

# The hidden agenda of Obama's opposition

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Is the US Tea Party movement a racial backlash against President Obama? A new study by Angie Maxwell from the University of Arkansas, and Wayne Parent from Louisiana State University, assesses whether racial attitudes are contributing to Tea Party membership, and if so, the exact nature of this racial prejudice. Their work is published online in Springer's journal, *Race and Social Problems*.

The [Tea Party](#) is an American political movement that began in 2009 and which is focused on fiscal conservatism. The first major protests took place in 40 states just 37 days after Obama's inauguration. While public statements by Tea Party organizations claim that the movement is driven by [economic concerns](#), anecdotal accounts of Tea Party events suggest that the movement may be part of a racially charged, anti-Obama backlash.

In an analysis of national survey data of 1,649 white participants, taken from a poll conducted by [Knowledge Networks](#), Maxwell and Parent look at the influence of three unique [racial attitudes](#) in the establishment of the Tea Party. Specifically, they investigate the role of:

- [racial stereotypes](#) – "old-fashioned racism," which exposes persistent attitudes and beliefs
- symbolic racism – the beliefs of individuals who are often socialized in early life to connect moral conservatism and negative ideas of African Americans
- ethnocentrism – the view that one's own cultural or ethnic group is superior to others

The authors' work demonstrates that both views on economic policy and disapproval of Obama drive Tea Party membership, as well as favorable attitudes to the Tea Party among non-members. In addition, in both cases, there is evidence of a racially biased, so-called "subterranean agenda" in the anti-Obama movement. Although there are nuances in terms of which particular racial attitudes motivate members versus supporters, both groups are driven by race.

The authors conclude, "Clearly, an African-American, mixed-race, liberal President may trigger symbolic racism and even racial stereotypes among the population at large. But these distinct measures are intricately connected, as is evident in this assessment of Tea Party membership and Tea Party support. What the Tea Party means to its members and what it represents to the public at large may, in fact, not be the same thing."

**More information:** Maxwell A & Parent TW (2013). A "Subterranean Agenda"? Racial Attitudes, Presidential Evaluations, and Tea Party Membership. *Race and Social Problems*. [DOI 10.1007/s12552-013-9097-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-013-9097-7)

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