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Poll Finds Tea Party Backers Wealthier and More Educated

By KATE ZERNIKE and MEGAN THEE-BRENAN

Tea Party supporters are wealthier and more well-educated than the general public, and are no more or less afraid of falling into a lower socioeconomic class, according to the latest New York Times/CBS News poll.

The 18 percent of Americans who identify themselves as Tea Party supporters tend to be Republican, white, male, married and older than 45.

They hold more conservative views on a range of issues than Republicans generally. They are also more likely to describe themselves as “very conservative” and President Obama as “very liberal.”

And while most Republicans say they are “dissatisfied” with Washington, Tea Party supporters are more likely to classify themselves as “angry.”

The Tea Party movement burst onto the scene a year ago in protest of the economic stimulus package, and its supporters have vowed to purge the Republican Party of officials they consider not sufficiently conservative and to block the Democratic agenda on the economy, the environment and health care. But the demographics and attitudes of those in the movement have been known largely anecdotally. The Times/CBS poll offers a detailed look at the profile and attitudes of those supporters.

Their responses are like the general public’s in many ways. Most describe the amount they paid in taxes this year as “fair.” Most
send their children to public schools. A plurality do not think Sarah Palin is qualified to be president, and, despite their push for smaller government, they think that Social Security and Medicare are worth the cost to taxpayers. They actually are just as likely as Americans as a whole to have returned their census forms, though some conservative leaders have urged a boycott.

Tea Party supporters’ fierce animosity toward Washington, and the president in particular, is rooted in deep pessimism about the direction of the country and the conviction that the policies of the Obama administration are disproportionately directed at helping the poor rather than the middle class or the rich.

The overwhelming majority of supporters say Mr. Obama does not share the values most Americans live by and that he does not understand the problems of people like themselves. More than half say the policies of the administration favor the poor, and 25 percent think that the administration favors blacks over whites — compared with 11 percent of the general public.

They are more likely than the general public, and Republicans, to say that too much has been made of the problems facing black people.

Asked what they are angry about, Tea Party supporters offered three main concerns: the recent health care overhaul, government spending and a feeling that their opinions are not represented in Washington.

“The only way they will stop the spending is to have a revolt on their hands,” Elwin Thrasher, a 66-year-old semiretired lawyer in Florida, said in an interview after the poll. “I’m sick and tired of them wasting money and doing what our founders never intended to be done with the federal government.”

They are far more pessimistic than Americans in general about the economy. More than 90 percent of Tea Party supporters think the country is headed in the wrong direction, compared
with about 60 percent of the general public. About 6 in 10 say “America’s best years are behind us” when it comes to the availability of good jobs for American workers.

Nearly 9 in 10 disapprove of the job Mr. Obama is doing over all, and about the same percentage fault his handling of major issues: health care, the economy and the federal budget deficit. Ninety-two percent believe Mr. Obama is moving the country toward socialism, an opinion shared by more than half of the general public.

“I just feel he’s getting away from what America is,” said Kathy Mayhugh, 67, a retired medical transcriber in Jacksonville. “He’s a socialist. And to tell you the truth, I think he’s a Muslim and trying to head us in that direction, I don’t care what he says. He’s been in office over a year and can’t find a church to go to. That doesn’t say much for him.”

The nationwide telephone poll was conducted April 5 through April 12 with 1,580 adults. For the purposes of analysis, Tea Party supporters were oversampled, for a total of 881, and then weighted to their proper proportion in the poll. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus three percentage points for all adults and for Tea Party supporters.

Of the 18 percent of Americans who identified themselves as supporters, 20 percent, or 4 percent of the general public, said they had given money or attended a Tea Party event, or both. These activists were more likely than supporters generally to describe themselves as very conservative and had more negative views about the economy and Mr. Obama. They were more angry with Washington and intense in their desires for a smaller federal government and deficit.

Tea Party supporters over all are more likely than the general public to say their personal financial situation is fairly good or very good. But 55 percent are concerned that someone in their household will be out of a job in the next year. And more than
two-thirds say the recession has been difficult or caused hardship and major life changes. Like most Americans, they think the most pressing problems facing the country today are the economy and jobs.

But while most Americans blame the Bush administration or Wall Street for the current state of the American economy, the greatest number of Tea Party supporters blame Congress.

They do not want a third party and say they usually or almost always vote Republican. The percentage holding a favorable opinion of former President George W. Bush, at 57 percent, almost exactly matches the percentage in the general public that holds an unfavorable view of him.

Dee Close, a 47-year-old homemaker in Memphis, said she was worried about a “drift” in the country. “Over the last three or four years, I’ve realized how immense that drift has been away from what made this country great,” Ms. Close said.

Yet while the Tea Party supporters are more conservative than Republicans on some social issues, they do not want to focus on those issues: about 8 in 10 say that they are more concerned with economic issues, as is the general public.

When talking about the Tea Party movement, the largest number of respondents said that the movement’s goal should be reducing the size of government, more than cutting the budget deficit or lowering taxes.

And nearly three-quarters of those who favor smaller government said they would prefer it even if it meant spending on domestic programs would be cut.

But in follow-up interviews, Tea Party supporters said they did not want to cut Medicare or Social Security — the biggest domestic programs, suggesting instead a focus on “waste.”
Some defended being on Social Security while fighting big government by saying that since they had paid into the system, they deserved the benefits.

Others could not explain the contradiction.

“That’s a conundrum, isn’t it?” asked Jodine White, 62, of Rocklin, Calif. “I don’t know what to say. Maybe I don’t want smaller government. I guess I want smaller government and my Social Security.” She added, “I didn’t look at it from the perspective of losing things I need. I think I’ve changed my mind.”