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Q & A: Dennis Coyle on the Tea Party

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Distinctly Catholic

Q & A continues its looks at the Tea Party with these comments from Professor Dennis Coyle, a politics professor at the Catholic University of America and a fellow at the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies.

The question: Will the Tea Party be a curse or a blessing for the GOP in November?

Professor Coyle:

With friends like these, who needs enemies? That is what perplexed mainstream Republicans are asking themselves in light of the surprising success of Tea Party-backed candidates in party primaries. Seemingly fringe candidates are roiling the political waters with their dynamic and sometimes puzzling personalities, their provocative statements and controversial backgrounds. Most surprising was the victory of Christine McDonnell over Rep. Michael Castle in Delaware, which seems to have dashed overnight Republican hopes, or perhaps fantasies, of taking over the Senate. It is enough to make one suspicious that Tea Party success is the product of some vast left-wing conspiracy intent on infiltrating the Republican Party and filling it with unelectable candidates.

So is the Tea Party, which isn't really a party and doesn't have anything to do with tea, doing more harm than good to Republican prospects in the mid-term elections? It is easy to make the case that the answer is yes: Highly conservative candidates push the party away from independent moderates and possible Democratic defectors needed for victory at the polls. But that is misleading. Absent the enthusiasm and interest the Tea Partiers have brought to the elections, Republicans would stand no chance of taking control of either chamber, and would have little momentum looking toward 2012. Riding that Tea Party tidal wave, the GOP is likely to capture the House, substantially narrow the Democratic edge in the Senate, and brighten its prospects of retaking the White House.

But won't the nomination of Christine McDonnell, who does not exactly come across as a model of

frugality and moderation, likely allow the Democrats to escape what would otherwise be almost-certain defeat in Delaware? Yes. But who cares? Republican prospects for retaking the Senate were already slim under any scenario. And narrow Senate control might be as much a curse as a blessing, as the public could then expect a Republican-controlled Congress to actually do something. With an opposition president and lacking the magical 60th vote for genuine dominance in the Senate, Republican leadership would likely be seen as just another ineffective part of the Washington establishment.

The most likely scenario, with the GOP controlling only the House, may best serve the long-term interests of the party. Conservatives in the House would be able to push through their agenda, then portray the Democrats in the Senate as the obstacles to change. And Republicans need not worry much about nominal Democratic control of the Senate, as the shrunken majority would be largely ineffective, deprived of the votes to stop filibusters and unable to see its measures approved by the House.

Yes, it's possible the Tea Party tidal wave will leave the Republicans broken on the rocky shoals of electoral politics. But better to chance a ride on that wave than to spend the next two years as a powerless party treading water, looking forlornly toward shore.

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