

June 21, 2013



## Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party

Posted: 10/21/11 05:46 PM ET

The "audacity" and "hope" that inspired lots of Americans to participate in the Obama campaign in 2008 seems to have re-emerged with the Occupy Wall Street movement. Many observers view this new phenomenon as the progressive counterpart to the Tea Party. There are some important similarities and some significant differences. There are also some lessons -- pro and con -- that the Occupiers can learn from the Tea Party.

Here are some key points of comparison:

**Setting the Agenda:** Both the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street changed the national conversation. The Tea Party emerged soon after Obama took office and immediately went on a relentless attack against everything Obama stood for and tried to achieve politically. They also attacked him personally, challenging his religion and birthplace. Obama's election, and the 2008 Congressional elections, had been seen as reflecting a shift in the nation's mood and in public opinion toward more liberal and progressive ideas about public policy, including what polls showed was overwhelming support for some kind of universal health insurance plan. But before the Obama was able to get much traction on its political agenda, the Tea Party had put the Democrats on the defensive, emboldened the Republicans, and gained widespread media attention. The Tea Party seized on the nation's economic hard times to demonize Obama and his liberal agenda. The Tea Party's disruptive protests at Congressional town meetings during the summer of 2009 provided the mainstream media with dramatic stories featuring confrontation.

The media immediately covered the Tea Party as a serious movement with serious ideas. As a result, the Tea Party helped shift the debate on many issues. For example, on health care reform, it injected bogus ideas (like the lie that Obama's plan included "death panels") that their political allies, like Sarah Palin and Sen. Charles Grassley, repeated and helped legitimate. Obama, the Democrats, and their allies had to spend inordinate time and political capital refuting those lies rather than advancing their own proposals. This strengthened the hand of the insurance and drug companies and their allies among the Republicans and moderate Dems like Sen. Max Baucus.

This strengthened the hand of the insurance and drug companies and their allies among the Republicans and moderate Dems like Sen. Max Baucus.

Obama has certainly been weakened by these attacks. A [new study](#) from the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism found that President Obama "has suffered the most unrelentingly negative treatment" from the media of all presidential candidates since May. Pew found that Obama was the subject of negative assessments nearly four times as often as he was the subject of positive assessments.

In contrast, Occupy Wall Street was initially ignored by the mainstream media. Then it was ridiculed by the media, which focused on the "spectacle" of the protest rather than the issues. But in the past two weeks, that has changed. Although the media continues to focus on the spectacle, it is also now taking seriously Occupy Wall Street's concerns about widening inequality and corporate influence. More stories, columns, and editorials are now addressing this issues. In Washington and in cities around the country, many politicians (almost all of them Democrats) are jumping on the bandwagon, or at least voicing support for Occupy Wall Street's grievances.

A [Time magazine survey](#), conducted October 9-10, found that among respondents familiar with Occupy Wall Street, 68% say the rich should pay more taxes and 79% agree that the gap between America's rich and poor had grown too large. (It would have been more appropriate if the question asked about the gap between the rich and "everyone else," since the Occupy movement has focused on the nation's richest 1%. A [recent study](#) found that Americans significantly underestimate the nation's concentration of wealth, but, even so, think that wealth should be distributed more evenly.

The growing crescendo of concern about these issues was so powerful that even Congressman Eric Cantor, the right-wing House majority leader, who last week called Occupy Wall Street a "mob," felt he had to address these issues. He scheduled a speech, on the topic of inequality, for today at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton business school, but [cancelled](#) it after he learned that he couldn't control who would be in the audience and that Occupy Philadelphia would be protesting outside. That's too bad, because it would have been fascinating to hear Cantor try to justify the widening economic divide.

**Targets and Solutions:** To the Tea Party, the major enemy is government in general and, in particular, taxes, regulations on business, and safety-net programs for the poor. On the other hand, their picket signs warn, hypocritically, "Keep Your Government Hands Off My Medicare" (and Social Security, too). To Occupy Wall Street, the major problem is the concentration of wealth and income by the super-rich, big business's disproportionate influence on government, and the failure of Congress (mostly Republicans but some Democrats, too) to rein in Wall Street's destruction of the economy, leading to massive unemployment and foreclosures.

For the Tea Party, the solutions are lower taxes and less government (except those programs that Tea Partiers want to preserve). The solutions to the problems identified by Occupy Wall Street are more progressive taxation, public financing of elections (to eliminate the system of legal bribery we call campaign finance), government pump-priming to create jobs and stimulate demand, and stronger regulations on business to protect consumers, workers and the environment.

**Media and Money:** The Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street are both highly decentralized. They both communicate to their participants and allies via Facebook and blogs, so that local groups feel part of a larger movement. But the Tea Party has several advantages. It has several megaphones for its message, including an entire cable channel (Fox News), the vast majority of talk radio shows (including Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck), and the *Wall Street Journal*. These huge media outlets are a wing of the movement, serve as cheerleaders for the Tea Party, and provide a consistent message that helps give the movement some ideological coherence. The Tea Party also gets lots of financial backing from right-wing millionaires like the Koch brothers and others, funneled through corporate-backed advocacy groups led by Karl Rove and former Cong. Dick Armey. Occupy Wall Street has neither advantage in terms of media or money.

**Outside/Inside Strategy:** Finally, since it emerged in the summer of 2009, the Tea Party's influence has been its effective use of an "outside/inside" strategy. Although it claims to be a movement of outsiders, surveys have revealed that most Tea Party activists had previously been involved with Republican Party politics. The Tea Party has helped move the GOP to the right by mobilizing voters in Republican primaries and in general elections, as revealed in the November 2010 elections. It is the Tea Party's threats to oust Republican elected officials and challenge GOP candidates who stray from the Tea Party's right-wing views that have given it such political influence. Even though the Tea Party represents a small proportion of American voters, and even of Republican voters, it has done a good job of mobilizing its base in Republican primaries.

It is too early to know if Occupy Wall Street activists will try to emulate the Tea Party's "outside-inside" strategy. Many Occupiers voice skepticism bordering on hostility for electoral politics. Most are disappointed with, and feel let down by, President Obama, which has fueled such sentiments. Many bristle at suggestions from some quarters that Occupy Wall Street should have a more specific set of demands or support specific pieces of legislation, like Obama's jobs plan, or proposals for a tax surcharge on millionaires, and communicate to their own members of Congress. Whether Occupy Wall Street activists, and its millions of sympathizers around the country, will translate its movement activism into volunteers and voters -- for example, to help Elizabeth Warren win a U.S. Senate seat in Massachusetts, or even help Obama get re-elected -- is unknown.

Occupy Wall Street has clearly captured the nation's imagination. The Time magazine survey found that 54 percent of Americans have a favorable impression of the Occupy protests, while just 23 percent have a negative impression. By contrast, just 27 percent have favorable views of the Tea Party. Two-thirds (65 percent) of Americans believe that the Tea Party's impact on U.S. politics has been negative or negligible.

Occupy Wall Street is now dealing with a dilemma that has faced many movements: how to link visionary calls for radical change with specific demands for immediate reform? They also reflect the difference between what organizers call "mobilizing" and "movement building." The first involves large protests that may generate media attention but don't necessarily build the organizations needed to follow up, train leaders and negotiate with policy-makers. The second involves the slow, difficult work of building unions, community organizations and other groups that can dig in for the long haul and keep people engaged when the excitement dies down.

In many cities, the Occupiers and the Organizers are now discussing ways that the two wings of this economic justice movement can work together. These conversations are still in the early stages, but there have already been some positive results. Last week in Los Angeles, for example, several busloads of Occupy LA activists joined a [demonstration sponsored by Unite Here Local 11](#) outside the ritzy Hotel Belair to protest the hotel's union-busting practices.

Also in Los Angeles, many Occupiers lent support to Rose Gudiel, a member of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), who was fighting a foreclosure and eviction by Fannie Mae and OneWest Bank. There's no doubt that the political climate created by Occupy LA and the national movement pressured these [two financial giants to modify Gudiel's mortgage](#) so she and her family could remain in their home. The battle transformed the 35-year old Gudiel from a victim into an activist who has pledged to help others win similar victories.

Occupy Wall Street is voicing the frustrations of tens of millions of Americans who are unlikely to show up at protest marches, but who could be mobilized to show up as volunteers and voters in upcoming elections if the Occupiers, unions, community groups, MoveOn, and other progressive groups can find a way to join forces and link the radical vision with a reform agenda.

### Been to Occupy Wall Street?

If you've been to an Occupy Wall Street event anywhere in the country, we'd like to hear from you. Send OfftheBus your photos, links to videos or first-hand accounts of what you've seen for possible inclusion in The Huffington Post's coverage.

Participate

