The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism, by Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson

Reviewed by Margaret Frattaroli

The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism by Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson is a social scientist’s view of the Tea Party and its effects on American politics. A study of different aspects of the Tea Party, the book presents everything from Grass roots activists to Media Moguls through the lens of observational findings and compiled demographical data. Skocpol and Williamson use their findings to come to the eventual conclusion that, while the Tea Party might not last forever, it has ensured its place in history by pulling the Republican party further right and changing the national discourse at a critical time in U.S. history.

The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism reads differently than many of the humanities works usually used in American Studies classes. It follows the scientific format, starting with questions, going on to explain methodology, then presenting Data, and finally providing a thesis in the conclusion. Although it may differ from most of what is read in American Studies classes, it provides a fresh way of looking at a political movement, one focused more on demographical and polling data rather than historical or cultural context.

Skocpol and Williamson’s book provides a wealth of information on various aspects of the Tea Party. Rather than merely looking at Grass roots organizations, the book also discusses the way the movement has been co-opted by media outlets, ultra-rich conservatives and (at times) the mainstream of the Republican Party. Throughout their discussion Skocpol and Williamson make reference to their sources, the vast majority of which are polls and personal observation. The most varied and interesting use of sources occurs in the chapter about the Media’s relation with the Tea Party. Here the authors begin to look more at transcripts and the way in which polls were worded rather than simply the results themselves “The sense readers get of the level of Tea Party activity clearly varies depending on how the question is asked”. This use of data is rare, however, as Skocpol and Williamson are more intent on showing the data that they gathered themselves.

In fact, the vast majority of book reads more like the presentation of data than the presentation of proof. The sharing of information clearly out weights any desire to make an argument. This format can make the book a bit tiresome to read straight through. With the exception of the introduction and conclusion, the chapters seem almost unconnected. The book lacks a narrative through line. Even when the information is interesting the lack of over all connection gives the reader no clear desire to keep on reading.

Despite this, there is an overall sense that Skocpol and Williamson are out to set the record straight on a number of stereotypes and assumptions about the Tea Party. Notwithstanding their own claimed liberalism, the two authors often found that they were able to get along relatively well with many of the Tea Party members whom they met during their research. In fact, the first chapter opens with a description of one kindly old couple who also happened to be Tea Party activists, “The people like Stan and Gloria who are most engaged in Tea Party undertakings at the local level...are not the types of people who shout”. Skocpol and Williamson are adamant that the loudest and most extreme activists are not representative of the whole.
In many cases, however, Skocpol and Williamson’s data does seem to be more in line with the stereotypes than against them. The data proves that tea party members are generally white, economically secure and older. One section is even titled “Tea Partiers are very Conservative” something most readers would likely have assumed before reading the book. Once again the more interesting and provocative sections of the book are later, in the discussion of how outside forces have shaped and been shaped by the Tea Party. Chapter 5, for example, shows the sway that the Tea Party has over the Republican Party at large, “…Tea Party funders can frighten and discipline more moderate GOP officeholders”. These sections seem more in line with Skocpol and Williamson’s insistence that their data may not fit into everyone’s assumptions.

Application for American Studies: If this book were to be used as a reading for a class at Connecticut College, I would suggest AMS 454 The Reagan Revolution: American Conservatism. The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism would fit in perfectly with the class’s goal of tracing the changing idea of what has constituted conservatism over the course of American history. I would also suggest this book as resource for any student writing a research paper on the Tea Party or a related topic. Although the book might not be completely engaging as a straight through read, it does provide an immense amount of data on the Tea Party itself. Anyone trying to gather data for a paper would do well to reference the book’s many polls and interviews.