Review of Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America. By Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto. Princeton University Press. 361 pp. $27.95

The Tea Party was born less than a month after Barack Obama was inaugurated as president. Reporting from the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade for CNBC, libertarian Rick Santelli blasted the new administration for forcing Americans to pay for their neighbor's mortgage even though he had "an extra bathroom and can't pay his bills." Although Obama did not advocate a bailout for all homeowners, Santelli's call for a "Chicago tea party" caught the attention of Fox News and by April 15, 2009, income tax day, tea parties had been organized in 850 communities around the country. In the election of 2010, the Tea Party helped the Republicans capture 63 House seats, the largest number that had changed hands in more than 60 years, 11 governorships and 680 state legislative seats.

At first Obama attributed the rise of the Tea Party to opposition to his economic stimulus package. But, as Jonathan Alter has observed in The Center Holds: Obama and His Enemies, when the president saw "Take the Country Back" placards at Tea Party rallies, he discerned a racial subtext, asking friends "Take it back from..." without having to complete the sentence.

In Change They Can't Believe In, Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto, professors of political science at the University of Washington, Seattle, draw on their own extensive surveys of Tea Party sympathizers to confirm Obama's intuition. The Tea Party, they demonstrate, is not best understood as a mainstream conservative "green" movement, pressing for lower taxes, balanced budgets and an end to entitlement programs for poor people. Supporters are motivated by a perception that the "real" America -- Christian, middle-class, mostly white and heterosexual -- is disappearing. They are reactionaries, the authors' argue, not unlike members of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and the John Birch Society in the 1950s, who are energized in part by antipathy to minority groups, and fundamentally by anger that change is subverting their core values.

Parker and Barreto do not hide their disdain for the Tea Party. And their attempt to show that their subjects should not be characterized as patriotic or liberty-loving is a bit of a stretch. Nonetheless, their statistically informed analysis helps us understand the Tea Party's priorities, its fervor, and its contempt for compromise.

Tea Party sympathizers are clearly aware of the changing demography of the United States. In 1970, 83% of the population was white. Forty years later, whites had dropped to 63 percent, with census takers finding 50 million Latino-Americans, 15 million Asian-Americans and 39 million African-Americans. Many Tea Party supporters believe that Obama is the beneficiary and malign agent of the multi-cultural agenda of these minority groups. Seventy-one percent of the Tea Party respondents to the authors' surveys claim that the president will destroy the country and 67 percent that he is a socialist. Only 41 percent agree that Obama was born in the United States and 29 percent that he is a Christian. Noting a reluctance by Tea Party supporters to answer questions on these subjects and their propensity to pay attention to the news, Parker and Barreto "don't believe these views come out of ignorance."

The authors' document the support of Tea Party adherents for "the new racism," an antipathy to blacks that does not include overt allegations of biological inferiority, but refers to laziness, moral laxity, and dependence on government handouts -- and their opposition to immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for illegal aliens. Fifty-six percent of Tea Party sympathizers support repealing the citizenship rights of the U.S. born children of illegal immigrant parents (which are protected by the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution).

Parker and Barreto provide documentation for the view that the Tea Party gained momentum because a sizable minority of Americans do not believe that Barack Obama loves the same country they love, refuse to grant him legitimacy as president, and oppose anything he supports. They demonstrate as well that race matters for Tea Party sympathizers, despite the denials of their spokespeople. Nonetheless, they leave a number of questions that bear directly on the durability of the Tea Party unmasked and unanswered. Was the same fraction of Americans also certain that Bill Clinton was a socialist, bent on destroying America? Will the immigration bill, which U.S. Senator Marco Rubio has endorsed, split the Tea Party? Will an economic recovery weaken a movement that the authors' claim is not, in its essence, about free market capitalism and individual liberty? What will happen to the Tea Party in 2016, when Barack Obama is not on the ballot but the United States is even less white?

In the meantime, with its stranglehold on the Republican Party and its capacity to paralyze public policy, the Tea (Party), whether it's green or black, is likely to keep many of us awake at night.