

# Commentary: Now, a chance for Tea Partyers to show they can govern

**William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune**

On a cloudy September day in 2009, tens of thousands of people marched on Washington, D.C., protesting government overreach and a bloated federal budget.

By some accounts, as many as a million people took part in the rally, although others put the number much lower.

In any event, while this "Taxpayer March" wasn't the Tea Party's first rodeo, it certainly raised the profile of the movement and helped stir popular opposition to the government's irresponsible fiscal policies. The enthusiasm it generated spilled over to the 2010 elections, when House Republicans won their largest majority in more than 60 years.

Six years later, almost to the day, Republican House Speaker John Boehner announced his resignation.

Whether Boehner's action will continue the Republican surge and hand them the 2016 presidential race - or mark, instead, the "high tide of the Confederacy" and keep the party out of the White House for a third consecutive term - could depend on how his caucus responds to this unexpected opening.

Six years ago the Tea Party movement enjoyed broad popular support, largely because it focused on fiscal issues - limiting the size of government, reducing the federal debt, lowering taxes. It tapped into widespread concerns about the country's fiscal trajectory and the realization that the burden we're bestowing on future generations may be too great to endure.

Since that time, the movement has turned into a punchline. It lost its way when it became a clearinghouse for every disgruntled, conspiracy-loving, anti-everything amateur constitutionalist who harbors grievances against government in general and the "political establishment" in particular.

While this shift in focus makes for entertaining political theater, it doesn't win national elections - and that's a problem for those who support the Tea Party's original goal of restoring fiscal sanity.

Realistically, a Democratic presidential candidate isn't going to go to bat for reduced government spending. A fiscally conservative Republican might - if he or she can get elected - but for that to happen, the conservative wing in Congress has to show it's capable of governing in a way that doesn't scare the stuffing out of the average American.

To date, conservatives have done a singularly poor job of this. They have, on multiple occasions, threatened to shut down the government if they don't get their way on Planned Parenthood, on the Affordable Care Act, on the Iran nuclear deal or the president's immigration order.

In Idaho, someone whispered "Sharia law" and panicked the Tea Party wing into blocking legislation related to a United Nations treaty, throwing the state's child support system into disarray and forcing a special session to correct the mess.

Lawmakers will defend these actions as a matter of principle, saying they're unwilling to compromise their values. That's fine, but they need to recognize how incompetent it makes them look. This "take-our-ball-and-shut-everything-down" approach to government doesn't engender confidence in most voters.

By all accounts, federal agencies only opened for business this morning because Boehner's resignation allowed House Republicans to avoid an intra-party fight. It created just enough unity to pass a temporary funding measure and prevent a government shutdown.

Now, whether they want it or not, conservatives have a chance to show they can continue to govern effectively - that they can lose votes without throwing a tantrum, that they're willing to focus on issues that enjoy wide public support, without trying to shove their social values down everyone's throat.

In effect, Boehner's resignation gives House conservatives the opportunity to show that they themselves aren't the biggest roadblock to achieving the Tea Party's original goals.

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*Spence covers politics for the Tribune. He may be contacted at [bspence@lmtribune.com](mailto:bspence@lmtribune.com) or (208) 791-9168.*