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Republicans Strain to Ride Tea Party Tiger

By [KATE ZERNIKE](#)

As they look to make gains in statehouses and Congress this year, Republicans are trying to harness the Tea Party energy that helped make an unknown named [Scott Brown](#) the senator-elect from Massachusetts.

But it may not be easy, as one Republican in Colorado learned the hard way.

When Scott McInnis appeared on Fox News last month underneath a title calling him the “Tea-Party-backed candidate” for governor, he triggered a tempest. Tea Party leaders fired off angry e-mail messages and public statements insisting that he was not their choice.

“Let it be known that we will not be used by any party or candidate!” Lu Ann Busse, the head of a coalition of Tea Party brethren known as 9/12 groups, declared at a “Defend the Republic” rally where she was invited to set the record straight after Mr. McInnis’s appearance.

Mr. McInnis said it was Fox that gave him the description without consulting him. But he was quick to try to make amends, issuing a statement on his Web site, and in the weeks since he and the head of the state [Republican Party](#) have toured Colorado meeting with Tea Party groups.

Across the country, many Tea Party activists believe that they have to work within the Republican Party if they want to elect fiscally conservative candidates. But they want the party to work for them — not, they argue, the other way around.

For Republican officials, managing the tensions between the two parties — one official, one potent — can be something like a full-time job.

“I do spend a lot of my time running interference,” said Dick Wadhams, the chairman of the Colorado Republican Party.

“I’m a big believer in the Tea Party groups,” he said. “I’m not going to claim that every Tea Party or 9/12 leader thinks I’m hunky-dory, but I do think the people who I’ve reached out to would acknowledge that I’ve welcomed them into the Republican Party. It’s a big priority of mine.”

Some Republican Party officials say privately that they are not yet certain whether the Tea Parties will prove to be a real force or simply the loudest voices. But the Tea Parties have proven their populist rage can be a power, whether to destroy Republicans — driving one out of a special Congressional election in upstate New York — or elect them in the most surprising of places, like

Massachusetts.

So publicly, Republicans are trying to make nice with Tea Party groups, particularly in states like California, Colorado, Florida, Kentucky and New Hampshire, where Tea Partiers are upending Republican unity with primary challenges to establishment candidates.

The chairman of the [Republican National Committee](#), [Michael Steele](#), proclaimed himself “a Tea Partier, a town-haller, a grass-rooter” in a recent interview, and organizers of the national Tea Party convention next month say he has expressed interest in their invitation to speak. Mr. Steele held a conference call with [Dick Armey](#), head of FreedomWorks, an umbrella for Tea Party groups, to talk about how they would fight together against health care legislation.

“R.N.C. ad goes Tea Party,” one conservative pundit declared when the committee released a spot featuring a series of faces saying “Listen to me,” a refrain from a Tea Party rally outside the Capitol in December.

And in New York, the new chairman of the state Republican Party recently turned up at a meeting of New York City Tea Party leaders. Participants took it as a gesture of reconciliation after the party outraged grass-roots groups by backing a moderate Republican over a conservative in the special Congressional election in New York’s 23rd District in November.

At the moment, much of the focus is on primaries, and many Republican leaders are repeatedly reassuring Tea Party groups that they will refrain from making endorsements. Tea Party groups and conservatives argue that if there had been an open primary in the New York race, for instance, the Republican candidate would have been a true conservative, not the moderate chosen by party leaders.

In Colorado, where Republicans are seeking to reverse the big gains Democrats have made over the last four years, Mr. Wadhams and the Tea Partiers first clashed last summer when, he says, a low-level staff member at the Republican senatorial committee in Washington registered internet domains in the name of Jane Norton, a former lieutenant governor running for the Senate.

Tea Party groups disdain Ms. Norton as the establishment candidate — she is backed by [John McCain](#) and is the sister-in-law of [Charlie Black](#), a political consultant and fixture of establishment Washington for three decades.

After what Mr. Wadhams calls “a backlash” of angry messages, he announced that he had called the Senate committee and told them not to endorse Ms. Norton.

In late November, hoping to avoid a primary fight in the governor’s race, Mr. Wadhams and Mr. McInnis introduced a “platform for prosperity,” echoing the language and demands of the Tea Party groups: less government intrusion, protecting states’ rights under the 10th amendment, opposition to federal stimulus bills.

But that was not enough for the Tea Partiers. They were angry that another candidate, Dan Maes, who has been endorsed by at least three Tea Party groups across the state, was excluded from the

drafting of the platform.

“They thought the platform was going to tie into what we were after, that we would be one big happy family,” said Lesley Hollywood, the leader of the Northern Colorado Tea Party.

Mr. McInnis was promoting the platform on Fox News when they identified him as the Tea Party candidate.

Ms. Hollywood was on the telephone with Ms. Busse, the coalition leader, when she saw the interview. “Did you see that?” she shouted. She sent an e-mail message to her members warning that they were “being played like pawns,” and another to Mr. Wadhams expressing her “extreme disgust” at the “blatant hijacking of the Tea Party.”

Tea Partiers noted that Mr. McInnis made no effort to correct the host, Neil Cavuto, when he called Mr. McInnis “the country’s biggest Tea Party candidate.”

Ms. Busse said Mr. McInnis had failed to get support from Tea Partiers because he received low to middling scores on fiscal conservatism from the Colorado Union of Taxpayers and the National Taxpayers Union during his years as a state representative and a congressman. But Tea Party groups also say he has ignored invitations to their candidate forums and other events.

“My frustration is, I have to do all of this work, now the G.O.P. wants us to do what they want to do?” Ms. Hollywood said. “If we’re the ones doing the work, it has to be the other way around.”

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