

# The Occupy Wall Street Movement: Not a Moment Too Soon

Posted: 10/11/11 08:38 PM ET

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Following the controversial Supreme Court decision which awarded the presidency to George W. Bush in 2000, a number of commentators noted the peaceful nature in which Americans across the political spectrum accepted the decision. This equanimity was offered as evidence of the strength and resilience of American democracy. At that time, few raised the question of whether or not the relative silence which greeted what was, at best, a series of questionable decisions in Florida and the Supreme Court, and at worst, election fraud, was, in fact, evidence of the weakness of American democracy. Perhaps accepting the Supreme Court decision so quietly was evidence of a widespread sentiment of powerlessness in the face of a stolen election rather than a stoic acceptance of democratic process. These questions were not really asked in 2000, but they should have been.

In the almost eleven years since that decision, particularly in the three years since the current economic downturn began, powerlessness has been a major and destructive feeling running through much of the electorate. Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 addressed this feeling of powerlessness, offering words of inspiration and hope to millions after the belligerent style and disastrous politics of the Bush presidency. Unfortunately, many of those same voters again felt powerless after Obama's presidency proved disappointing to many and as the economic crisis continued.

Powerlessness, obviously, has not been restricted to those on the left. The Tea Party movement, despite its corporate backers and links to ambitious and wealthy politicians is, at least in some respects, a movement that reflects the anger and powerlessness felt by many in the face of what they perceive to be powerful and uncaring corporations and governments.

In this context, the Occupy Wall Street movement seems particularly notable. It is not yet entirely clear what the specific goals or demands of the Occupy Wall Street movement are, but that is neither a fair nor reasonable question to ask of a movement that appears to be, to a large degree, organic and genuine. The Occupy Wall Street movement appears to be a legitimate expression of the anger and frustration that many ordinary Americans have felt towards the leaders of the banking and finance sector, and the good treatment they have received from the federal government, despite driving the economy into the ground, causing millions to lose their homes, savings or jobs.

People who ask what the Occupy Wall Street movement wants or why it is appearing now are asking the wrong question. The question which should have been asked a year,

or three, ago is why there was no anger towards Wall Street and why what anger existed seemed to be exceeded by ideologically driven anger towards the Democratic administration. The Obama administration has, since its early days, taken the position that almost nothing the banks or finance firms did in the years leading up to the economic collapse is reprehensible enough to make strong regulatory action, let alone criminal persecution, necessary. In this context, it is even more important for ordinary Americans to demonstrate their frustration and anger, even if that is all they can do.

The Occupy Wall Street movement is just beginning. It could lead quickly to concrete legislative change, but that is unlikely. It could also simply disappear after a few weeks, but with increased participation from organized labor, and now a handful of Democratic politicians, that, too, seems unlikely. In between these two outcomes are some other possibilities that are less extreme, but more likely. The Occupy Wall Street may create pressure for a political environment where it is no longer OK to give financial elites a free ride and where rhetoric about small government is properly understood as calling for the wealthy financiers who contributed to the problem in the first place to get richer.

In this regard, Occupy Wall Street can provide both pressure and backup for politicians seeking a more progressive approach to solving the economic problems facing our country. The absence of a movement like Occupy Wall Street is one of the reasons why an economic crisis that, for most Americans, is about unemployment, job insecurity and dwindling savings, was framed by the far right as one that is about public debt and a government that has grown too big.

Occupy Wall Street is still in its embryonic stage, but it is a movement of those who, if not powerless, were certainly voiceless until recently. Just as an observer in late 2000 might have seen the silence with which Americans greeted Bush's appointment as president as evidence of despair and the deep weakness of American democracy, the absence of citizens organizing to call for economic justice in the face of economic pillaging and one sided class warfare could be seen, by 2011, as further evidence of the deep despair running through the American electorate. Perhaps that is beginning to change.