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Trump's Staunch GOP Supporters Have Roots in the Tea Party

Republicans who did not agree with the tea party during Obama era were somewhat less likely to remain affiliated with GOP years later

FOR MEDIA OR OTHER INQUIRIES:

Carroll Doherty, Director of Political Research
Jocelyn Kiley, Associate Director, Research
Bridget Johnson, Communications Manager

202.419.4372

www.pewresearch.org

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Trump's Staunch GOP Supporters Have Roots in the Tea Party

Republicans who did not agree with the tea party during Obama era were somewhat less likely to remain affiliated with GOP years later

A decade after the tea party emerged as a political force, its former supporters are some of Donald Trump's most stalwart Republican supporters, according to a new analysis of Pew Research Center panel surveys from 2014 through 2018.

Republicans who had positive views of the tea party movement in 2014 or 2015 were among Trump's most enthusiastic backers during the 2016 campaign. And, unlike Republicans who had mixed or negative opinions of the tea party, they continued to have very positive feelings about Trump through his first year as president.

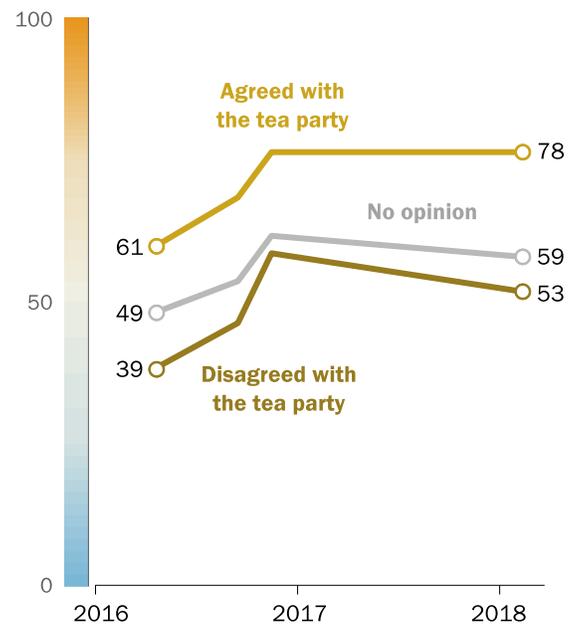
At the height of the tea party, in 2010, about half of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents said they agreed with the movement, with roughly a third of Republicans continuing to say this over the next several years.

Leveraging the Center's nationally representative American Trends Panel (ATP), this analysis explores the relationship between individual Republicans' attitudes about the tea party several years ago – from surveys conducted in 2014 and 2015 – and their views about the GOP and Donald Trump through 2018, the last time this series of questions was asked of the same respondents (see Methodology for details). An expanded version is being presented at the 2019 conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

In February 2018, those who had been Republican tea party supporters gave Trump an average rating of 78 on a 0-100 "feeling thermometer," while Trump's rating averaged 59 degrees among those Republicans who had no opinion of the tea party and was a much chillier 53 degrees among

Tea party Republicans retained very warm feelings toward Trump

Average rating of Donald Trump on a 0-100 'feeling thermometer' among Republicans and Rep leaners who, in 2014 or 2015 ...



Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted 2016-2018.

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those who disagreed with the tea party. (Across all Pew Research Center surveys conducted in 2014 and 2015, 34% of Republicans and Republican leaners said they agreed with the tea party and just 11% disagreed, while the largest share – 53% – expressed no opinion.)

A gap in views of Trump between tea party supporters and those who disagreed with the movement was evident throughout 2016, both during the primaries and following the general election. That gap widened over the first year of Trump’s presidency. Although views of Trump grew more positive in each of these groups following his victory, there was no change in former tea party supporters’ views of Trump between November 2016 and early 2018. Meanwhile, Trump’s ratings among those who disagreed with the tea party or had no opinion moved in a more negative direction over this period.

About the analysis

The analysis in this report draws from surveys conducted with Pew Research Center’s [American Trends Panel](#) (ATP) to explore the association between individuals’ views of the tea party movement when they were first surveyed (in 2014 or 2015) and their attitudes about Donald Trump and the Republican Party in the years that followed.

This analysis is restricted to those individuals who were originally recruited from two large telephone surveys in [2014](#) and [2015](#) to join the ATP and remained active panelists through at least July 2017. The original surveys included the following question: “From what you know, do you agree or disagree with the tea party movement, or don’t you have an opinion either way?” The analysis looks at attitudes on other measures over the next several years. Because the same set of individuals are interviewed in each survey, changes in opinion can be tracked over time.

See Methodology for additional details.

GOP tea party supporters were most likely to remain in the party

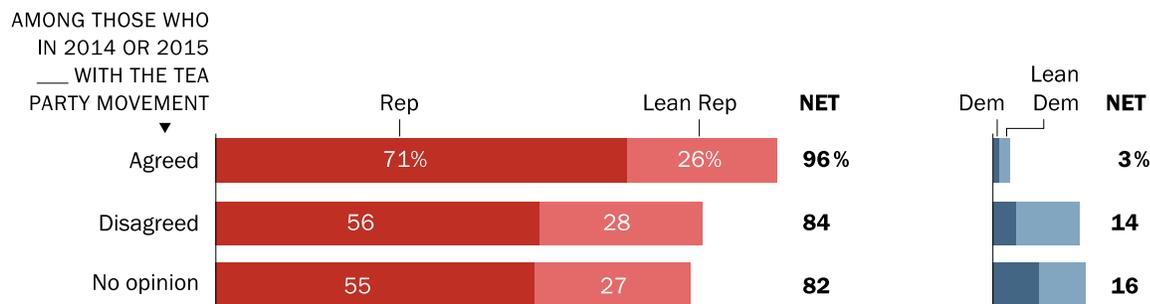
Virtually all Republicans and Republican leaners in 2015 who supported the tea party in 2014 or 2015 continued to align with the party as of 2018: 71% identified with the GOP, while another 26% leaned toward the Republican Party.

These tea party supporters were more likely than other Republicans to say that Trump's election made positive changes in what the party stands for in a 2016 postelection survey.

And while it's [relatively rare for partisans to switch parties at all](#), this was more common among the subset of Republicans who had disagreed with the tea party or had no opinion. Among the small subset of those who identified with or leaned to the GOP in late 2015 and had disagreed with the tea party in 2014 or 2015, 15% identified as Democrats or leaned Democratic in 2018. A similar share (16%) of those who had expressed no opinion of the tea party in 2014 or 2015 had switched loyalties to the Democratic Party by 2018.

Republicans who had been negative or neutral toward the tea party were more likely to defect from the GOP

% of Republicans and Rep leaners in 2015 who in 2018 identified as ...



Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted 2015-2018.

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Views of tea party were associated with 2016 primary preference

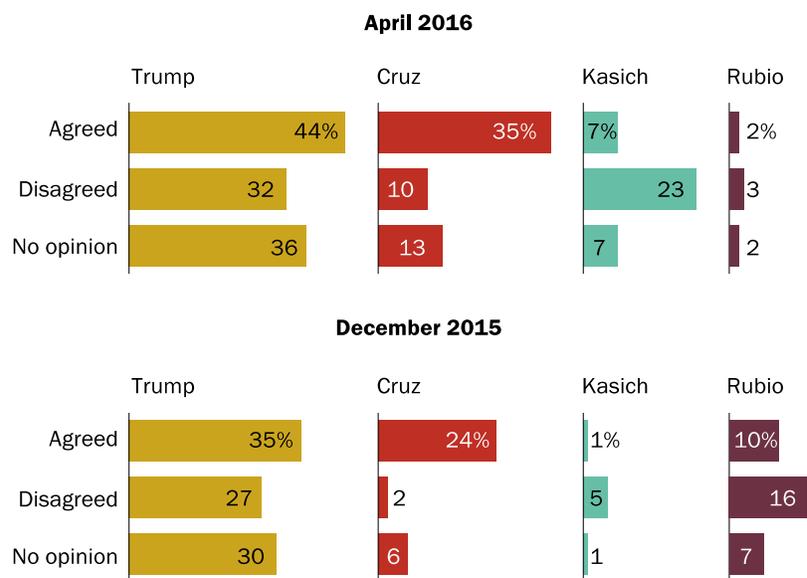
Throughout the 2016 GOP primary contest, Trump enjoyed more support than other candidates from Republicans who had agreed with the tea party, those who had no opinion and even those who had disagreed with the tea party.

But those who had agreed with the tea party were more likely than other Republicans to say they wanted to see Trump get the 2016 GOP nomination, both in December 2015 and in April 2016.

Although the plurality of Republicans who had agreed with the tea party backed Trump for the nomination in both surveys, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas enjoyed substantial levels of support from this group: 24% supported him in December 2015, while 35% did so in April 2016. Far smaller shares of other Republicans favored Cruz at either point. In contrast, Republicans who disagreed with the tea party were substantially more likely than other Republicans to back Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida in late 2015 and Ohio Gov. John Kasich in April 2016.

In 2016 GOP primaries, tea party Republicans preferred Trump by a modest margin over Ted Cruz

% of Republicans and Rep leaners who supported each candidate during the primaries, among those who had previously ___ with the tea party



Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted in December 2015 and April 2016.

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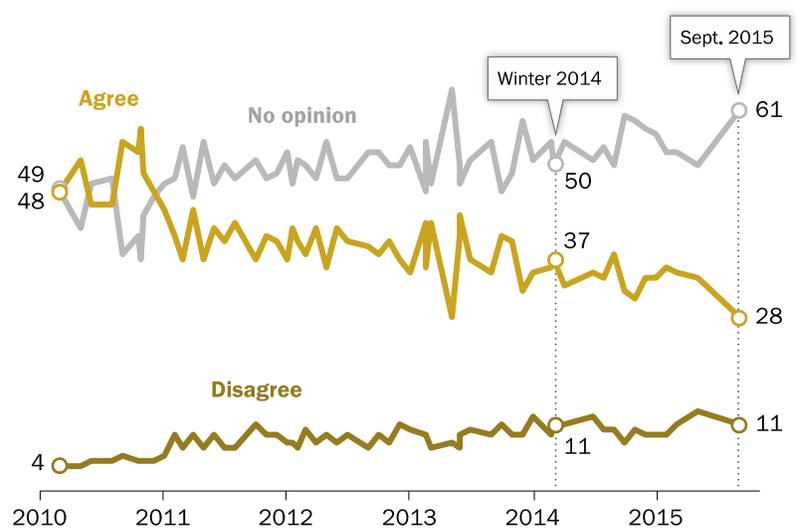
Appendix: The trajectory of GOP views of the tea party

In March 2010, about a year after the movement's first major national protests, 48% of Republicans said they agreed with the tea party, while just 4% said they disagreed (26% said they had no opinion of the movement and 21% had not heard of it). By comparison, just 6% of Democrats and Democratic leaners agreed with the movement, while 25% disagreed (31% had no opinion and 37% had not heard of it).

In fall of 2010, more than half of Republicans expressed agreement with the tea party. While support declined in subsequent years, roughly a third or more of Republicans continued to express agreement with the movement for the next several years. By fall 2015, the share of Republicans who said they agreed with the tea party had dropped to 28%. Although Pew Research Center stopped regularly tracking this question in 2015, the question was last asked in August 2016; in that survey, 36% of Republicans and GOP leaners reported agreeing with the movement.

Republican attitudes about the tea party, 2010-2015

% of Republican and Rep leaners who say they ___ with the tea party



Notes: Respondents to the Winter 2014 and Sept. 2015 surveys indicated were recruited to Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel. See methodology for more detail. Those who hadn't heard of the tea party are included with those who had no opinion. Source: Pew Research Center surveys of U.S. adults conducted 2010-2015.

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Acknowledgements

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals:

Research team

Carroll Doherty, *Director, Political Research*

Jocelyn Kiley, *Associate Director, Political Research*

Alec Tyson, *Senior Researcher*

Bradley Jones, *Research Associate*

Baxter Oliphant, *Research Associate*

Hannah Hartig, *Research Analyst*

Amina Dunn, *Research Assistant*

John LaLoggia, *Research Assistant*

Communications and editorial

Jessica Pumphrey, *Communications Associate*

David Kent, *Copy Editor*

Graphic design and web publishing

Peter Bell, *Design Director*

Sara Atske, *Assistant Digital Producer*

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on respondents to a set of self-administered web surveys conducted between December 2015 and March 2018. The analysis is restricted to those individuals who were originally recruited from two large telephone surveys in [2014](#) and [2015](#) to join Pew Research Center's [American Trends Panel](#) (ATP), and remained active panelists through at least July 2017.

The ATP is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults recruited from landline and cellphone random-digit-dial surveys. Panelists participate via monthly self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. During the first several waves, the panel was managed by Abt, and it is currently being managed by GfK.

Of the more than 8,000 respondents who were recruited to the ATP in 2014 and 2015, 7,588 were asked questions in their recruitment surveys about support for the tea party (in the 2015 survey, a random $\frac{3}{4}$ of respondents were asked this question). This analysis is based on the 3,974 who remained active panelists through at least 2017 and restricted to the 1,724 who identified with or leaned to the Republican Party in the December 2015 survey.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the analysis:

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Rep/Lean Rep	1,724	3.8 percentage points
Agree with the tea party	772	5.7 percentage points
Disagree with the tea party	241	10.3 percentage points
No opinion about the tea party	688	6.1 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

About the missing data imputation

Participants in the American Trends Panel are sent surveys to complete roughly monthly. While wave-level response rates are relatively high, not every individual in the panel participates in every survey. The analysis of Republican tea party supporters is restricted to respondents who completed the summer 2017 “member engagement” survey (a yearly survey to update information about panelists). Data in this analysis includes questions asked on waves conducted December 2015; April, September and November 2016; and February and March 2018.

Several hundred respondents did not respond to at least one of these waves. A statistical procedure called multiple imputation by chained equations was used to guard against the analysis being undermined by this wave level nonresponse. There is some evidence that those who are most likely to participate consistently in the panel are more interested and knowledgeable about politics than those who only periodically respond. Omitting the individuals who did not participate in every wave of the survey might introduce bias into the sample.

The missing data imputation algorithm we used is a method known as multiple imputation by chained equations, or MICE. The MICE algorithm is designed for situations where there are several variables with missing data that need to be imputed at the same time. MICE takes the full survey dataset and iteratively fills in missing data for each question using a statistical model that more closely approximates the overall distribution with each iteration. The process is repeated many times until the distribution of imputed data no longer changes. Although many kinds of statistical models can be used with MICE, this project used classification and regression trees (CART). For more details on the MICE algorithm and the use of CART for imputation, see:

Azur, Melissa J., Elizabeth A. Stuart, Constantine Frangakis, and Philip J. Leaf. March 2011. “[Multiple Imputation by Chained Equations: What Is It and How Does It Work.](#)” International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research.

Burgette, Lane F., and Jerome P. Reiter. Nov. 1, 2010. “[Multiple Imputation for Missing Data via Sequential Regression Trees.](#)” American Journal of Epidemiology.