The Tea Party, Social Media and the Emergence of Online Politicking 3.0

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Abstract

This paper argues that the Tea Party movement (TPM), which emerged in early 2009 as an influential player in the U.S. political landscape, constitutes a sharp departure from the previously dominant bottom-up political mobilization model. In fact, it can be seen as the manifestation of a new form of politicking (online politicking 3.0) that is hyper decentralization and fragmented in nature. Several social and political movements closely mimicking the Tea Party blueprint have gained varying levels of traction in many national contexts since 2009 such as the U.S.-based Coffee Party movement, the transnational #Occupy movement, the student movement against tuition hikes in the Canadian province of Quebec, and the #idlenomore movement.

This paper provides a quantitative content analysis of more than 1.7 million tweets with at least one *#teaparty* hashtag that were posted on Twitter by 79,564 unique tweeters between early December 2009 and mid-March 2011. The findings suggest that unlike previous populist political mobilization initiatives, the Tea Party movement is a hierarchically decentralized movement fuelled by a diverse range of formal and informal political players with often narrow preferences, interests, and objectives and focusing on a large number of social, political, and economic issues.

KEYWORDS: Social media, online politics, Twitter, big data, United States, Populism, Tea Party

The Tea Party movement (TPM) has experienced a meteoric ascendency in the United States since early February 2009 due to a plethora of factors such as the 2008 economic downturn, the exacerbation of socio-demographic tensions between certain segments of the population, and the immense distrust among many Americans with the forty-fourth President, Barack Hussein Obama, and some of his policy proposals. In fact, it still constitutes a powerful force in the political landscape even though it has lost some support among the public since the end of the 2012 Presidential election cycle (Skocpol and Williamson; 2012; Williamson, Skocpol *et al*., 2011; Courser, 2012; Smith, 2013). Specifically, the Tea Party movement is credited for influencing the outcome of the special Massachusetts Senate contest in January 2010 and for shaping the course of a large number of local and regional electoral races across the United States during the 2010 Midterm elections (Karpowitz, Monson *et al*., 2011; Disch, 2011). More recently, Tea Partiers and other conservative political players forced "Republican presidential hopefuls to move noticeably to the right during the primary" season in 2012 (Benoit, Bostdorff *et al*., 2013: 248)

This movement began in a fairly low-key and innocuous manner. In early 2009, Seattle-based conservative political activist and blogger Keli Carender, also known as "Liberty Belle", organized a series of "porkulus"[1] demonstrations in opposition to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) which she described as "the most frightening bill on Earth" in a blog post on February 10, 2009[2] (Disch, 2011: 125). Her President's Day rally on February 16, 2009 attracted close to 120 participants compared to roughly 300 for an event seven days later and 600 for a "Tax Day" demonstration on April 15, 2009 (Berg, 2011). On February 19, 2009, CNBC's Rick Santelli fumed against the decision of the Obama administration to provide foreclosure relief through different policy initiatives such as the Homeowners Affordability and Stability Plan (HASP). In the words of Santelli, "[t]he government is rewarding bad behavior! [… it plans] to subsidize the losers' mortgages" (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012: 7). Santelli called on all American capitalists to mobilize and attend a Chicago Tea Party to denounce this situation (Sckocpol and Williamson, 2012; Disch, 2011).

Many social scientists have argued in recent years that the Tea Party movement is essentially a "genetically modified grassroots organization (GMGO)" (Bratich, 2011: 342), or Astroturf phenomenon, spearheaded by a small number of influential conservative and libertarian organizations and heavily promoted by the Fox News Channel (e.g.: Skocpol and Williamson, 2012). However, we suggest in this paper that the Tea Party movement constitutes in fact one of the first large-scale manifestations of a new form of politicking, known as online politicking 3.0, that is hyper decentralized and fragmented in nature. Many social and political movements mimicking the Tea Party blueprint in its entirety, or with some modifications, have gained varying levels of traction in different national contexts since 2009 such as the U.S.-based Coffee Party movement, the transnational #Occupy movement, the student protest in reaction to university tuition hikes in the Canadian province of Quebec, and the #idlenomore movement in Canada (Mascaro, Novak *et al*., 2012; Gaby and Caren, 2012; Sawchuk, 2012).

We also argue that the rancor and activism of Tea Party adherents represents the latest incarnation of an old American phenomenon, namely old-fashioned American conservative populism. But because its emergence has coincided with the maturation of social media channels and the growing popularity of post modern political dispositions among a growing

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[1] This derisive term was first used by conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh on January 28, 2009 to characterize what he believed to be wasteful spending provisions contained in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

[2] http://www.redistributingknowledge.blogspot.ca/2009/02/seattleites-out-there.html#links.

number of Americans, there is something fundamentally different and, to some extent, transformative about this new permutation of populism.

In order to illustrate our arguments, we offer in this paper a multifaceted quantitative content analysis of all the tweets with at least one #teaparty hashtag that were shared on Twitter's public timeline between early December 2009 and mid-March 2011, a time period roughly coinciding with the 2010 Midterm U.S. elections (including the Republican Primary season, the Special 2010 Senate election in Massachusetts, and other important political moments).

Online politicking 3.0

While traditional political players have been the main drivers behind Web politics in the United States since its mainstream emergence during the 1996 Presidential contest (e.g.: Gibson and Ward, 2012; Gibson, 2013; Foot and Schneider, 2006), the last four years have been marked by the grassroots-intensive hyper decentralization and fragmentation of e-politicking. However, it is worth to note that U.S. Midterm and Presidential election cycles between 2004 and 2008 have been marked by the development of digital campaigning approaches that have profoundly redefined the structure of the online political mediascape. Kreiss (2011: 380) believes that the innovative use of online media channels by the Dean for America campaign (e.g.: *MeetUp.com*, blogs, etc.) to attain various voter mobilization and fundraising goals in 2004 "reshaped the cultural grounds of Internet politics". More recently, Gibson (2012: 79; 2013) argues that the Obama campaign's heavy reliance on social media platforms (e.g.: video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, social networking services such as Facebook, micro-communication channels such as Twitter, etc.) and other communication technologies (e.g.: text messaging, etc.) for voter outreach in 2008 had "reprogramming" effects on the dynamics of e-electioneering in the United States. While these campaigns have contributed in their own way to the reengagement of the public in the political process, they have still followed an essentially top-down, controlled politicking model as they were driven by an influential political figure and their focus was limited to a relatively small number of broad-based issues.

As previously indicated, online politicking 3.0 manifests itself through two complementary phenomena. On one hand, hyper decentralization, which will be the main focus of this paper, can be defined as the diffusion of the initiative, the execution, and the control of digital political communication, mobilization, and organizing from formal political elites to a rapidly growing number of individuals and organizations with wide-ranging concerns and objectives. On the other hand, hyper fragmentation can be described as the shattering of the collective political awareness, which is acquired through "broadly shared social and political experience" and knowledge, as well as the emergence of constantly evolving micro-political realities that are tailored to often extremely narrow preferences, interests, and objectives (Bennett, 1998: 741). Some social scientists (e.g.: Kim, 2011; Bennett, 1998) believe that this phenomenon can pose major challenges to the effective functioning of coherent democratic societies and their leadership structures.

Specifically, the emergence and rapid popularization of social media, coupled with the adoption by a growing proportion of the U.S. public of post modern political dispositions, have contributed to the hyper decentralization of e-politicking in three distinct ways. First, they have led to the mobilization of previously-peripheral and, in many cases, resource-poor political players by encouraging them to be actively involved in the political process. The distinct structural and technical properties of Web 2.0 media channels have significantly

lowered the threshold to political participation (e.g.: financial resources, technical knowledge and expertise, etc.) (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Carlisle and Patton, 2013). Meanwhile, the post modern political dispositions of a growing number of Internet users, which are anchored in personal values such as freedom, creativity, assertiveness, self-mastery, and empowerment, have encouraged them to independently engage in highly entrepreneurial digital participatory patterns (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung *et al*., 2012; Bennett, Wells *et al*., 2009), also known as "micro-activism" (Christensen, 2011). From a broader perspective, they have contributed to the rapid incubation of digital "hipster narcissism" (Chi and Yang, 2010) or identity-centered egoism of a political nature during the last five years (Chadwick, 2009: 32; 2012; Malikhao and Servaes, 2011: 69). The use of the concept of narcissism in this context refers culturally and technologically-induced state of "introspection and self-absorption that takes place in blogs", social network sites, and other user-generated communication platforms (Papacharrissi, 2009b: 237).

Second, the distinct interactive capabilities of Web 2.0 media platforms have given politically-savvy Internet users more opportunities to interact with each other and, to some extent, develop and maintain relationships that can be the source of political dividends. Conversely, they have contributed to traditional political players' loss of control on political information flows and social interactions on the Internet (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung *et al*., 2012; Himelboim, Lariscy *et al*., 2012). However, political elites deployed significant efforts in recent years to counter this redefinition of the online political communication environment and tried to engage in conventional media-inspired controlled voter outreach through social media channels. In the words of Gurevitch, Coleman *et al*. (2009: 172), they have tried "to monitor the blogosphere, control the content of wikis, and make their presence felt in unfamiliar environments, such as Facebook and YouTube".

Third, while political parties with mass appeal and other socio-political institutions were central components of the U.S. political landscape before the early 1960s, they have progressively lost their relevance, credibility, and influence among the electorate during the following decades (this dynamic has accelerated during the last 9 years with the emergence of social media channels as important components of the political mediascape). For example, major political parties have seen the size of their membership steadily shrink due, in part, to their rigid organizational structure which is not adapted to the expectations of younger segments of the population (Gunther and Diamond, 2003; Bennett, Wells *et al*., 2009; 2011). Indeed, young adults are generally "not inclined to enter into formal [and usually long-term] membership relations" which often have implications that are not necessarily compatible with their interests and goals (Bennett, Wells *et al*., 2011: 850). They prefer to be part of informal groups or be involved in *ad hoc* mobilization initiatives giving them more political engagement latitude (Bennett, Wells *et al*.; 2011).

This situation has incited many traditional political organizations to undergo deep internal restructuration while allowing informal political players to emerge and play a bigger role in the political arena. Specifically, formal political actors have progressively abandoned their highly centralized "command and control" approach to politicking and turned to strategies tailored to exploit the post modern dispositions of the electorate and the distinct capabilities of Web 2.0 tools (Wring and Ward, 2010). In other words, they have adopted a growingly decentralized internal leadership structure and operational approach, known as "post modern organizing model" (Carty, 2010: 161).

Big-store populism vs. boutique populism

Populist appeals have played a prominent role in democracies for decades. Such appeals have come and wane but never totally disappeared from the political landscape. Over the last twenty years, several populist movements have captured voters' imagination. Through Preston Manning in Canada to Ron Paul and Jesse Ventura in the United States, as well as Austria's Jörg Haider, Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and France's Jean-Marie Le Pen, populism has presented itself in different ways.

The decentralization trends described in the previous section of this paper tend to indicate that the Tea Party movement is the prototype of a new form of populism that is "boutique" in nature. The analogy points to a contrast between a more centralized or "big-store" relationship (Costco-style populism) where a few elite political actors offer a vast choice of policy options in order to mobilize a large group of supporters. As will be demonstrated with the analysis of #teaparty tweeting patterns in the Twittosphere, Web 2.0 media channels have been used by Tea Party activists to offer very specialized messages aimed at developing a relatively small but devout following outside of the realm of traditional political elites.

Methodology

In order to examine the manifestation of the Tea Party movement in the Twitterverse, we conducted an in-depth quantitative content analysis of all the tweets with at least one #teaparty hashtag that were posted on Twitter's public timeline between December 9, 2009 at 10h41 pm +0000 and March 19, 2011 at 3h40 pm +0000, a time period roughly coinciding with the 2010 Midterm U.S. election cycle (including other important political moments). As noted by Perrin, Tepper et al. (2011: 74), the Tea Party movement was the main "story of the 2010 midterm elections".

Hashtags, which are not native to the Twitter platform, can be defined as a "community-driven convention" that became popular among tweeters during the San Diego area forest fires in 2007 (#sandiegofires) (Small, 2011: 873-874). They generally consist of a single word or a textual or numerical expression that is immediately preceded by the pound sign (#) (e.g.: #hashtag). Due to the fact that a hashtag is "hyperlinked in the Twitter interface", it enables users who click on it to automatically launch a search for all tweets with the same hashtag (Teevan, Ramage et al., 2011: 39). Based on a review of recent academic literature, it can be argued that hashtags serve three main purposes:

- ✓ Classifying tweets by linking them to broad or narrow topics of interest (e.g. theme, geographical location, etc.);
- ✓ Helping to establish and coordinate quasi-synchronous or asynchronous decentralized conversations between tweeters who might or might not be formally following each other or share social connections;
- ✓ Enabling users to express themselves by issuing comments, feelings, or opinions (e.g.: Small, 2011; Larsson and Moe, 2012).

We selected the open-source data mining and archiving platform Twapper Keeper to gather information on different aspects of #teaparty tweets that were posted during the time period covered by this study such as their content, the time of their publication, and details about their author. There are no ways to verify independently if all #teaparty tweets that were posted on Twitter's public timeline between early December 2009 and mid-March 2011 were archived by Twapper Keeper. As noted by Wilson and Dunn (2011: 1251), "there is no definitive method for determining if the tweet set is complete". However, we are confident

based on the large size of the #teaparty dataset that even if some tweets were missed during the archiving process, it would have minimal to no effects on the validity and the explanatory value of the conclusions of this investigation.

We downloaded the #teaparty data collected between late 2009 and early 2011 on March 20, 2011 from the Twapper Keeper servers in a CSV (comma-separated values) format. We then reorganized and imported it into the data management and analysis software MySQL and the data visualization tool Gephi (version 0.8.1 beta). While numerous software are equipped for the study of tweets, we selected these platforms due to their capacity to handle large datasets ("big data") and the properties of their analytical tools which are well suited for the study of tweets.

Findings

The Twapper Keeper data mining platform enabled the collection of 1,747,306 tweets with at least one #teaparty hashtag that were posted by 79,564 unique tweeters[3]. The overwhelming majority of the #teaparty tweets were published in 2010. That year was marked by different events that mobilized Americans adhering or opposed to Tea Party ideals and objectives such as the public debate on the reform of the health care system and the U.S. Midterm election cycle (Karpowitz, Monson *et al.*, 2011; Skocpol and Williamson, 2012).

In order to have a more detailed assessment of #teaparty tweeting patterns, we conducted an analysis of the weekly #teaparty tweeting volume (from Monday to Sunday)[4]. As shown in table 1, the rapid intensification of #teaparty tweeting between early April 2010 and early May 2010 can be attributed to several factors such as the heated Republican Primary races in several states involving candidates with ties to the Tea Party movement, different community-based and national Tea Party events such as the first Tennessee Tea Party coalition inaugural convention in Gatlinburg between May 22 and May 23, 2010, and the growing attention that this movement received from the U.S. mainstream press (Boykoff and Laschever, 2011; Burghart and Zeskind, 2010). Boykoff and Laschever (2011: 356), who studied the news coverage of the Midterm elections between February 9, 2009 and November 30, 2010, point out that:

> "every article [with an "election impact frame"[5]] that was published in major U.S.-based news source such as ABC News, CBS News, CNN, FNN, MSNBC, The New York Times, the USA Today, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal] after 1 May 2010 included some discussion of 'Tea Party candidates' or how TPM energy drove voter activity".

The final days of April 2010 and the first weeks of May 2010 were also marked by the adoption of laws and other regulations in several states addressing some of the social and economic concerns of Tea Partiers. For example, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed into law SB 1070 on April 23, 2010 and HB 2281 on May 10, 2010 which respectively sought "to

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[3] While the time of publication (year, month, day and hour) of 96.64 per cent of the #teaparty tweets collected (1,688,681 tweets) was properly recorded by Twapper Keeper, a minor technical issue prevented the acquisition of this information for 58,625 tweets (3.36 per cent of the tweet sample). This situation is unlikely to have a negative impact on the integrity of the analysis of the #teaparty politicking dynamic because it only affects a small portion of the dataset.

[4] Due to the constraints associated to the time period selected for this investigation, the first week only comprises 5 days (from Wednesday, December 9, 2009 at 22h41:00 +0000 to Sunday, December 13, 2009 23h59:59 +0000) while the last week contains only 6 days (Monday, March 14, 2011 at 0h00:00 +0000 to Saturday, March 19, 2011 at 15h40:00 +0000).

[5] The "election impact frame" refers to any "articles and reports portraying the movement as influential or important in elections, as a significant player in horse-race politics, or as playing a key role in legislative action" (Boykoff and Laschever, 2011: 356).

streamline undocumented migration and [...] [to essentially erase] La Raza and Mexican-American Studies at the Tucson Unified School District" (Torres, 2012).

Table 1: Weekly volume of #teaparty tweets

Weekly volume of #teaparty tweets
(per number of tweets and percentage of dataset)

#	Weekly breakdown	Number of tweets	Percentage	#	Weekly breakdown	Number of tweets	Percentage
1	9-dec-09 to 13-dec-09	9,495	0.56	35	2-aug-10 to 8-aug-10	45,947	2.72
2	14-dec-09 to 20-dec-09	16,984	1.01	36	9-aug-10 to 15-aug-10	42,111	2.49
3	21-dec-09 to 27-dec-09	14,364	0.85	37	16-aug-10 to 22-aug-10	43,538	2.58
4	28-dec-09 to 03-jan-10	17,560	1.04	38	23-aug-10 to 29-aug-10	29,944	1.77
5	04-jan-10 to 10-jan-10	15,883	0.94	39	30-aug-10 to 5-sep-10	51,555	3.05
6	11-jan-10 to 17-jan-10	15,039	0.89	40	6-sep-10 to 12-sep-10	51,888	3.07
7	18-jan-10 to 24-jan-10	12,206	0.72	41	13-sep-10 to 19-sep-10	24,318	1.44
8	25-jan-10 to 31-jan-10	17,870	1.06	42	20-sep-10 to 26-sep-10	64,310	3.81
9	1-feb-10 to 7-feb-10	14,333	0.85	43	27-sep-10 to 3-oct-10	47,710	2.83
10	8-feb-10 to 14 feb-10	11,607	0.69	44	4-oct-10 to 10-oct-10	58,459	3.46
11	15-feb-10 to 21-feb-10	15,643	0.93	45	11-oct-10 to 17-oct-10	58,493	3.46
12	22-feb-10 to 28-feb-10	18,822	1.11	46	18-oct-10 to 24-oct-10	65,609	3.89
13	01-mar-10 to 07-mar-10	17,576	1.04	47	25-oct-10 to 31-oct-10	72,088	4.27
14	08-mar-10 to 14-mar-10	10,332	0.61	48	1-nov-10 to 7-nov-10	75,409	4.47
15	15-mar-10 to 21-mar-10	6,849	0.41	49	8-nov-10 to 14-nov-10	43,319	2.57
16	22-mar-10 to 28-mar-10	9,558	0.57	50	15-nov-10 to 21-nov-10	36,458	2.16
17	29-mar-10 to 04-apr-10	9,439	0.56	51	22-nov-10 to 28-nov-10	31,827	1.88
18	05-apr-10 to 11-apr-10	15,538	0.92	52	29-nov-10 to 5-dec-10	34,846	2.06
19	12-apr-10 to 18-apr-10	11,315	0.67	53	6-dec-10 to 12-dec-10	5,361	0.32
20	19-apr-10 to 25-apr-10	8,261	0.49	54	13-dec-10 to 19-dec-10	0	0.00
21	26-apr-10 to 2-may-10	18,709	1.11	55	20-dec-10 to 26-dec-10	9,728	0.58
22	3-may-10 to 9-may-10	35,136	2.08	56	27-dec-10 to 2-jan-11	5,184	0.31
23	10-may-10 to 16-may-10	34,006	2.01	57	3-jan-11 to 9-jan-11	10,731	0.64
24	17-may-10 to 23-may-10	39,426	2.33	58	10-jan-11 to 16-jan-11	10,813	0.64
25	24-may-10 to 30-may-10	35,274	2.09	59	17-jan-11 to 23-jan-11	4,237	0.25
26	31-may-10 to 6-jun-10	22,336	1.32	60	24-jan-11 to 30-jan-11	6,740	0.40
27	7-jun-10 to 13-jun-10	20,293	1.20	61	31-jan-11 to 6-feb-11	1,489	0.09
28	14-jun-10 to 20-jun-10	37,973	2.25	62	7-feb-11 to 13-feb-11	2	0.00
29	21-jun-10 to 27-jun-10	37,599	2.23	63	14-feb-11 to 20-feb-11	94	0.01
30	28-jun-20 to 4-jul-10	37,708	2.23	64	21-feb-11 to 27-feb-11	1,472	0.09
31	5-jul-10 to 11-jul-10	42,352	2.51	65	28-feb-11 to 6-mar-11	2,535	0.15
32	12-jul-10 to 18-jul-10	48,197	2.85	66	7-mar-11 to 13-mar-11	1,599	0.09
33	19-jul-10 to 25-jul-10	29,793	1.76	67	14-mar-11 to 19-mar-11	7,313	0.43
34	26-jul-10 to 1-aug-10	36,078	2.14		**Total**	1,688,681	100.00

The data in table 1 also indicates that #teaparty tweeting reached peak levels during the two-week period immediately preceding the elections on November 2, 2010 and the whole week of the elections. Specifically, 65,609 #teaparty tweets were posted between October 18 and October 24, 2010 (3.89 per cent of the #teaparty dataset), 72,088 tweets were published between October 25 and October 31, 2010 (4.27 per cent of the dataset) and 75,409 posts were shared between November 1 and November 7, 2010 (4.47 per cent of the dataset). On Election Day alone (November 2, 2010 from 12h00 am +0000 to 11h59 pm +0000), #teaparty tweeters shared 16,613 micro-blog entries, a number far surpassing the tweet volume observed during 30 of the 67 weeks considered for this study (44.8 per cent)[6].

We also examined the level of involvement of Twitter users in the #teaparty politicking dynamic. Our analysis shows that 79,564 unique tweeters participated with varying levels of intensity in the #teaparty discussion. The majority of them (51.14 per cent of all #teaparty tweeters) tweeted only once while 13.6 per cent posted at least two tweets (10,388 unique users), 6.57 per cent shared a minimum of three tweets (5,225 unique users), 4.03 per cent published at least four tweets (3,208 unique users), and approximately a quarter of them (25.2 per cent) posted five tweets or more. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the number of tweeters who posted between 1 and 120 tweets. We can argue based on these findings that the #teaparty conversation did not revolve around a small number of influential political players. In fact, a large number of individuals and organizations were involved in the #teaparty discussion, thus reaffirming the decentralization thesis. Even though slightly more than half of #teaparty tweeters only posted one tweet, their number far surpasses the number of tweeters who posted more than 50 tweets.

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[6] There were abnormally low tweeting levels during three of the 67 weeks considered in this study (week of December 13 to December 19, 2010, week of February 7 to February 13, 2010 and week of February 14 to February 20, 2011). This situation is caused by a minor technical issue linked to the archiving of the date and time of publication of 58,625 #teaparty posts that was discussed previously in this paper.

Table 2: Number of contributions of #teaparty tweeters

Number of contributions of #teaparty tweeters
(per number and percentage of unique tweeters)

Number of tweets	Number of unique tweeters	Percentage	Number of tweets	Number of unique tweeters	Percentage
1	40,691	51.14	31	141	0.18
2	10,388	13.06	32	132	0.17
3	5,225	6.57	33	130	0.16
4	3,208	4.03	34	129	0.16
5	2,215	2.78	35	126	0.16
6	1,704	2.14	36	116	0.15
7	1,288	1.62	37	78	0.10
8	1,080	1.36	38	89	0.11
9	865	1.09	39	108	0.14
10	762	0.96	40	92	0.12
11	650	0.82	41	79	0.10
12	551	0.69	42	98	0.12
13	470	0.59	43	81	0.10
14	442	0.56	44	77	0.10
15	413	0.52	45	71	0.09
16	373	0.47	46	81	0.10
17	369	0.46	47	81	0.10
18	271	0.34	48	78	0.10
19	287	0.36	49	77	0.10
20	264	0.33	50	67	0.08
21	245	0.31	51	57	0.07
22	224	0.28	52	69	0.09
23	229	0.29	53	78	0.10
24	222	0.28	54	48	0.06
25	199	0.25	55	55	0.07
26	187	0.24	56	61	0.08
27	177	0.22	57	54	0.07
28	136	0.17	58	55	0.07
29	130	0.16	59	49	0.06
30	151	0.19	60	57	0.07

Table 2: Number of contributions of #teaparty tweeters (continued)

**Number of contributions of #teaparty tweeters
(per number and percentage of unique tweeters)**

Number of tweets	Number of unique tweeters	Percentage	Number of tweets	Number of unique tweeters	Percentage
61	47	0.06	91	31	0.04
62	33	0.04	92	19	0.02
63	45	0.06	93	21	0.03
64	37	0.05	94	24	0.03
65	43	0.05	95	21	0.03
66	45	0.06	96	23	0.03
67	39	0.05	97	15	0.02
68	34	0.04	98	16	0.02
69	43	0.05	99	19	0.02
70	39	0.05	100	26	0.03
71	33	0.04	101	16	0.02
72	49	0.06	102	20	0.03
73	35	0.04	103	19	0.02
74	33	0.04	104	17	0.02
75	38	0.05	105	25	0.03
76	36	0.05	106	17	0.02
77	28	0.04	107	15	0.02
78	35	0.04	108	16	0.02
79	36	0.05	109	17	0.02
80	30	0.04	110	13	0.02
81	26	0.03	111	18	0.02
82	24	0.03	112	15	0.02
83	31	0.04	113	12	0.02
84	24	0.03	114	8	0.01
85	26	0.03	115	10	0.01
86	22	0.03	116	14	0.02
87	22	0.03	117	20	0.03
88	27	0.03	118	15	0.02
89	29	0.04	119	18	0.02
90	23	0.03	120	14	0.02

The 4,284 Twitter users who posted 50 #teaparty tweets or more (5.38 per cent of all #teaparty tweeters) can be defined as "vocal" tweeters (Mascaro and Goggins, 2012). While they were heavily invested in the #teaparty conversation, they were not likely to have a strong influence on its structure and overall agenda because their low-profile counterparts were collectively the source of an extremely large volume of micro-blog entries which mostly likely diluted the impact of their contributions. In other words, non-vocal tweeters had a bigger impact on the #teaparty discussion than the minority of vocal tweeters who were the source of more tweets.

Table 3 provides a weekly breakdown of the number of tweeters who took part in #teaparty discussion. Much like in the case of the #teaparty tweeting levels, the data shows that the number of unique #teaparty contributors reached its highest levels during the two weeks leading up to the U.S. Midterm contest and the week of the elections. Interestingly, 4,188 Internet users participated in the #teaparty discourse on November 2, 2010 alone (November 2, 2010 from 12h00 am +0000 to 11h59 pm +0000). More #teaparty tweeters were active on that day than during 35 out of the 67 weeks that were covered in this study (52.2 per cent). In fact, no less than 4,400 individuals posted at least one #teaparty tweet between the week of April 26 to May 2, 2010 and the week of November 29 to December 5, 2010.

Table 3: Weekly number of tweeters who contributed at least once to the #teaparty conversation

**Weekly number of tweeters who contributed
at least once to the #teaparty conversation (per number of unique tweeters)**

#	Weekly breakdown	Number of unique tweeters	#	Weekly breakdown	Number of unique tweeters
1	9-dec-09 to 13-déc-09	1,572	35	2-aug-10 to 8-aug-10	5,522
2	14-dec-09 to 20-déc-09	2,513	36	9-aug-10 to 15-aug-10	5,131
3	21-dec-09 to 27-déc-09	2,268	37	16-aug-10 to 22-aug-10	5,542
4	28-dec-09 to 03-jan-10	2,369	38	23-aug-10 to 29-aug-10	5,256
5	04-jan-10 to 10-jan-10	2,592	39	30-aug-10 to 5-sep-10	6,916
6	11-jan-10 to 17-jan-10	2,388	40	6-sep-10 to 12-sep-10	6,697
7	18-jan-10 to 24-jan-10	2,499	41	13-sep-10 to 19-sep-10	5,595
8	25-jan-10 to 31-jan-10	2,951	42	20-sep-10 to 26-sep-10	7,520
9	1-feb-10 to 7-fév-10	3,235	43	27-sep-10 to 3-oct-10	5,615
10	8-feb-10 to 14 fév-10	2,719	44	4-oct-10 to 10-oct-10	6,452
11	15-feb-10 to 21-fév-10	3,150	45	11-oct-10 to 17-oct-10	7,084
12	22-feb-10 to 28-fév-10	3,635	46	18-oct-10 to 24-oct-10	8,487
13	01-mar-10 to 07-mar-10	3,300	47	25-oct-10 to 31-oct-10	9,823
14	08-mar-10 to 14-mar-10	2,321	48	1-nov-10 to 7-nov-10	12,602
15	15-mar-10 to 21-mar-10	2,243	49	8-nov-10 to 14-nov-10	6,323
16	22-mar-10 to 28-mar-10	3,003	50	15-nov-10 to 21-nov-10	5,978
17	29-mar-10 to 04-avr-10	2,632	51	22-nov-10 to 28-nov-10	4,980
18	05-apr-10 to 11-avr-10	3,143	52	29-nov-10 to 5-dec-10	4,995
19	12-apr-10 to 18-avr-10	3,295	53	6-dec-10 to 12-dec-10	1,484
20	19-apr-10 to 25-avr-10	2,715	54	13-dec-10 to 19-dec-10	0
21	26-apr-10 to 2-may-10	4,416	55	20-dec-10 to 26-dec-10	2,152
22	3-may-10 to 9-may-10	6,083	56	27-dec-10 to 2-jan-11	1,537
23	10-may-10 to 16-may-10	5,405	57	3-jan-11 to 9-jan-11	3,968
24	17-may-10 to 23-may-10	7,059	58	10-jan-11 to 16-jan-11	3,604
25	24-may-10 to 30-may-10	5,957	59	17-jan-11 to 23-jan-11	1,463
26	31-may-10 to 6-jun-10	4,632	60	24-jan-11 to 30-jan-11	2,171
27	7-jun-10 to 13-jun-10	4,714	61	31-jan-11 to 6-feb-11	621
28	14-jun-10 to 20-jun-10	5,387	62	7-feb-11 to 13-feb-11	2
29	21-jun-10 to 27-jun-10	4,669	63	14-feb-11 to 20-feb-11	91
30	28-jun-20 to 4-jul-10	5,903	64	21-feb-11 to 27-feb-11	899
31	5-jul-10 to 11-jul-10	5,676	65	28-feb-11 to 6-mar-11	1,094
32	12-jul-10 to 18-jul-10	6,920	66	7-mar-11 to 13-mar-11	784
33	19-jul-10 to 25-jul-10	5,873	67	14-mar-11 to 19-mar-11	2,703
34	26-jul-10 to 1-aug-10	5,451			

It can be inferred from these results that the #teaparty politicking dynamic was highly heterogeneous and, by extension, not necessarily driven by a small number of "A-list" tweeters, especially during sensitive moments such as the weeks leading up to the elections.

Many recent studies have examined the involvement of Internet users in Twitter-based politicking phenomena in different national contexts (e.g.: Burgess and Bruns, 2012; Mascaro and Goggins, 2012). However, they have taken into account relatively short periods of time and often a small number of micro-blog entries. While their findings provide some insights on Twitter-based politics, they fail to deliver a detailed characterization of tweeters' involvement in online politicking activities. We strongly believe that the "big data" nature of this study is critical to better understand the different facets of the manifestation of the Tea Party movement in the Twitterverse.

We also conducted an analysis of direct social interactions between Twitter users through the consideration of #teaparty tweets serving a @reply function (tweets starting with the "@" sign immediately followed by the username of a tweeter and the text of the interaction (@username ABC)). It indicated that only 85,629 @replies (approximately 4 per cent of all #teaparty tweets) were posted by 11,296 unique tweeters (close to 14.20 per cent of all #teaparty tweeters). In order to understand the structure of direct #teaparty social interactions in the Twitterverse, a network analysis of @replies was conducted with the help of the data visualization platform Gephi. Only tweets serving a @reply function with at least one #teaparty hashtag posted during four specific weeks (Monday through Sunday) were taken into account for the network analysis:
- ✓ Week in 2009 with the highest volume of #teaparty publications;
- ✓ Two weeks in 2010 with the highest volume of #teaparty tweets;
- ✓ Week in 2011 with the highest volume of #teaparty posts.

Unlike 2009 and 2011 where only one week's worth of tweets was taken into account in the analysis, two weeks were considered in 2010 because more tweets were posted per week during that year than in 2009 and 2011. Moreover, the entire year of 2010 was considered in this investigation while only a partial month was studied in 2009 and approximately two months in a half were taken into account in 2011.

Four graphs (one per week) were produced with the help of Fruchterman and Reingold's "force-based" algorithm (1991) (see graphs 1, 2, 3, 4). It determined the layout of the nodes, which represent tweeters who were involved in social interaction processes (both senders and receivers), and edges, which can be defined as social interaction links. According to this algorithm, nodes sharing links tend to be attracted by each other while non-linked nodes tend to repulse each other much like electric forces of different charges.

Graph 1: Network analysis through the consideration of @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (December 14, 2009 to December 20, 2009)
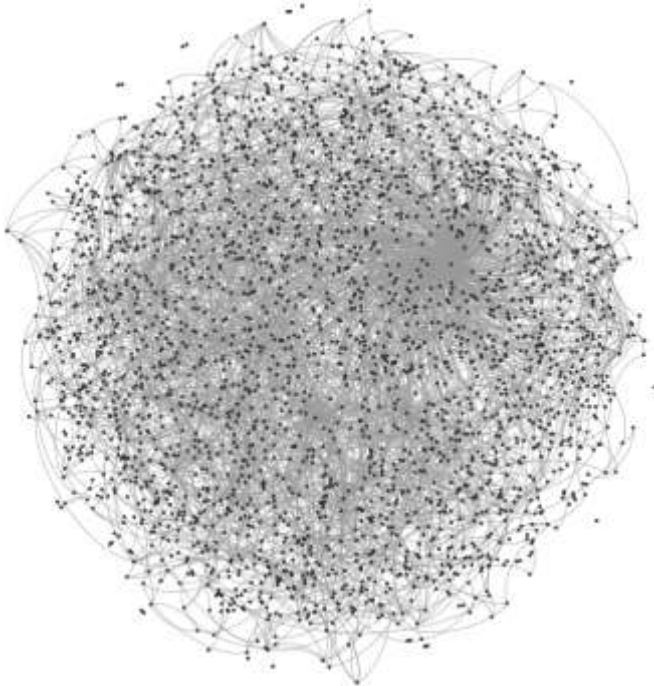

Number of @replies	877	Number of edges	648
Number of nodes	654	Average degree	0.991

Graph 2: Network analysis through the consideration of @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (November 1, 2010 to November 7, 2010)
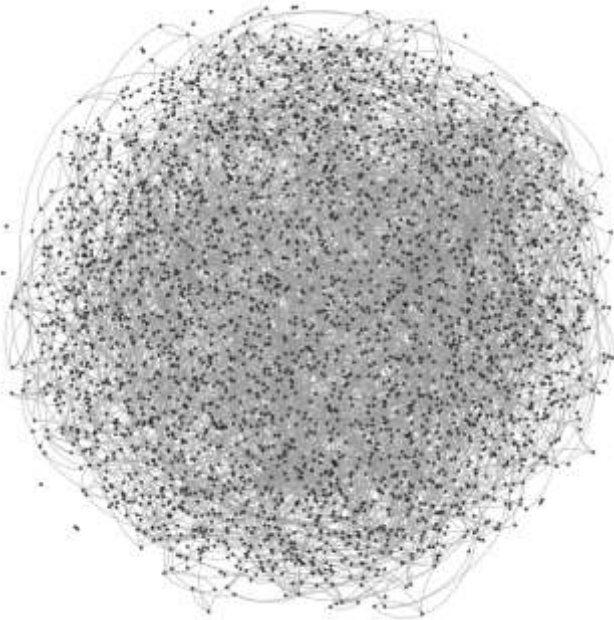
Number of @replies	4,424	Number of edges	3,542
Number of nodes	3,258	Average degree	1.087

Graph 3: Network analysis through the consideration of @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (October 25, 2010 to October 31, 2010)

Number of @replies	4,280	Number of edges	3,131
Number of nodes	2,630	Average degree	1.19

Graph 4: Network analysis through the consideration of @replies with at least one #teaparty hashtag (January 10, 2011 to January 16, 2011)

Number of @replies	688	Number of edges	624
Number of nodes	807	Average degree	0.773

The graphs show that while some tweeters were part of more social interactions than others and could be therefore defined as conversation catalysts (for example, see the upper right quadrant of graph 3), #teaparty social interaction patterns on Twitter were for the most part highly decentralized.

In order to demonstrate the "boutique" nature of the Tea Party brand of populism, we examined the involvement of political elites in the #teaparty politicking dynamic. While some formal and informal political players (e.g.: elected and non elected politicians, interest groups, media personalities, etc.) considered as leading voices of the Tea Party movement in the U.S. offline political mediascape were fairly active in the #teaparty discussion, many others played a more peripheral role. In fact, many of them did not even join the #teaparty conversation even though they were present on Twitter.

Table 4: Number of #teaparty tweets by organization affiliated to the Tea Party movement

Organization	Number of #teaparty tweets
Tea Party Patriots	2,553
Tea Party Nation	105
FreedomWorks	5
Tea Party Express	0
ResistNet	0

As shown in table 4, Tea Party Patriots and Tea Party Nation were actively involved in the #teaparty conversation by posting 2,553 and 105 tweets respectively. Comparatively, Freedom Works only shared 5 micro-blog entries with at least one #teaparty hashtag while other national groups affiliated to the Tea Party movement such as Tea Party Express or ResistNet did not even participate in the #teaparty politicking dynamic. It should be noted that a relatively large number of small and mid-size Tea Party groups did not take part in the #teaparty discussion. In fact, many of them such as the Tea Party Federation, Nationwide Tea Party Coalition, and TeaParty365 did not even have an official Twitter account during the 67-week period covered by this study despite that the fact that they were present on other Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 platforms.

Table 5: Number of #teaparty tweets by media and political personalities affiliated to the Tea Party movement

Political or media personality	Number of #teaparty tweets
Andrew P. Napolitano	35
Glenn Beck	12
Rush Limbaugh	5
Dick Armey	0
Sarah Palin	0

Table 6: Number of #teaparty tweets by Senate contenders in the 2010 U.S. Midterm elections affiliated to the Tea Party movement

Senate contenders	Number of #teaparty tweets
Joe W. Miller (Alaska)	921
Christine O'Donnell (Delaware)	168
Sharron Angle (Nevada)	102
Pat Toomey (Pennsylvania)	2
Jim DeMint (North Carolina)	1
Rand Paul (Kentucky)	0
Ken Buck (Colorado)	0
Marco Rubio (Florida)	0

While many of the public figures and organizations listed in tables 5 and 6 did not partake in the #teaparty tweeting dynamic, most of them did publish at least one tweet during the time period considered for the quantitative content analysis. In fact, the overwhelming majority of those who were active in the Twitterverse discussed in a mostly unidirectional manner a wide range of issues that could be of interest to Tea Partiers such as gun rights, race relations, the health care reform, or taxes. They also engaged in mostly top-down political mobilization activities by inciting their followers to donate money to their campaign or by encouraging them to participate in online and real-world mobilization events. For instance, Florida Senate candidate Marco Rubio tweeted the following on July 8, 2010 at 8:36 am ET:

Why we need new leadership: "U.S. Marks 3rd-Largest, Single-Day Debt Increase" http://is.gd/djWO7 #flsen #sayfie

Also, South Carolina congressional hopeful Tim Scott posted the following on September 23, 2010 at 10:41 am ET:

CBN Exclusive Tim Scott Interview: No Racism in Tea Party http://fb.me/EG3Br4tb

The review of the #teaparty dataset also shows that many Internet users turned to Twitter to reach out to Tea Party contenders in the Midterm elections. For example, 68 Twitter users contacted senatorial hopeful Marco Rubio 114 times compared to 173 times by 113 users for Jim DeMint and a mere 7 times by 7 tweeters for Rand Paul. Interestingly, many #teaparty tweeters posted @replies targeting prominent individuals and groups with ties to the Tea Party movement such as Sarah Palin or senate contenders Marco Rubio and Rand Paul even though they were not involved in the #teaparty conversation. Conversely, individuals and organizations considered as leading Tea Party voices initiated few social interactions with members of the public through the @reply mechanism. As previously mentioned, most of them preferred engaging in using Twitter to attain top-down communication, mobilization and organizing objectives.

Discussion

Our analysis points to one specific conclusion: the #teaparty conversation in the Twitterverse was mostly fuelled in highly decentralized manner by a large and diverse pool of ordinary Internet users that most likely have wide-ranging preferences, interests, and goals. In other words, it was not driven by elected or non-elected politicians, conventional media organizations, influential personalities, or elite-led political groups. Hence, we are convinced that the maturation of social media and the growing popularity of post modern political

dispositions among the U.S. public have accentuated the pressure on the sustainability of the inherent contradiction of populism which is used to energize a large group of devoted people while relying on an elitist directional communication flow too often based on a charismatic leader emboldened by his or her ability to energize "the people" and speak on its behalf. In other words, the Tea Party movement constitutes an essentially leaderless political mobilization phenomenon with a decentralized and constantly evolving organizational structure pointing towards the democratization of populism. From a broader perspective, we believe that the Tea Party movement constitutes the materialization of a new form of e-politicking, known as online politicking 3.0, that is likely to have a strong impact on the structure of the online and, to some extent, real-world political landscape in the United States and several other countries over the next decade.

The findings of this study complement the work of other scholars who have examined the Tea Party movement from other angles in recent years. For instance, Skocpol and Williamson's (2012) found through their study of the political engagement of Tea Partiers that they were heavily invested in highly decentralized political debates that were often based on distorted facts and beliefs or, to a broader extent, conspiracy theories. For instance, they noted that some groups of Tea Partiers "made outlandish claims, ranging from the suggestion that the Obama administration plans to seize all 401K savings to pay off the deficit, to the prediction that federal authorities have plans to round up conservatives, seize their guns, and put them in concentration camps" (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012: 199). They also observed individuals who participated in a Tea Party meeting in Massachusetts discussing about "the possibility that the 'SmartGrid' (an infrastructure improvement to the electricity grid, a plan approximately as controversial as road repair) was in fact a plan that would give government control over the thermostats in people's homes".

With the Obama re-election in 2012, the future of the Tea Party movement is uncertain. This uncertainty was fuelled in late 2012 by Dick Armey's decision to leave FreedomWorks, a group that provided strong financial and logistical backing to Tea Party activists during the 2008 and 2012 election cycles, and in early 2013 by Sarah Palin's decision to end her association with the Fox News Channel. It was also exacerbated by the sudden resignation of Tea Party stalwart Senator Jim Demint in January 2013. Demint's decision to head the Heritage Foundation may point to the realization that the strength of the Tea Party will be felt outside of the traditional political system. Our findings would lend some support to this theory. But regardless of its future, the communication, mobilization, and organizing impact of the Tea Party movement is likely to be felt in the future.

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