea Parties sprung up around the country last April to blast the economic stimulus package, a movement championed by high-profile conservatives [video of Fox News host Glenn Beck]...Political analysts say conservative Republicans are hoping these rallies give them the united front they desperately need.”

### ***Scorning the Tea Parties as Wacky, Extremist and Racist***

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The networks almost never associated the Tea Party with the anti-ObamaCare protests that erupted during congressional town hall meetings in August, which means such stories fall outside the scope of this study. But the MRC’s review of coverage at the time showed the citizens protesting at those meetings were derided in the media as “ugly,” “unruly,” “nasty” mobs, with reporters presenting the most odious images (such as pictures of Obama drawn as Hitler) as somehow representative of the entire group. In spite of the media onslaught against the protesters, public support for both President Obama and his ObamaCare program fell dramatically during the month.

Thus, by the time the Tea Party movement descended on Capitol Hill for a huge rally on September 12, liberal politicians had shifted tactics, launching direct attacks on the Tea Party and other anti-Obama protesters. The media shifted their tone as well. Now, correspondents were warning viewers of a group that seemed weird, or even extremist in its views – and possibly even racist in its motivations.



*Good Morning America, Sept. 12, 2009*

Opening Saturday's *Good Morning America* the morning of the event, co-host Bill Weir painted the Tea Partiers as driven by rage: "This morning, outrage. Protesters descend on Washington to rally against the President's health care plan. As civility gives way to shouting, what's fueling all this anger?" On that night's *CBS Evening News*, reporter Nancy Cordes also touted the supposed radicalism of the crowd: "Homemade signs accused Mr. Obama of socialism, communism and worse."

Back on ABC's *Good Morning America* the next day, reporter Yunji de Nies highlighted one marcher who claimed "every Democratic politician is working for the mafia," and she directly confronted a second man: "Do you really believe the President is a communist?"

On CBS's *Face the Nation*, Bob Schieffer framed it this way: "An angry nation, a nasty debate....Tens of thousands of conservatives marched in Washington yesterday, protesting what they call socialism in the President's health care plan. How indicative is their demonstration of the national mood?"

In the days following that rally, liberal reporters tried to reset the debate to one about the marchers' civility, not the President's policies. ABC's *World News* on September 15 showed pictures from the Capitol Hill rally in a piece by Dan Harris detailing liberals' complaints about the protesters, followed by a suggestion that the real problem is some Americans' "refusal to accept a black President."

They've waved signs likening President Obama to Hitler and the devil, raised questions about whether he was really born in this country, falsely accused him of planning to set up death panels, decried his speech to students as indoctrination and called him everything from a 'fascist' to a 'socialist' to a 'communist.' ...And all that was before Mr. Obama's speech was interrupted by a Representative who once fought to keep the Confederate flag waving over the South Carolina state house. Add it all up, and some prominent Obama supporters are now saying that it paints a picture of an opposition driven, in part, by a refusal to accept a black President.

Adding to the drumbeat that night, NBC's Brian Williams touted a similar jab from Jimmy Carter, whom Williams had interviewed as part of a profile for the ex-President's upcoming 85th birthday. "A certain number of signs and images at last weekend's big Tea Party march in Washington and at other recent events have featured racial and other violent themes, and President Carter today said he is extremely worried by it," Williams gravely intoned.

Carter smeared: "I think an overwhelming portion of the intensely demonstrated animosity toward President Barack Obama is based on the fact that he is a black man, that he's African-American....It's an abominable circumstance and grieves me and concerns me very deeply."

Not to be left out, CBS weighed in a few days later with a long profile by senior political correspondent Jeff Greenfield on *Sunday Morning*. Greenfield detailed what he termed a "new militancy on the Right," perfectly capturing the liberal establishment's view of the Tea Party:

From the Tea Parties on tax day last April....to the rancorous town halls on health care in August, to the gathering last weekend at the Capitol, discontent is in the air. You can see it in the signs they carry, hear it from the most prominent voices on talk radio, all from the right....Some of it seems very traditional, an outcry against the government that critics say has grown too big....Some of it is aimed specifically and virulently at Obama — at his background, at his race, at his agenda: Fascist, Communist, both.

Greenfield then permitted liberal Massachusetts Representative Barney Frank to slash at what he called "racist elements" of Obama's opposition: "The very anger of it, the racist elements, the irrational elements, the embrace of fiction, the threats — I think that makes it less politically useful."

*Nightline* got around to producing its one (and, so far, only) lengthy report on the Tea Party on November 2. Co-anchor Terry Moran cobbled together every spin point the Left had ever coined about the Tea Party. "We went to south Florida to see at the ground level what this grassroots movement is really like, and check out critics' contention that it's not a real grassroots uprising at all, but a corporate front — an AstroTurf movement, they call it," Moran promised at the outset.

Moran centered his report on FreedomWorks chairman Dick Armey, a key supporter of the Tea Party. Moran lamely tried to argue that Armey was a "hypocrite" for opposing a massive government-imposed health care system while he himself was on the federal employees health plan as a member of Congress: "People would say, Mr. Armey, you got government health care. You got taxpayers subsidizing your health care....They'd say now you're a hypocrite."

"And I'd say you're being silly," Armey shot back. "That is not a reason why I should be opposed to you having your insurance imposed on you by the federal government."

Moran also cast the Tea Party as a gang of angry white people. "Some critics of the movement note that the vast majority of people at the rallies are white people. And they point to a few hateful signs that have dotted the crowds. Former President Jimmy Carter said it was all being fueled by racism," Moran told Armey.

"Jimmy Carter's all wet, the poor fellow," Armey riposted.

Actually, according to a poll of Tea Party participants and supporters conducted in March by McLaughlin & Associates and commissioned by the National Review Institute, nearly one in six Tea Partiers are non-white, with education rates that are higher than the general population (see box).

The same poll also discovered that 87 percent of Tea Party supporters said they are “very likely” to vote in the 2010 election for U.S. Congress. To put that in perspective, in the previous midterm election, 2006, just over 40 percent of eligible voters cast ballots. In other words, the Tea Party seems poised to be a potent political force in 2010.

### *The Tea Party: Liberals’ Secret Weapon?*

Coverage of the Tea Party ramped up considerably after the election of Scott Brown in Massachusetts, a shocking defeat for liberals that nearly derailed their plans to enact a massive government health care program. In just the first three months of 2010, the networks ran 42 stories on the Tea Party, compared to just 19 in 2009. Another 93 stories carried at least a brief reference to the Tea Party, for a total of 135 items through March 31, 2010 — a rate of coverage six times greater than it was in 2009 (an average of 14 stories per month in 2010, vs. barely two stories per month from April to December).

In late 2009, some reporters suggested the Tea Party’s involvement in the special congressional election in upstate New York was a precursor to a Republican or conservative civil war. On ABC’s *Good Morning America* the morning before the election, reporter Jake Tapper painted the Tea Party as a spoiler because the official Republican nominee Dede Scozzafava’s “candidacy had been hobbled irreparably by Conservative Party candidate Doug Hoffman, the new darling of conservative Tea Party activists....Obama advisors are eager to paint this as a trend, a conservative purge.”

### **More Than Just Cranky White Men**

“The movement is not an angry-male thing: 50 percent are women. Religious affiliations also reflect America: 60 percent Protestant, 28 percent Catholic, 2 percent Jewish. Sixty-nine percent attend religious services regularly. On the abortion issue, 68 percent are pro-life, 26 percent pro-choice. Here are some of the other findings:

- 62 percent are Republican, 25 percent Democratic, 10 percent Independent
- 16 percent are liberal, 19 percent moderate, 64 percent conservative
- 26 percent are urban residents, 41 percent suburban, 29 percent rural
- 16 percent live in the East; 19 percent in the Midwest, 45 percent in the South, 21 percent in the West
- 81 percent are white; 16 percent non-white
- 36 percent are college grads, 16 percent have post-graduate degrees, 29 percent have some college, 16 percent are high school graduates
- 57 percent are over 55 years old, 26 percent are 41-55; 9 percent are 26-40
- 33 percent approve of Obama’s job performance; 66 percent disapprove.

“This is not the profile of isolated extremists but of Americans from all walks of life who are educated and informed on the issues confronting their nation.”

— **George Marlin writing in *The Catholic Thing*, March 11, summarizing the results of a McLaughlin & Associates poll of Tea Party attendees and supporters.**

Of course, Scozzafava had been chosen by a small group of party leaders, not a primary, and her liberal voting record in the New York state assembly was at odds with rank-and-file Republican voters. It can be argued that Scozzafava's decision to endorse the Democratic candidate instead of the conservative Hoffman was what ultimately "spoiled" the race for New York's Republican voters.

Scott Brown's victory in the Massachusetts Senate race in mid-January appears to have jolted the media into finally recognizing the Tea Party's clout. But over the next several weeks, network reporters spent more time suggesting that the Tea Party was a threat to Republicans rather than the Obama administration and its liberal allies.

"Republicans may have benefitted from this movement, but they may not be immune from Tea Party activist anger themselves," ABC's Tapper opined on the January 20 *World News*, the day after Brown's win. CBS's Jeff Greenfield echoed the point a week later on the *Evening News*: "There's no doubt that the grassroots Tea Party energy is stirring Republican hopes and dreams for big gains in Congress this November, but like any powerful force, nitroglycerin, for example, it has to be handled with great care."

"Republican incumbents have a big problem of their own this year. Across the country, Tea Party activists are challenging sitting Republicans, claiming they're not conservative enough." CBS's Chip Reid proclaimed on the February 18 *Evening News*.

A week later on *The Early Show*, co-host Harry Smith suggested to California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger that the Tea Party's effect would be to make Republicans unelectable: "There are winds of change blowing in the Republican Party. The Tea Party has met. It feels like a significant shift to the right. Can the Republican Party exist without moderates?"

Certainly, the Tea Party has aided challenges to Republican candidates — most notably, Florida Governor and Senate candidate Charlie Crist — who seem to espouse the same frivolous attitude toward government spending as liberal Democrats. But it is a stretch to argue that the net effect of a broad-based voter movement against higher spending and big deficits would be most keenly felt by Republican candidates.

Yet nearly all of the analysis of the Tea Party's potential political effect emphasized problems for Republicans. One exception was NBC's Andrea Mitchell, on the January 10 *Meet the Press*: "There are more Democrats at stake than Republicans. So the Democratic Party is

### **Frightened by Tea Party's "Not Fact-Based" Anger**

"There's an anger out there, and I have not seen it since my very first campaign, which was 1968 and George Wallace. And that is the angry populism which is not fact-based, it's just furious at everybody; angry at Democrats, at Republicans. The Tea Party has higher numbers in our last NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll than either of the other traditional parties. And that is what I think this news cycle which you referred to is feeding into, and that is what does frighten me. This spirit of America is so large and embracing, but there is an angry subtext because of economic dislocation that is very, very worrisome."

— NBC correspondent **Andrea Mitchell** on *Meet the Press*, December 27, 2009.

facing the reality that in 2010, if it doesn't start to change, they are going to feel the anger, the anger that the Tea Party advocates really epitomize."

### *More Tea Party Trashing*

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In February, the networks were drawn to the "Tea Party Convention," a gathering in Nashville organized by the group Tea Party Nation. While the event generated 36 total mentions on ABC, CBS and NBC, most were either brief items or incidental mentions in stories focusing on the keynote speaker, former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Twelve of those stories delighted in pointing out that Palin had written notes on her hand, while other stories focused on the former Alaska governor's career prospects.

Just 13 of the Tea Party Convention stories were in-depth discussions of the movement itself. Ten of those were on ABC, which sent reporter John Berman to the scene, and three on NBC. (There were no full reports about the Tea Party Convention on CBS.) ABC's Berman was antagonistic in an item he filed for the February 5 *World News*: "The business of this first ever national Tea Party convention is the nuts and bolts of politics, like voter registration....But barely scratch the surface, and there's a tone of anger and confrontation."

Specifically, Berman deplored how, as he put it, "the convention's first speaker, former Congressman Tom Tancredo, said that people who voted for Barack Obama could not pass a basic civics literacy test." The ABC correspondent suggested that the Tea Party was a "fringe" element: "One of the goals of this convention is to turn this movement into a political force. The question is, does the harsh rhetoric keep them on the fringe?"

The next morning, *Good Morning America* hosted an interview segment about the Tea Party convention, but the guest was not a convention organizer or Tea Party attendee. Instead, co-host Kate Snow talked to *Daily Beast* columnist John Avlon, whose media shtick is denouncing "wingnuts," what he calls the "lunatic fringe" of either the Left or the Right. (Avlon was in Nashville that day, which meant anyone from the convention site could easily have appeared on the program.)

The spin was obvious from Snow's first question: "Let's be clear, John, right off the bat here. You don't think that every Tea Party follower is a wingnut?"

"Absolutely not," Avlon insisted, before painting the overall movement as fringe: "One of the things that's happened over the last year in politics is we're seeing the fringe start to blur with the base....Their [the Tea Party's] real strength is the people who shout the loudest tend to have the most influence in American politics right now."

Overall, 44 percent of network stories on the Tea Party (27 out of 61) included suggestions that the movement reflected a fringe or extremist nature. While this line of attack was championed on the liberal cable news networks as early as April 2009, it only became a prominent aspect of the broadcast networks' coverage after the September 12 rally and complaints about a racial animus motivating the anti-Obama demonstrators. The spin was revived for the February Tea Party convention, and appeared with even more force during the final days of the ObamaCare debate in March.

### *Smearing With a Broad Brush*

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With a final House vote on Obama's liberal health care package expected to be close, Tea Party activists held rallies around the country and on Capitol Hill in mid-March to try to lure undecided Democrats to their side. On the March 16 *CBS Evening News*, reporter Chip Reid impugned the activists as engaging in "ugly" tactics: "Outside the Capitol, a few hundred members of the conservative Tea Party movement called on Congress to kill the Democratic health care reform bill as Republicans urged them to keep fighting....Moving inside, they tried to lobby undecided Democrats. At times, it got ugly."

CBS's video of the supposed "ugly" confrontation consisted of a staffer closing a wooden door while a group of people mildly shouted in the corridor. The next morning, the political newspaper *The Politico* reported on the same event: "Staff members for Democrats reported orderly, even polite conversations with protesters....'It was like a high school classroom,' an aide to one lawmaker who hosted Tea Partiers noted glumly. 'It was so boring.'"



*CBS Evening News, March 16, 2010*

Four days later, on the eve of the final vote, the networks breathlessly reported Democrats' complaints that epithets had been shouted at Representatives John Lewis and Barney Frank, while someone in the crowd had supposedly spat at Representative Emmanuel Cleaver. Network reporters rhetorically punished the entire Tea Party gathering for the presumed actions of a few.

Anchoring ABC's *World News* on March 20, David Muir indicted everyone who was there: "Late word from Washington tonight about just how ugly the crowds gathered outside the Longworth office building have become...." On the March 21 *Face the Nation*, Bob Schieffer made every demonstrator culpable:

A year-long debate that's been rancorous and mean from the start turned even nastier yesterday. Demonstrators protesting the bill poured into the halls of Congress shouting 'Kill the bill!' and 'Made in the USSR.' And as tempers rose, they hurled racial epithets, even at civil rights icon John Lewis of Georgia, and sexual slurs at Massachusetts Democrat Barney

Frank. Other legislators said the protesters spit on them, and one lawmaker said it was like a page out of a time machine.

That night on ABC's *World News*, Diane Sawyer kept hitting the same point, even though at that point the incident was more than 24 hours old: "Opponents of the bill have been out today, and some of them pulled out all the stops. Protesters roaming Washington, some of them increasingly emotional, yelling slurs and epithets."

Tarring the entire Tea Party — and, by extension, anyone opposed to President Obama's policies — based on a few isolated episodes of misbehavior fits with the networks' pattern after the September 12 protest, when journalists chose to impugn the whole movement based on the presence of some hateful signs in the mass demonstration.

But that's not the way the networks reacted to the presence of hateful signs or even outright violence when it appeared in various anti-war marches against the Iraq war. Back on January 18, 2003, all three of the broadcast networks touted an anti-war march organized by the radical International ANSWER, an outgrowth of the communist Workers World Party. Signs at the rally read: "USA Is #1 Terrorist," "Bush Is a Terrorist," and "The NYPD Are Terrorists Too." National Review Online quoted several protesters who claimed 9/11 was a Bush plot, "like when Hitler burned down the Reichstag," and argued Bush would "build a worldwide planetary death machine."

Rather than attack the credibility of the entire march, reporters bypassed all that hate and showcased the protesters as everyday Americans. ABC's Bill Blakemore stressed how the protest attracted "Democrats and Republicans, many middle-aged, from all walks of life," while CBS's Joie Chen saw "young, old, veterans and veteran activists — all united in the effort to stop the war before it starts."

A month later, all three broadcast networks led their February 15, 2003 newscasts with another set of protests. In New York City, anti-war demonstrators injured eight police officers, and several protesters were arrested. In spite of the violence, CBS reporter Jim Acosta still referred to the event as "for the most part" peaceful: "Despite some arrests and clashes with police, it was, for the most part, a peaceful reminder to the powerful that there is a divide over whether the nation should go to war."

No one was arrested at the Tea Party protest outside the Capitol on March 20, but all of the networks pounced on the Democrats' complaints to tout the idea that the President's opponents had become too dangerous. Over the next several days, reports of threatening phone calls and a brick thrown threw a window dominated the news. "It can now be said that the debate over health care reform has gone too far. It's now veered into threats of violence," NBC anchor Brian Williams castigated on the March 24 *Nightly News*. The network coverage quickly subsided after it turned out that Republicans had faced similar threats, with one man arrested after threatening the family of House Minority Whip Eric Cantor (R-VA).



There's no obviously excuse for even the threat of violence in any policy discussion, but the networks' outraged reaction to the much milder conduct of a few in the Tea Party crowd, compared to the genuinely violent actions of those on the anti-war Left, only underscores the double standard at play for most of the past year.

### ***Conclusion: Ignoring and Deploring the Tea Party***

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In just one year, the Tea Party movement has wielded incredible influence on American politics. The Tea Party succeeded in putting runaway government spending at the center of our national political discussion. The pressure the movement brought to bear at the grassroots level put liberals on the defensive for much of the health care debate, and nearly succeeded in torpedoing the entire scheme in spite of Democrats' overwhelming congressional majorities. In April 2009, the Tea Party rallied in the streets against the policies of a popular new President; by April 2010, more Americans disapproved than approved of President Obama's job performance.

Yet, amazingly, the networks paid only slight attention to this movement as it was gathering momentum in 2009. As polls showed the public rallied to the Tea Party's views on the issues, the networks amplified the liberal establishment that deplored the crowds in the street.

While the broadcast networks seldom devolved into the juvenile name-calling and open hostility evident at the liberal cable news networks, their coverage of the Tea Party's first year reflected a similar mindset of elitist condescension and dismissiveness. Given how the networks have provided fawning coverage and helpful publicity to far-less consequential liberal protest movements, their negative treatment of the Tea Party is a glaring example of a media double standard. Rather than objectively document the rise and impact of this important grassroots movement, the "news" networks instead chose to first ignore, and then deplore, the citizen army mobilizing against the unpopular policies of a liberal President and Congress.

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