CHANGE THEY CAN’T BELIEVE IN: THE TEA PARTY AND REACTIONARY POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA


Winner of the 2014 Best Book Award, Race, Ethnicity, and Politics Section of the American Political Science Association

Are Tea Party supporters merely a group of conservative citizens concerned about government spending? Or are they racists who refuse to accept Barack Obama as their president because he's not white? Change They Can't Believe In offers an alternative argument—that the Tea Party is driven by the reemergence of a reactionary movement in American politics that is fueled by a fear that America has changed for the worse. Providing a range of original evidence and rich portraits of party sympathizers as well as activists, Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto show that what actually pushes Tea Party supporters is not simple ideology or racism, but fear that the country is being stolen from "real Americans"—a belief triggered by Obama's election. From civil liberties and policy issues, to participation in the political process, the perception that America is in danger directly informs how Tea Party supporters think and act.

The authors argue that this isn't the first time a segment of American society has perceived the American way of life as under siege. In fact, movements of this kind often appear when some individuals believe that "American" values are under threat by rapid social changes. Drawing connections between the Tea Party and right-wing reactionary movements of the past, including the Know Nothing Party, the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, and the John Birch Society, Parker and Barreto develop a framework that transcends the Tea Party to shed light on its current and future consequences.

Linking past and present reactionary movements, Change They Can't Believe In rigorously examines the motivations and political implications associated with today's Tea Party.