

Vox Populi

by Michael S. Lubell, APS Director of Public Affairs

Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly and the rest of Roger Ailes's Fox News minions might have given the "Tea Baggers" a larger megaphone than their actual numbers merited during last summer's congressional town hall meetings, but make no mistake about it, the protesters were steeped in something more profound than a boiling teapot of right-wing palaver.

It's easy to dismiss people who walk around with a fringe of tea bags dangling from the brims of their bonnets as members of a lunatic fringe. But polling data reveal a trend in public sentiment in which the Tea Baggers may actually be in the vanguard. They could very well represent the cusp of a brewing populist uprising, one that has already taken down a major Democratic leader, five-term Connecticut Senator Christopher J. Dodd, who announced in early January that he would not seek re-election in November.

Two years ago Dodd's withdrawal would have been unthinkable. During his three and a half decades of service in Congress, poll after poll perennially rated him one of the most popular politicians in Connecticut. But within the last year his approval ratings plummeted – so much so that analysts increasingly viewed the 2010 race as a certain Republican pickup.

What brought Dodd to the brink of electoral rejection was voters' perception that he was too cozy with big banking and too enthralled with big government. As chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, he stood accused of getting a sweetheart personal deal from now-defunct mortgage lender Countrywide Financial and of protecting the bonuses of executives of Connecticut-based insurance giant AIG, which received more than \$150 billion in government loans.

The Senate Ethics Committee exonerated him of any wrongdoing with Countrywide and records show the White House had requested the waiver for AIG executives on legal grounds, but both charges stuck in the minds of his constituents, and that's all that matters.

As acting chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee, Dodd also had the task of pulling together the Senate's first version of a health reform bill. The sea of accusations of a government takeover and the creation of death panels drowned out discussion of any positive features the bill contained. In the end, the HELP bill foundered and all that remained afloat was the image of Dodd embracing Washington.

Dodd's decision not to run will probably keep the Connecticut seat in the Democratic column, but the saga highlights the very palpable public pique with big government, big banking and big business. Such hostility is a big deal because it can have profound political and policy consequences – so profound that even science could be caught up in an ensuing full-blown populist rebellion.

From the times of the founding of the Republic, Americans have never been enamored of an elite ruling class. As Eric Burns's book, *Infamous Scribblers*, so ably documents, even George Washington came under withering attacks by the nascent Antifederalist press, which articulated the populist sentiments and sensibilities of the era.

Back then Benjamin Franklin was synonymous with American science. But back then, Franklin, as his biographer Walter Isaacson writes, was regarded with some distrust as more French than American, more elitist than plebian.

Given such a landscape it is remarkable that the framers even mentioned science at all in the United States Constitution. They did once in Article 1 Section 8, but only in the context of what we now call patents and copyrights. Discovery, serendipitous or not, had worth, in their minds only if it had economic worth.

Much has changed in the 222 years since New Hampshire became the requisite ninth state to ratify the Constitution. Today's policy makers recognize the importance of science for defense, medicine, energy and the economy, just for starters. And today's polls show strong public support for science.

So why am I worrying? Because if you dig a bit deeper into the polls what you find is that apart from medicine, the public has virtually no recognition of the benefits of science. And scientists, more often than not, see no reason why they need to justify their work to a scientifically illiterate public.

When times are good economically, science can get away with its elitist aura. But when people are without jobs and paychecks, when parents fear their children will not have better lives than they do, when populism becomes the political mantra, scientists better climb down from their pedestals and pay heed to the need to make themselves relevant. If they don't, they shouldn't expect elected officials to make the case for them. Washington officialdom won't, and the consequences for science and the nation's future could be profound.

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