

Tea Party Aims to Apply Its Touch to the Senate G.O.P.
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By Jennifer Steinhauer

WASHINGTON — The Tea Party is very much alive in the drive for Republican control of the Senate, portending a potential shake-up in the mind-set of the chamber. The easy Republican primary victory in Texas on Tuesday of Ted Cruz, the 41-year-old Sarah Palin-blessed upstart, virtually assured the latest Tea Party candidate a seat in the chamber next year. And he will not be alone when it comes to those backed by the movement, which propelled Republicans to control of the House in 2010.

Among 17 contested Senate races and in Texas, more than half a dozen of the Republican candidates — or those currently running ahead in their primaries — are Tea Party-embraced. The infusion of new conservative blood could alter the complexion of the Senate, increasing the sorts of conflicts between moderates and far-right Republicans disinclined toward compromise that have characterized the House for two years.

From Indiana, where Richard E. Mourdock recently toppled the veteran Republican Senator Richard G. Lugar, to Wisconsin — where two Tea Party candidates are slowly unmooring the Republican front-runner, former Gov. Tommy Thompson — to Nebraska, where Deb Fischer surprisingly beat out a more established Republican candidate, Tea Party-backed contenders are surging. In Missouri, three Republicans are fighting to portray themselves as the candidate most strongly aligned with Tea Party values.

Even if Democrats maintain control, newcomers like Mr. Cruz are likely to coalesce quickly with veteran conservatives like Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina and freshmen like Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, enlarging the ranks of members who stand well to the right of their party's central platform.

As a result, the group could also present the sort of added aggravations for Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the minority leader, that befell the House speaker, John A. Boehner of Ohio, as he sought to draft difficult deals with Democrats and the White House at a time of a complex fiscal mess.

Should Republicans gain control of the Senate — as they have a fair shot of doing — Mr. McConnell could find himself having to balance the demands of Republicans like Mr. Cruz against those of remaining centrists like Senator Susan Collins of Maine.

But those concerns will come later, as conservatives were busy Wednesday celebrating the triumph of Mr. Cruz.

"This all proves what we've said all along," said Jenny Beth Martin, co-founder of the Tea Party Patriots, "that the Tea Party movement is here to stay. I am actually surprised that people are surprised that Ted Cruz won. I've only been home for three days of the last month, and I talk to people from all walks of life and they still want government out of our lives."

The Tea Party's sinewy stamina among Senate candidates is the corollary trend of the moderate Congressional members fleeing the scene, best represented by this week's surprise retirement of Representative Steven C. LaTourette, Republican of Ohio, who

announced his decision through a flame of recriminations about partisanship, and Senator Olympia J. Snowe of Maine, who left her party in a tough spot.

Some are already sensing a shift in the attitude of the Senate leadership.

"I notice that Mitch McConnell is speaking at a Tea Party rally soon," Mr. Mourdock said in an interview on Wednesday. Mr. Mourdock campaigned with Mr. Cruz, who told him, he said, that he had taken his inspiration from Mr. Mourdock's insurgent campaign in Indiana.

"Just the fact that the Republican leadership is willing to reach out to those folks is important," Mr. Mourdock said. "If that kind of coalition comes together, on Day 1 it will be if not a literal majority a real large majority, and I think on Day 1 we will jump right into the frying pan."

If Mr. McConnell, who will attend a Tea Party rally in Kentucky with Mr. Paul, feels any discontent anticipating a conference with many more Mr. Pauls, he has not expressed it. "I am very impressed with Ted Cruz and will do everything I can to help elect him in November," he said.

The dynamic was not lost on Democrats. "I think it's more of their problem than ours," said Senator Patty Murray of Washington, the chairwoman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. Democrats involved in campaigns further insist that Tea Party candidates will be disadvantaged among the much-coveted independent voters come November.

"The Tea Party positions and Tea Party policies and Tea Party agenda is going to be a huge vulnerability," said Matt Canter, a spokesman for the campaign committee.

Of course, Democrats have some of their own candidates who may prove too liberal to be elected. Some analysts believe that Representative Ron Kind might have made a stronger general election candidate in Wisconsin than the more liberal Representative Tammy Baldwin.

The campaign of former Senator Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, who is in an uphill fight against Ms. Fischer, has issued several news releases using her Tea Party affiliation as a pejorative. "She is either sending smoke signals to her Tea Party friends or she is grossly uninformed on what Social Security is," Paul Johnson, Mr. Kerrey's campaign manager, said in one.

The campaign for Representative Joe Donnelly of Indiana, the Democrat challenging Mr. Mourdock, said the Tea Party affiliation would be a central theme.

Republicans say, good luck with that. "This will probably come as a newsflash to the liberal Democratic establishment in Washington," said Brian Walsh, a spokesman for the National Republican Senatorial Committee, "but in states like Missouri, Indiana, Nebraska and Arizona, what voters think is extreme is Obamacare, massive tax hikes on small businesses and \$8 trillion in new debt over the last five years. So attacks like this simply show how out-of-touch Democrats in Washington are these days and it's a very serious problem for their fellow liberal candidates across the country."

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