

NJ brews its own milder flavor of Tea Party

By JANE ROH • Courier-Post Staff • April 4, 2010

Tea Party member -- that description alone can conjure images of radical members carrying signs with racist slogans and protesting loudly on national television.

But, in New Jersey, a Tea Party member is not as easily defined.

The more radical Tea Partiers tend not to be found here, political experts say, because of the state's famously moderate electorate.

"We have the most diverse population of any state in the country in terms of culture," said Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute. "In order for all of us to get along, extreme views just rarely get a foothold across the state."

William Haney, president of the Burlington County Tea Party, dismissed more radical Tea Party assertions such as those regarding President Obama's citizenship and alleged communist views, saying that Obama's worst sin was that he is a progressive.

Tea Partiers repeatedly stress that they are a movement, not a political organization. A wide range of views can be found among Tea Partiers locally, they said.

"If you checked the voter registrations here you'd find a lot of undeclared Republicans and Democrats," said Britta Wenzel said, a former Democratic LaVallette councilwoman.

Brian Bendar, chairman of the Lacey Township Democratic Committee, agrees that the Tea Party can be beneficial to both parties.

"The Tea Party should be for both parties because what it represents is the people taking back their government," said Bendar. "It's nice for people to yell about how bad the federal government is, but if you want to be true to your cause you need to start right here."

Bendar hopes to challenge Rep. John Adler in the Democratic primary based on the freshman congressman's vote against the health care package, which Bendar supports.

Mixed support

While some supporters feel being a member of the Tea Party gives them a unique outlet that typical political parties may not, polling shows that sympathy for the Tea Party is low here compared to other regions in the country.

Murray said that's because New Jersey voters tend to be wary of ideologues.

"It's not that we're more liberal. We're probably more libertarian than anything else," Murray said. "Really, New Jersey's state motto should be 'Live and Let Live.' "

But, the Tea Party movement appears to be giving already angry New Jersey voters another outlet to express that anger. A possible upside is the movement is attracting people who previously weren't involved in local politics.

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At a health care protest at Rep. Rob Andrews Haddon Heights office Thursday, Becky Milakovic of Blackwood said the Tea Party's opposition to the health care debate inspired her to become politically active. She said she also appreciated "the togetherness and voicing your ideas" at local meetings.

"New Jersey as much as any other state in the country feels it is excessively overtaxed. It's looking for lower taxes, more take-home pay, and less government intrusion," said Michael Johns, a former speechwriter for President George H.W. Bush who spoke at the rally outside Andrews' office. "The Tea Party is speaking to some basic instincts of what New Jersey wants."

Murray cautioned that voters here might not have the stomach for the more radical elements of the movement.

"The Tea Party is giving people an outlet for expressing their anger. But the thing with these groups is as they gain greater visibility, their fringe elements tend to be more publicized. Then you will get the middle disavowing themselves," he said.

Radicals and rationals

Most of the attendees at a central New Jersey Tea Party meeting on Tuesday were conservatives. And, they proved a receptive audience for Justin Murphy, who is running against Republican party pick Jon Runyan in the 3rd District Congressional primary. Murphy is already backed by the Burlington County Tea Party.

Murphy, won applause from everyone in the room with his stances on accountability, campaign reform, taxes and machine politics, acknowledges there are some radical elements to the Tea Party.

He said there are racist sentiments among some Tea Partiers, but said he would immediately disavow any supporters who expressed those views.

Movement leaders here said they do not condone the actions of fellow members who espouse borderline racist or unfounded views about the president. At the rally outside Andrews' office one protester held up a sign that read, "We are not racist. We are patriots."

At the same protest, Janet Monitzer of Erial said that Obama's advisors were admitted Marxists "who hate our capitalist society."

"I can't think of their names offhand but they're the different czars he has. I've seen the videos," she said.

Steve Jeffries, head of the Ocean County Tea Party, took his sentiments even further.

"Obama hates America. He wants to destroy the principles and traditions upon which it's built," Jeffries said. "I don't know if he's an American citizen. I think it's a little odd that he won't produce a birth certificate. I don't believe he's a Christian."

Despite these views, Tea Party members in New Jersey say they want to keep their focus on reform.

Grassroots goals

Tea Partiers at the central Jersey meeting said that elected officials dependent on large campaign donors no longer answered to them. And that frustration was driving them to the polls this November.

"There's something wrong with the amount of money in politics today," Murphy said, noting that Adler has raised more money than any other incumbent in New Jersey's House delegation. "We need to use the grassroots, and grow through small community

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meetings like this."

Bendar agreed.

"If you reform how campaigns are funded, then the people get their say back instead of the special interests and corporations," he said.

The Traditional Republicans of Ocean County is a relatively new third-party response to what voters there said was a GOP political machine in their area.

"We're looking to get Ocean County politics away from the political bosses who decide who's going to run," said Jason Wallace, a TROC freeholder candidate this year, adding that the county's high taxes were directly linked to the Republican Party's control over hiring and government there.

Ingrid Reed, of the Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics, said she does not believe politicians here have to be concerned about Tea Party activism -- yet.

"I do think that the heart of the Tea Party movement is a frustration with government, and that frustration comes in part because of what's perceived as excessive costs and also philosophically in terms of what government should be doing. Those two pieces fit very well with the sentiment we've seen in New Jersey since before Gov. Chris Christie was elected," Reed said.

The real test for the movement here, Reed said, will be its staying power if the economy improves and property taxes go down.

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