



REUTERS/KEVIN LAMARQUE

STUCK BETWEEN THE TEA PARTY AND A HARD PLACE

Republicans courted the Tea Party in 2010 with promises of fiscal austerity. Now Tea Partiers say they must deliver, or face primary challenges in 2012.

BY NICK CAREY
DAYTON, OHIO, MAY 17

THIS JOHN BOEHNER was not the John Boehner that Tea Party leaders in the room thought they knew.

Compared to the Boehner who talked tough on spending ahead of last

November's elections, the one who showed up at Club 55, just off Interstate 75 in Troy in southwestern Ohio, struck them as timid.

The private April 25 meeting was convened by the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives at the request of Tea Party leaders, who were seething over recent Republican compromises, most

notably on the 2011 budget.

One of the 25 or so leaders, all from Boehner's district, asked him if Republicans would raise America's \$14.3 trillion debt limit.

According to half a dozen attendees interviewed by Reuters, the most powerful Republican in Washington said "yes."



WEEPY: House Republican leader John Boehner breaks into tears during his speech as he addresses supporters at a Republican election night results watch rally in Washington, November 2, 2010. **REUTERS/JIM YOUNG**

"And we're going to have to raise it again in the future," he added. With the mass retirement of America's Baby Boomers, he explained, it would take 20 years to balance the U.S. budget and 30 years after that to erase the nation's huge fiscal deficit.

That answer incensed many of the Tea Party activists, for whom raising the debt limit is anathema.

"You could have knocked me out of my chair," said Denise Robertson, a computer programmer who belongs to the Preble County Liberty Group. "Fifty years?"

She said "my fantasy now" is someone will challenge Boehner in the 2012 Republican primaries. "If we could find someone good to run against him, I'd campaign for them every day," Robertson said.

"I am sick of the tears," she added, a sarcastic reference to Boehner's famous propensity to cry. "I want results."

Fed up with "broken promises," some Tea Party activists have already moved beyond the fantasy stage and aim to "primary" Republicans who have let them down -- that

*"I AM SICK OF THE
TEARS. I WANT
RESULTS. "*

is, challenge them in primaries. Some talk of long-shot attempts to unseat leaders like House Majority Whip Eric Cantor.

Led by Boehner, Republicans in Congress are at odds with Democrats and the White House over how to raise the limit on how much debt the United States can afford. President Barack Obama's administration warns of global financial chaos if lawmakers do not increase the current cap of \$14.3 trillion.

Boehner, in a May 9 speech in New York, did insist that any increase to the debt limit include "cuts in trillions." But conservatives expect the Republicans will not uphold his demand.

If the Republicans lose the debt limit battle, more Tea Party groups say they will aggressively seek candidates to challenge establishment figures in the 2012 primaries.

VIDEO

Nick Carey on MSNBC here:

<http://link.reuters.com/wud69r>

"At this point, all of them are potential targets," said Dawn Wildman, president of the SoCal Tax Revolt Coalition, who lives in San Diego. "All the way up to Boehner."

FAILURE AN OPTION?

BORN IN THE DAYS after Obama took office in early 2009 in a wave of conservative anger at corporate bailouts and hefty government spending to stem the Great Recession, the Tea Party movement has come a long way in just two years.

After failing to halt the passage of Obama's health reform bill, Tea Partiers staffed phone banks, knocked on doors to get out the vote and played a major role in gaining 63 seats for the Republicans in the 2010 elections.

The biggest midterm election year swing

BLOG

Find more Reuters special reports at our blog The Deep End here:

<http://link.reuters.com/heq72q>

since 1938 delivered a large House majority for the Republicans and made gains in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

Flush with victory, Tea Partiers dived headfirst into local and state politics in 2011 -- the results of which are expected to affect the state and national elections of 2012.

Their primary foe is still America's progressive left -- it is a given in Ohio, for instance, that the top target for 2012 is Democratic U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown.

But now more than ever before the full force of their ire is directed at the Republican Party establishment.

Dozens of interviews with Tea Party activists across the country paint a picture of a conservative movement whose members gave the Republican Party in Washington a chance to prove it was serious about fiscal responsibility after years of running up deficits under Obama's predecessor George W. Bush.

And many Republican politicians promised to uphold the Tea Party's central tenets -- constitutionally limited government, lower taxes and the free markets.

"They certainly talked the talk before the election," said Tim Dake of the Wisconsin Grandsons of Liberty. "They told us what they knew we wanted to hear and sought us out."

After the election, not so much. "All of a sudden they stopped taking our calls and were no longer interested in what we had to say," Dake said.

Hoping for meaningful change, they watched as either the same people -- Boehner and Cantor -- or party loyalists took up leadership positions in the House.

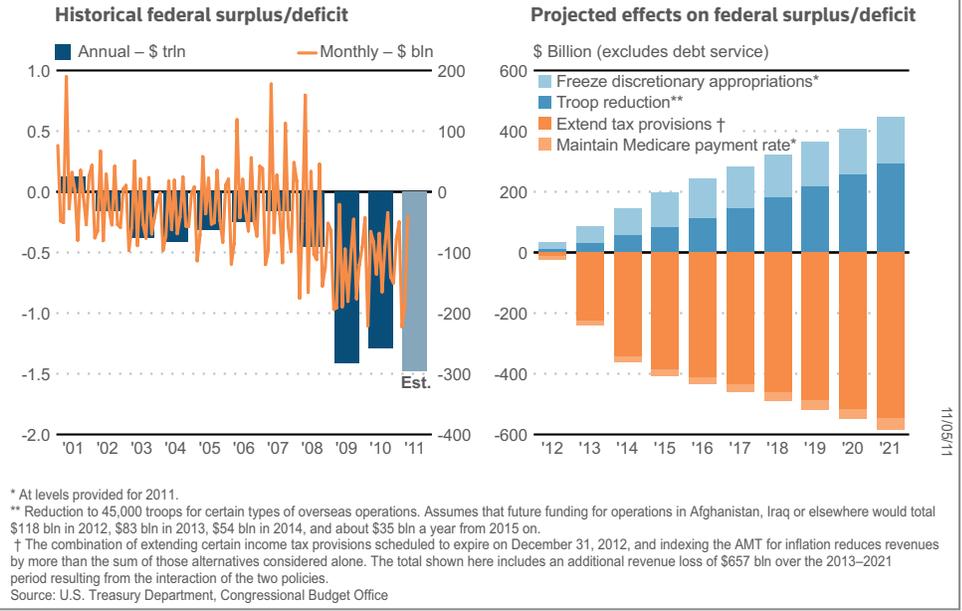
Then came the first real battle of the new Congress that mattered to the Tea Party -- cutting spending in the 2011 budget. Instead of \$100 billion in cuts the Republicans promised in their "Pledge to America" unveiled last September, Republicans and Democrats agreed on \$38 billion.

When the Congressional Budget Office said the real spending reduction was \$352 million that set many Tea Partiers boiling.

"They volunteered that damn promise of \$100 billion, we didn't ask for it," said Randy Keller of the Bowling Green Southern

U.S. federal budget

The Treasury Department reported a federal budget deficit of \$40.5 billion in April, down \$82.7 a year ago.



Reuters graphic/Stephen Culp



Kentucky Tea Party. "They seem to think that we can't handle simple math. We in the Tea Party are so angry we can't stand it."

Not raising America's debt ceiling has now taken on even greater importance for Tea Party groups.

The April 25 meeting with Boehner and inside accounts of others between House Republicans and Tea Partiers in their districts hint at a party trying to manage expectations ahead of the real debt limit debate. The trouble is while compromise is a trademark of Washington politics, to many Tea Partiers it is a dirty word.

According to Ned Ryun, head of American Majority, which provides training for conservative activists, the Republicans' problem is they mistook their November victory as a sign the Tea Party backed them because its members are conservatives.

"The Republican establishment suffers from a weird belief that somehow the Tea Party will fall in line because it is an adjunct of the Republican Party," he said. "But the Tea Party is not and never will be an arm of



GENERATION T: A boy holds a sign as he attends a South Florida Tea Party rally in Boca Raton, Florida, April 16, 2011. REUTERS/JOE SKIPPER

the Republican Party."

That leaves Boehner stuck between the Tea Party and a hard place. If he pushes too hard on cuts, that will rattle the Republican Party's powerful Wall Street wing, potentially roiling the markets and unsettling the broader electorate.

But backing down will also hurt him. "After accusations he didn't do enough in the budget battle, Boehner has to have something real to take back to conservatives or he's in trouble," said James McCormick, a professor of political science at Iowa State University. "He's boxed in between two components of the Republican Party. Obama knows that and is not under the same pressure."

If the Republicans falter, the search for establishment targets will kick into a higher gear -- with freshmen, or those elected in 2010 seen as the easiest to unseat as they are new.

"The Tea Party will almost certainly primary those they want to get rid of," said Larry Sabato, a politics professor at the University of Virginia. "They are not out to rebuild the Republican Party. They are out to take over the Republican Party and make it more like the Tea Party."

"If it takes some Republican defeats along the way to make that happen, then that is what they'll do," he added.

'SCREW UP A FREE LUNCH IN A SOUP KITCHEN'

WHEN NIGHT FELL ON election day last November 2, Tea Partiers across the country were flat out exhausted.

Most activists in the amorphous movement are unpaid. Many have full-time jobs as well as volunteering for the cause.

In the run-up to the election an army of volunteers learned the mechanics of electioneering: from manning phone banks to knocking on doors to get people to the polls.

Ana Puig of the Kitchen Table Patriots in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, says her group staffed a "Liberty Headquarters" 12 hours a day for four months, made 36,000 phone calls, knocked on 20,000 doors and handed out 5,000 yard signs, helping to elect conservative Pat Toomey to the U.S. Senate.

"The Republicans would not have been able to achieve those results by itself," said Puig. "We reached the folks the Republican Party could not."

This is the real power of the Tea Party in its



STILL ANGRY: Linda Dupere holds a sign at the Tax Payer Tea Party Rally in Concord, New Hampshire April 15, 2011. REUTERS/BRIAN SNYDER

raw form: the ability to get voters to the polls.

Tea Party activists in many states describe with contempt an "atrophied" Republican Party machine that in some places they have taken over or ignored entirely.

"The Ohio state Republican Party would screw up a free lunch in a soup kitchen," said Ralph King of the Cleveland Tea Party, a sentiment echoed elsewhere, though less colorfully.

After the election, Tea Party groups in many states immersed themselves in local and state politics -- a task made easier by massive Tea Party-infused gains for Republicans at the state level.

Groups in states like Wisconsin, Indiana,

New Hampshire and Ohio have pushed "right to work" bills to take on the unions.

Others have backed voter identification bills, under consideration now in 25 states, which conservatives say would prevent voter fraud. Democrats say these bills would lower the turnout for minority, low-income and elderly voters. In Texas, Tea Parties have pushed hard for cuts to the state budget.

Social conservatives have used new Republican majorities in state houses to pass some bills targeting abortions. Others are pushing gun rights legislation.

And in many states Tea Party groups have pushed back against Obama's healthcare reform -- dubbed "Obamacare." In Ohio



SEEKING COMPROMISE: U.S. President Barack Obama hosts a meeting with bipartisan House and Senate Leadership in the Cabinet Room of the White House to discuss fiscal policy in Washington April 13, 2011. **REUTERS/KEVIN LAMARQUE**



TARGET: U.S. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) leaves a meeting hosted by Vice President Joe Biden on a legislative framework for comprehensive deficit reduction with congressional Republicans and Democrats at Blair House in Washington, May 5, 2011. **REUTERS/JASON REED**

"BY NOT HAVING A FEDERAL AGENDA FLYING AT US, WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO FOCUS MORE ON LOCAL AND STATE POLITICS IN 2011."

activists are nearing the 386,000 signatures needed for a statewide ballot in November challenging the mandate that individuals obtain health insurance.

"We needed time to breathe," said Chris Littleton, head of the Ohio Liberty Council, who said he is happy control of Washington is divided in the short term because it has allowed Tea Party groups in Ohio "to build up infrastructure."

"By not having a federal agenda flying at us, we have been able to focus more on local and state politics in 2011," he said, "before we go back to federal politics in 2012."

There has been some media attention devoted recently to the fact that attendance at Tea Party rallies, the hallmark of the early days of the movement, has dwindled.

But Tea Partiers say they are too busy learning how the political system works -- prior to 2009 most had little or no political

experience -- and that rallies produce few results.

"Rallies get people off the couch," Wisconsin Grandsons of Liberty's Dake said. "But the return on investment from all the work and money that you have to put into them is not very high. What we've found is that people want to have an impact, even if it is just at the local level."

Though the anger may burn with a lower intensity than the white-hot rage of the early days, it still burns -- and the Tea Party is trying to put that to good use.

"You can't sustain that kind of anger for long, it drains you," said Jim Lefler of the Southwest Michigan Tea Party. "We've learned to channel our anger to get results."

WAR WITH REPUBLICANS

IRRESPECTIVE OF THEIR immersion on local politics, however, the Tea Party movement

has maintained its laser focus on the national political scene.

Despite their fervent opposition to Obama's health reform, few appear impressed by the symbolic vote in January in the House to repeal the law -- it never stood a chance in the Democratic-controlled Senate, let alone reached Obama's desk.

"That vote was just so Republicans could go home and campaign by saying they voted to repeal Obamacare," said Paul Keith, chairman of the Bowling Green Southern Kentucky Tea Party. "That vote was meaningless, it was crap."

"The things that matter to us are what the Republicans control. Where if they don't cooperate, there is no deal."

The fiscal 2011 budget was one such thing. In their "Pledge to America" the party promised spending cuts of \$100 billion "in the first year alone and putting us on a path to begin paying down the debt, balancing the budget, and ending the spending spree in Washington."

Not only did Tea Party members around the country note which Republicans voted for the 2011 budget -- especially those who ran as fiscal conservatives last year -- they are also aware of the 59 Republicans who voted against it.

Tea Party members in Ohio, for instance, know three House Republicans held the Tea Party line -- Jim Jordan, Steve Chabot and Jean Schmidt -- while nine did not, including Boehner.

For some Tea Party groups the budget was too much. So they want to target RINOs -- Republicans In Name Only, a pejorative term conservatives use for moderate Republicans.

"There isn't any urgency among the establishment Republicans," said Phillip Dennis of the Dallas Tea Party. "They just don't get that we elected them not because we love them, but only because they weren't Democrats."

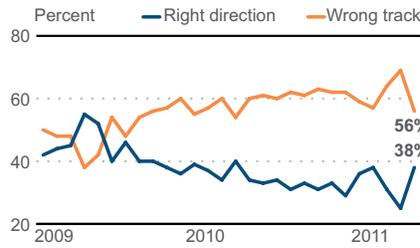
"Our war now is with the Republican Party," he added. "We need to send home a whole boatload of RINOs."

So far the only high-profile attempt to "primary" a moderate Republican in 2012 is Indiana, where conservative state treasurer Richard Mourdock is challenging Senator Dick Lugar, who has steadfastly refused to change his views.

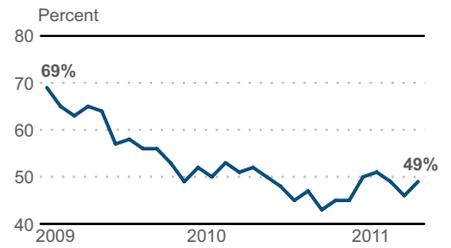
But others are mentioned as possible. Utah Senator Orrin Hatch is one, though no challenger has yet come forward. Tea Party groups in a number of states are eyeing potential candidates for House races, but say

Reuters/Ipsos poll

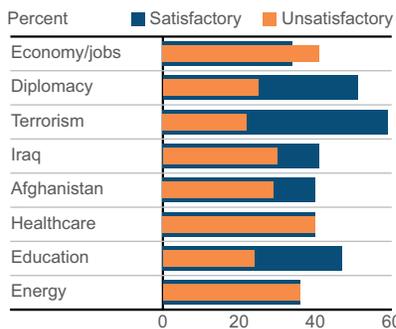
Are things in this country headed in the right direction or are they on the wrong track?



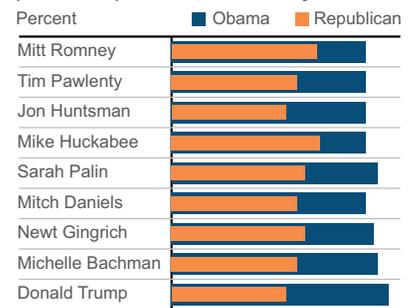
Do you approve of the way Barack Obama has handled his job as President?



Has President Obama's performance on the following been satisfactory or unsatisfactory?*



If the presidential election was today and the candidates were Obama and one of the following possible Republicans, who would you vote for?



What is your party affiliation/ideology?



* Respondents were asked to grade Obama's performance A, B, C or D. A and B constitute 'satisfactory' and C and D constitute 'unsatisfactory'. From a sample of 1,029 randomly-selected adults surveyed May 5 to 9, 2011. Source: Reuters/Ipsos



Reuters graphic/Stephen Culp

11/05/11

their searches are still in the early stages.

Perhaps the highest-profile member of the House whom Tea Partiers hope to unseat is Eric Cantor. Karen Hurd of the Virginia Tea Party Alliance is working on a two-pronged strategy to challenge him. The House Majority leader is considered conservative by many, but Hurd says he is a RINO.

Hurd is compiling an "information campaign" highlighting his record, including voting for the unpopular 2008 bank bailout. If the campaign gains traction, Hurd wants to find a challenger, though she acknowledges that is a tall order. Cantor's is a safe seat and he can raise a lot of money.

"Right now Cantor is impregnable, but if we can make him vulnerable then he can be primaried," Hurd said. "A few years ago challenging Cantor was inconceivable. The big change now is that while it's a huge challenge, it's not impossible."

Others, like Dake of the Wisconsin Grandsons of Liberty, are waiting to see how

their Republicans vote in the near future. The more they stray from the fiscal conservative line, the more likely they will be challenged.

"It's still early in the year," he said. "We'll give them a couple more votes before we decide."

'NOT ONE HAND WENT UP'

TEA PARTY LEADERS WHO attended the April 25 meeting with John Boehner -- a member of his office confirmed much of the account given by those who spoke to Reuters -- recall he put on a nice spread: quiche, fruit, some "nice cheese" and such.

But the assembled leaders found his answers on raising the debt limit unpalatable.

Ron Musilli, 62, a native of Troy, recalls asking Boehner what leverage points the Republicans planned to focus on in debt limit talks with the White House and Senate Democrats.

"We haven't figured that out yet," he recalls Boehner replied.

Musilli says that was "a little disconcerting. My kids will be retiring in 50 years, so I like to see a plan to reduce the deficit before then."

When someone asked what happened to the bold-talking John Boehner of October 2012, the Speaker became frustrated and responded with a question: "Would you have the United States default on its obligations?"

For many, the short answer is yes.

Gene Clem, a spokesman for the Michigan Tea Party Alliance, says at a meeting of 120 activists from 12 Michigan counties at the end of April he asked who wanted to raise the debt limit.

"Not one hand went up," he said. "Not one."

Others want the Republicans to force the Democrats to agree to major cuts before they raise the debt limit. Boehner and other Republicans have talked tough in recent days about slashing spending. Now the onus is on them to deliver.

The University of Virginia's Sabato said the Republicans' predicament is they cannot do enough to please a movement that wants drastic cuts and dislikes compromise.

"The Tea Party wants to take it (the debt limit debate) to the brink," he said. "The Republicans won't go there because they know the price will be too high for them."

The Republicans' corporate wing would prefer a mix of gradual spending cuts and tax increases, which conflicts with the Tea Party's ideals of both lower taxes and spending.

Matt Kibbe, CEO of FreedomWorks, which has provided logistical support for some Tea Party groups, said corporate support for the banking sector bailout, the stimulus package and even for healthcare reform had been unpopular with Tea Party activists.

That has created what Kibbe called "a growing divide" between the Tea Party and corporate America.

'NOT QUALIFIED TO BE DOG CATCHER'

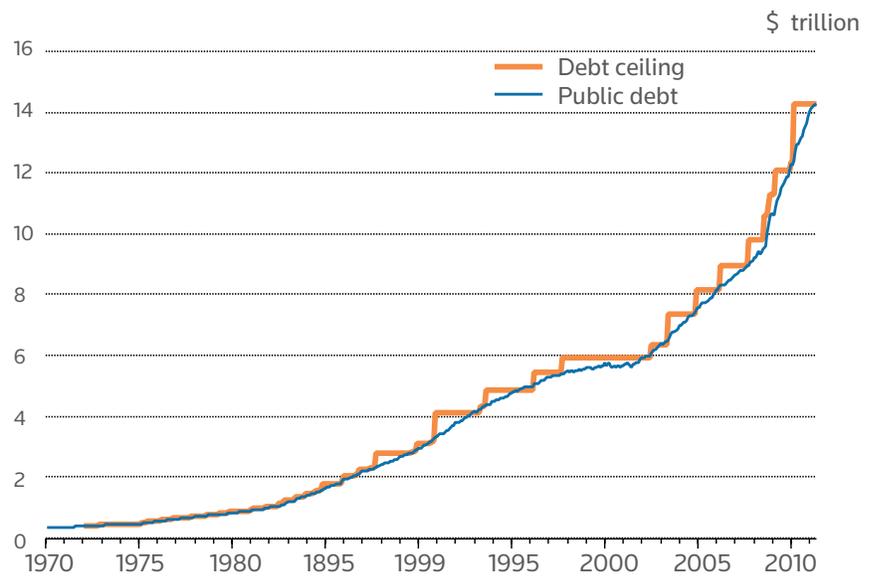
TEA PARTY GROUPS LEARNED some tough lessons in the 2010 election. First, they often split the vote between them when going up against establishment figures.

Hoping to avoid the same mistakes, the Michigan Tea Party Alliance, a coalition of Tea Party groups across the state, is working out guidelines to agree on one challenger per seat.

The other main drawback in 2010 was that Tea Party neophytes often chose candidates whose track records or background made them unelectable.

Possibly the prime example of that was

U.S. public debt and debt ceiling



Source: Thomson Reuters Datastream

Reuters graphic/Van Tsui 5/1

REUTERS INSIDER

COLUMBUS, OH

Video interview with Chris Littleton, head of the Ohio Liberty Council:
<http://link.reuters.com/zev59r>

CHRIS LITTLETON
PRESIDENT

Christine O'Donnell, who beat a moderate candidate in the Republican primary for the U.S. Senate seat in Delaware, but whose campaign foundered in part over embarrassing revelations of dabbling in witchcraft. Some establishment Republicans claim poor Tea Party choices cost them the Senate.

"Let's face it, we had people who were solidly unqualified for dog catcher, let alone the office they were running for," said SoCal Tax Revolt Coalition's Wildman.

"The other thing we are learning now

is what happens when naive people get into high office," she added of some of the freshmen the Tea Party helped elect.

"So we are learning how to vet candidates properly."

While being a complete outsider was seen as a plus last year, Tea Party groups are now looking for conservative candidates with a track record and name recognition.

Some in the movement have run or plan to run for office at the local level. But they will not be ready for primetime until they have worked their way up the political ladder,



TRUMP CARD: Property magnate and reality TV star Donald Trump speaks at a South Florida Tea Party rally in Boca Raton, Florida, April 16, 2011. **REUTERS/JOE SKIPPER**

which is some years off at best.

"The biggest challenge we are facing is finding people to run," said Ken Emanuelson of the Dallas Tea Party. "We need an experienced person with a political track record. It may take several cycles to get the right people in place."

But even an unsuccessful run can be bad news for an establishment candidate, forcing them to spend time and vast sums of money, plus move further to the right to win the primary. In short, incumbents fear primary challenges.

"I get a lot of feedback from people locally and from around the country and it's pretty clear the Republicans do not want us to influence the primaries in 2012," said Jane Aitken of the New Hampshire Tea Party Coalition. "They hate us, but they are terrified of us too."

"But whether the Republicans want us to or not, we are going to influence the primaries next year."

American Majority's Ryun says he expects a few high-profile Republicans may be beaten in primaries next year.

But the Tea Party is expected to find easier targets among the freshmen of 2010. After two years their name recognition will not be



WOONG THE RIGHT: U.S. Congresswoman Michele Bachmann speaks at the Tea Party Patriots "Continuing Revolution" rally on Capitol Hill in Washington March 31, 2011. **REUTERS/KEVIN LAMARQUE**

that high and many of them are in marginal seats.

Even if challenges for high-profile establishment figures prove unsuccessful, they will get the attention of others.

"It would send a message to all other Republicans," the University of Virginia's Sabato said. "If it could happen to someone as powerful as, say, Eric Cantor, it could

certainly happen to you."

WINNING THE PARTY'S SOUL

HOW THAT PLAYS OUT in the general election is an open question. While the Tea Party will have an out-sized impact on

Republican primaries, its success in November 2012 will depend on how acceptable its candidates are to the broader

electorate.

The fierce battles going on at the state level over collective bargaining rights or spending cuts are also a factor to watch, as, thanks in part to the Tea Party, those fights are further to the right than the debate in Washington.

"There is very little doubt in my mind that establishment Republicans are very worried," said James Henson, a politics professor at the University of Texas. "They are having to watch their right flank and may end up leveraged in the middle."

"A lot of people are thinking in the abstract that cutting taxes and spending is good," he added. "But the question is what challenges the reality poses for the Republicans."

Henson also says "divisions the Tea Party has created within the Republican Party have already complicated the party's presidential race," as some candidates will wait until the battle for the party's soul has been decided.

That leaves what almost every Tea Party activist interviewed described essentially as

a lackluster field.

Conservative New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's name was the only one mentioned consistently with any excitement in informal polling for this article, even though he says he will not run. Another candidate who has raised some interest is Herman Cain, a political outsider and former pizza chain CEO.

Minnesota Representative Michele Bachmann has courted the Tea Party actively, but her name was barely mentioned.

In one small survey of 68 Tea Party leaders in Ohio conducted in April by the Ohio Liberty Council, in which respondents were asked who they wanted for president, Christie won with 15 votes. Bachmann got four votes, level with real estate tycoon Donald Trump, who said on Monday he would not run.

At the back of the pack, alongside former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum and Barack Obama, was former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney with zero votes. In

general polls, Romney currently leads the Republican pack, but the health reform he passed in office -- dubbed "Romneycare" -- is despised by conservatives for its similarities to Obama's health reform.

"Romneycare is the kiss of death for his campaign," said Kristen Varley of the Greater Boston Tea Party.

Just how bad is the divide between the Tea Party and the Republican establishment? "Could the Tea Party harm the Republicans?" said Stuart Rothenberg of the Rothenberg Political Report. "If it pushes too hard then it could fracture the Republican Party."

For some people on the ground like Colleen Conley of the Rhode Island Tea Party, a bit of party fracturing might not be a bad idea.

"If the Republicans can't come through on their promises," she said, "maybe the party needs to be blown up."

(Additional reporting by David Morgan, Corrie MacLaggan and James B. Kelleher; Editing by Jim Impoco and Claudia Parsons)



TEA TIME: With tea bags hanging from her hat, Tea Party member Martha Stamp of Wakefield, Rhode Island, attends the 38th annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington February 10, 2011. **REUTERS/KEVIN LAMARQUE**

COVER PHOTO: Activists dressed as a Captain America and a patriot attend the Tea Party Patriots "Continuing Revolution" rally on Capitol Hill in Washington March 31, 2011. **REUTERS/KEVIN LAMARQUE**

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