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Q & A: Matthew Green on the Tea Party

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 20, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

This week at Q & A, we asked five experts to submit, by email, their thoughts on the Tea Party and what it means for the November midterm elections. Our first respondent is Professor Matthew Green, a politics professor at the Catholic University of America and a fellow at the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies [1].

The question: Will the Tea Party be a blessing or a curse for the GOP in the November midterm elections?

Professor Green: Recent Tea Party election victories show why direct primaries are both a blessing and a curse for political parties. On the one hand, the primaries worked just as they were intended by progressive-era supporters: they forced a party organization (the G.O.P. in this case) to be more responsive to voters and gave people a greater say in who represents them. On the other hand, the primaries circumvented the ability of the Republican Party to select candidates most likely to win general elections.

In fact, the rise in influence of conservative voters in Republican primaries has caused the Party at least two short-term electoral problems. The first is the nomination of candidates who are so conservative, inexperienced, and/or personally flawed that their odds of winning are very low; this certainly describes the situation in Delaware (for Senate), and possibly in Nevada (Senate) and New York (governor) too. The second is that in some races -- in Florida and, more recently, Alaska -- more moderate candidates (Charlie Crist, Lisa Murkowski) have refused to bow out and have sought other avenues to election instead, threatening to split the Republican vote in November.

What will be the impact of these Tea Party victories on the Republican Party itself? In the short run, besides denying the Party some election wins (and likely control of the Senate), it means the election of new ideologues to Congress, which will make governance and party unity quite difficult to G.O.P. leaders to manage -- as Speaker Newt Gingrich learned the hard way after the 1994 elections. But in the long run, because the Tea Party movement excites many conservative voters and forces the G.O.P. to deal with long-simmering divisions and conflicts within its ranks, I think Republicans can turn it into a means of reinvigorating their Republican base and finding ways to reunify itself...though it could take a while.

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