

Tying the GOP to the Tea Party

**Jim Kessler**

Senior Vice President for Policy

[@ThirdWayKessler](https://twitter.com/ThirdWayKessler)**Lanae Erickson Hatafsky**

Vice President for the Social Policy & Politics Program

[@LanaeErickson](https://twitter.com/LanaeErickson)

“The GOP is better off if it foregoes any attempt to merge with the Tea Party movement... [it] will hurt Republicans if the party is formally associated with Tea Party groups.”

— Karl Rove

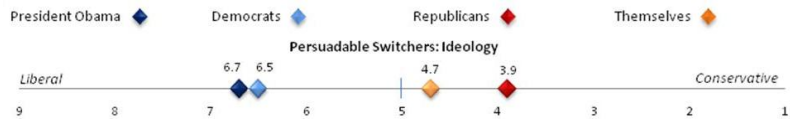
A September Gallup poll gave the Republican Party a 43–53% favorability rating, or minus ten percent.¹ Not terrific, but not awful. But an August AP poll gave the Tea Party a minus18% rating,² and a *New York Times* poll of the same month pegged Tea Party favorability slightly worse at 20–40%.³ And in a recent Third Way survey of swing voters,⁴ we found the Tea Party to be strikingly unpopular with this key demographic.

In this memo, we agree with Karl Rove and argue that the most effective Democratic message against Republicans is to tie the GOP to the Tea Party. Below we describe why such a strategy is effective and how to put this advice into practice.

Why Democrats Must Tie the GOP to the Tea Party

Republicans are seen as conservative, but the Tea Party is seen as radical.

In our own poll conducted by Lincoln Park Strategies, Third Way asked swing voters to place themselves on an ideological continuum from 1 to 9. Our swing voters placed themselves at 4.7, or just a tick to the right of the ideological center. They placed congressional Republicans at 3.9—modestly to the right. By contrast, they said Democrats were at 6.5 and President Obama at 6.7—at the traditional left.⁵



If swing voters next year see themselves as 0.8 points away from Republicans and 1.8 points away from Democrats on the ideological spectrum, it could be a long Election Night for Democrats. To change the calculus, Republicans must become tethered to the Tea Party, which is seen as way too far to the right on a host of issues. For example, in the same poll, swing voters by 56% to 19% said that the Tea Party “is going too far in jeopardizing important safety net programs.”

Tea Party popularity is plummeting.

In the space of four months, the Tea Party’s popularity dropped 17 points, plunging from a net minus 3 points to a net minus 20 points, according to the *New York Times*. In April 2011, a poll by the outlet placed Tea Party favorability at 26%. By August, the same poll had Tea Party favorability down to 20%, with its unfavorables up to 40%.⁶

The Associated Press found the same trend in their polling: Tea Party favorability declined from 33% in June 2010 to 28% in August 2011; unfavorability spiked from 30% in June 2010 to 46% in August 2011. One-third of voters had “very unfavorable” views of the Tea Party in the August AP poll.⁷

The GOP is controlled by the Tea Party, but they are not yet seen that way.

As the last six months have shown, the Republicans are now taking direction in almost every meaningful way from the Tea Party. Indeed, without such profound Tea Party influence, Republicans would not have pushed the nation to the brink of default or scuttled a grand bargain deficit deal. (Does anyone involved in the policy debate think that John Boehner believed it to be a good idea for the United States to risk a default on our national debt?) Moreover, GOP frontrunner Mitt Romney paid tribute to the Tea Party by attending their candidate forum and saying repeatedly that he shares their values.

The public is beginning to catch on to this connection, and there is a growing concern that Republicans and the Tea Party are becoming one and the same. In February 2010, only 14% of voters felt that the Tea Party had too much influence on the Republican Party. By August, 43% of voters felt that the Tea Party had too much influence.

This trend is helpful, but it is not sufficient. The full magnitude of Tea Party control over the GOP has not yet penetrated voter consciousness. Democrats must ensure that the public knows that Speaker Boehner, candidate Romney and others embrace these positions in obeisance to the Tea Party.

How Democrats Can Tie the GOP to the Tea Party

Use only one adjective for Republicans: “Tea Party.”

Voters see the Tea Party as something to fear. That should signal to Democrats that Republicans should not be characterized as “Wall Street Republicans,” “Corporatist Republicans,” “Extremist Republicans,” or “in-the-pocket of millionaires and billionaires Republicans.” They are “Tea Party Republicans.”

Democrats must show that the Tea Party and the Republican Party are joined at the hip and that Republicans are both in league with the Tea Party and beholden to them. Democrats must use every opportunity to define radical Republican ideas and the legion of Republican candidate flip-flops as the consequences of strict adherence to Tea Party dogma.

Thus:

- Perry’s “Ponzi” scheme comment about Social Security is about appealing to the Tea Party agenda of making Social Security unconstitutional (not about hurting seniors).
- Romney’s flip-flopping is about his being beholden to the Tea Party (not about his character).

- The Ryan budget is the Tea Party plan to voucherize Medicare (not an attempt to ration healthcare).
- Teaching “intelligent design” is the Tea Party’s education agenda for your children’s school.
- The near debt default was because the Tea Party demanded that Republicans sacrifice our economic standing for their narrow agenda.
- Speaker Boehner bailed out on a comprehensive deficit agreement because he was afraid to stand up to the Tea Party.

In short, Mitt Romney was telling the absolute truth when he said there is virtually no difference between the Tea Party and the Republican Party.⁸

Conclusion: A Vote for Republicans is a Vote for Tea Party Control

There is one vote that every member of Congress must cast—it is the vote deciding whether to put the Tea Party in control of the House after next year’s election, and possibly the Senate.

Next November, as voters head into the voting booth, the question that must go through their minds is this: Do I really want to put the Tea Party in charge of everything—Congress and the White House? If that is the question they ask, it could be a long night for Republicans.

END NOTES

1. Jeffrey M. Jones, “Republican, Democratic Party Images Equally Negative,” Poll, Gallup, September 8 –11, 2011. Accessed October 12, 2011. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/149795/Republican-Democratic-Party-Images-Equally-Negative.aspx>.

- 2.** “The AP–GfK Poll – August, 2011,” Poll, GfK Roper Public Affairs & Corporate Communications, August 18–22, 2011, TP2, p. 7. Accessed October 12, 2011. Available at: [http://surveys.ap.org/data/GfK/AP-GfK%20Poll%20Aug%202011%20FINAL%20Topline Congress.pdf](http://surveys.ap.org/data/GfK/AP-GfK%20Poll%20Aug%202011%20FINAL%20Topline%20Congress.pdf).
- 3.** “*The New York Times*–CBS News Poll: August 2–3, 2011,” Poll, August 2–3, 2011, Question 31, p. 9. Accessed October 12, 2011. Available at: <http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/229918/the-full-results-from-the-new-york-times-and-cbs.pdf>.
- 4.** Lincoln Park Strategies, 800 likely voters, 12 battleground states, all Obama voters from 2008 who voted GOP in 2010 and are undecided for 2012, completed August 16, 2011.
- 5.** Lincoln Park Strategies, 800 likely voters, 12 battleground states, all Obama voters from 2008 who voted GOP in 2010 and are undecided for 2012, completed August 16, 2011.
- 6.** *The New York Times*–CBS News Poll: August 2–3, 2011.
- 7.** The AP–GfK Poll – August, 2011.
- 8.** John Eligon, “Romney Plays Down G.O.P. –Tea Party Strife,” Blog – The Caucus, *The New York Times*, September 5, 2011. Accessed October 12, 2011. Available at: <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/05/romney-says-he-can-relate-to-tea-party/>.