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Wrong Track	52.8
Spread -13.3	

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September 21, 2010

R.I.P. Political Establishment

By **David Paul Kuhn**

The big story of American politics stretches from the netroots to Barack Obama's victory to the tea party movement. The political establishment's reign has finally ended.

The National Republican Senate Committee supported eight candidates who lost in the primary. One week ago, the primary season closed with the most suitable of metaphors: the tea party movement sacked GOP's Castle.

Yet this is a phenomenon larger than the tea party movement. The conservative grassroots are the most formative force within today's Republican Party. The **partisan industrial complex** feeds our hyper-partisan age. But, ironically, it has also empowered a complex independent of any central staging point. Party leaders and political barons remain influential. But the old guard no longer constitutes the maestros of national politics.

This is one way to understand what's taking place in American politics. The orchestras have overtaken the conductors. There are still conductors. But we no longer look to them to grasp what's to play out.

Politics has moved from top-down to bottom-up. The liberal netroots of 2006 was a harbinger of the far larger and far more influential tea party movement. Both capture our new politics: where power is more fleeting, where politics is increasingly de-centralized and influence more democratized. The tail easily wags the dog in modern politics.

"The tea party is part of something. Something is not part of the tea party," said Republican strategist Alex Castellanos. "The phenomenon we are talking about is, yes, not a left-right phenomenon as much as it is a bottom up phenomenon."

It was precisely the opposite when Barack Obama was born. As recently as midcentury, presidents' political careers were often owed to a few key benefactors. Harry Truman owed his rise to Missouri's "Boss Tom" Pendergast. Lyndon Johnson to a pair of Texas brothers. John Kennedy to his father. Twentieth century presidential historian Richard Neustadt found that until 1968 only "some 50 to 100 men--state leaders, party bosses, elder statesmen--decided nominations." The rise of primary elections weakened the establishment's hold, like campaign finance law.

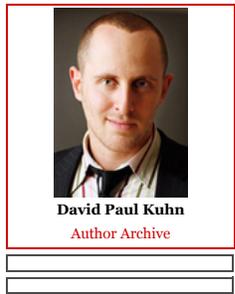
Political establishments have never been static. Joe Kennedy was shamed out of FDR's Democrats. He later fathered a political dynasty. Moderate party establishments fell with Barry Goldwater's Republicans in 1964 and George McGovern's Democrats in 1972. Political insurgencies often become the new establishment, as with McGovern and Goldwater.

The rapid pace of the change is what's changed. Should 2010 prove a wave election, that will mark three waves straight. Establishments require a structure that assures its endurance. That structure is too weak today to be determinative.

That structure was far more formidable in Goldwater's day. Goldwater won power through trench warfare. His staff spent three years mobilizing support at the precinct level. By the GOP convention, Goldwater had enough delegates to win the nomination on the first ballot. He was also the beneficiary of a party gradually moving southward and westward, of an already fading Northeastern moderate GOP, of a party becoming less blue blooded and more blue collar.

Power no longer shifts so tectonically, nor so gradually. Trench warfare is now blitzkrieg. It also amounts to combat without generals. The tea party movement's purge of moderates echoes Goldwater's coup. But today's conservative movement is occurring without a Goldwater.

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Today's grassroots movements need not win power by first winning the seats that make power.

This is a trend hardly isolated to politics. The public has gradually lost faith in institutions. The Associated Press recently spearheaded a poll that asked Americans their confidence in 18 major institutions. No institution won the strong faith of the majority of Americans.

The change is also larger than the sum of its parts. It's somewhat like emergent structures in nature. The intersection of the parts shapes events rather than simply the existence of these parts. Think tornados or rock formations. Republicans Sarah Palin and Jim DeMint, like CNBC's Rick Santelli, did not make the tea parties. And the tea party movement would carry on if all these actors left the stage.

No single factor, including [Santelli's rant](#), sparked this movement. Tea party activists want it to remain decentralized and independent of party leaders. One popular book within the tea party movement is the business text, "The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations." The starfish does not depend on a head to survive or even operate. If you cut off the arm of a starfish, it can regenerate.

The tea party movement has therefore sought to stay free of the Republican head. It's the GOP establishment that has attempted to wrap itself around the tea parties.

This has been the story from Kentucky's Rand Paul to last week in Delaware, when Christine O'Donnell defeated Mike Castle. Castle enjoyed near uniform support from the Republican Senate committee to Karl Rove to the state GOP chairman. The night O'Donnell won, a Republican Senate committee official reportedly said the group would not fund her bid. The group's chairman, John Cornyn, offered only curt congratulations.

Less than a day later, the GOP Senate establishment reversed itself. Cornyn issued a lengthy statement of support. A \$42,000 contribution followed. And the GOP's most establishment of presidential hopefuls, Mitt Romney, quickly endorsed O'Donnell. Romney also contributed \$5,000 to her campaign. No GOP candidate in 2012 wants to be seen on the other side of the tea party movement. The netroots similarly influenced major Democratic candidates during the last presidential contest.

But it remains a far stretch to argue the people, or even the activists, have supplanted the powerful. The establishment no longer reigns, but it remains an influential force. Many tea party movement candidates will rely on the conventional Republican apparatus for assistance in fundraising, organization and strategy in the general election. Some of the tea parties favorite sons and daughters are not outsiders. Florida Senate candidate Marco Rubio was a former speaker of the state's House. Palin is, after all, a former GOP vice presidential nominee.

The so-called mother's milk of politics--money--illustrates how influence is still top heavy in other respects. Obama's campaign raised a record \$745 million. By its calculation, a half a billion dollars of that sum came via the Internet. But only about a quarter of Obama's fundraising came from people who contributed less than \$200, the same share as George W. Bush four years earlier, according to the nonpartisan Campaign Finance Institute. Donors who contributed at least \$1,000 filled nearly half of Obama's coffer. And the five companies whose employees donated the most to Obama were respectively: University of California, Goldman Sachs, Harvard University, Microsoft Corp and Google Inc. Not exactly anti-elitist bodies.

But, on the shoulders of Howard Dean before him, it was online fundraising that allowed Obama to so quickly channel the surge in enthusiasm into megabucks. This is how Obama's fundraising operation so quickly competed with, and eventually overtook, the far more conventionally connected Clinton campaign. In time, the last phalanx of the political establishment, super delegates, fell in line with voters.

Technology was the tipping point. The Internet does not mean the people feed politics. But fundraising is now no longer the province of big money alone. Campaign communication can now be sent online for free. Digital cameras, YouTube, have made producing advertising cheap. And like all advertising, political marketing is increasingly micro-targeted online. Minority ideological coalitions can also rapidly unite and influence the party through web-social networking (see MoveOn or Tea Party Express).

"We are moving from the top down industrial age to the bottom up communications age. Facebook is growing and The New York Times is dying. A few smart people in a room can run anything," Castellanos said. "Ron Paul and the Internet is a political party. There will be political parties, but right now anyone with a computer is a political party."

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