

August 24, 2012

## The Tea Party's New Model: Experienced Candidates Magnifying Movement's Influence

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

Missouri Republican Senate candidate Todd Akin's "legitimate rape" comment and the ensuing controversy marked a rare setback for the Tea Party in 2012. It's been a banner year for the movement. Mitt Romney's selection of Tea Party favorite Representative Paul Ryan as his running mate was a prominent success, and it wasn't even the most important one. Numerous well-established movement conservatives like Akin have won upset victories in congressional primaries, putting the Tea Party well on its way to becoming the new core of the Republican Party.

That trend was on display recently in Texas' Senate primary, where former state solicitor general Ted Cruz defeated Lieut. Governor David Dewhurst, a better-known, better-financed candidate who had a mass of state leaders, including Governor Rick Perry, supporting him. What Cruz and other Tea Party-backed insurgents have shown is that the movement is not just focused on taking out putative Republican moderates. They are knocking off Establishment conservative candidates with a new strategy: rather than gambling on fringe elected officials or people without any electoral experience, the Tea Party is choosing veteran candidates as its standard bearers.

A look back at the 2010 election shows how much the movement's basic strategy has changed. While the midterm was a big moment for Tea Party supporters, it was not without its failures. Instead of nominating quality candidates in very winnable races, they chose fringe players who blew Republicans' chances at several pivotal seats. In fact, the Tea Party may have deprived the GOP of a majority in the Senate as it worked to knock off experienced Republicans.

The nomination of Sharron Angle, a little-known Nevada state legislator, was the critical factor in Harry Reid's successful re-election comeback. Delaware was an all but certain Republican victory until Christine O'Donnell upended Representative Michael Castle in the primary, ensuring the election of a previously doomed Democratic candidate. And in Colorado, Ken Buck's surprise defeat of Lieut. Governor Jane Norton may have played a big role in the Democrats' narrow Senate victory in November.

But there was one example of a different way for the Tea Party to win in 2010, one that it has clearly worked to emulate on a grand scale: Marco Rubio's victory in Florida. A former speaker of the Florida house, Rubio was not some unknown insurgent; he was a critical part of the state's power structure. True, he challenged a popular sitting governor in the primary, but he did not blink when faced with calls to pull out for the good of the party. Instead, he marshaled his forces and destroyed Charlie Crist not once but twice. Other ambitious officials sitting in the second tier of politics have seen the wisdom of Rubio's approach.

This successful model shows clearly where the Tea Party is going. The Akin controversy may hark back to the mistakes of 2010 — losing Missouri's very winnable Senate seat could cost the party its shot at taking control of the Senate — but it's an exception. This year the Tea Party has backed candidates with significantly more experience and much stronger résumés than it did in 2010.

Akin is a six-term Congressman. Ted Cruz was the solicitor general of Texas. Richard Mourdock, who toppled longtime Indiana Senator Dick Lugar, was state treasurer. Paul Ryan is a seven-term Congressman. Not every Tea Party candidate hails from the ranks of elected officials — a veterinarian knocked off Representative Cliff Stearns in a Florida primary — but there has been a real movement by backbench elected officials to claim the mantle of the Tea Party and step up to the big time.

This trend may lead Tea Party members to question whether their insurgent movement has been co-opted by elected officials, a claim that the Tea Party has been working to dodge from its very beginning. But it is a basic compromise that almost all political groups face on their way to becoming mainstream. If that means more victories in November, it's a compromise that a majority of self-professed Tea Party members would likely be happy to make. Though the Akin controversy shows experience is no guarantee of success, the fact that more elected officials are running under the Tea Party banner is evidence of the movement's growing influence. The Tea Party is quickly moving toward the power center of the Republican Party.

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