

# Obama, Occupy Wall Street and 2012

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Comparisons between the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street only go so far. While both are movements born largely out of frustration and a sense of powerlessness, there are key differences. The Tea Party was at least as much the product of Fox News and wealthy right wing benefactors like the Koch brothers as it was an organic grass roots movement, while Occupy Wall Street has no similar financial patrons and, at first, was [not even covered positively in many liberal media outlets](#). Moreover, in some critical ways the Tea Party was backward looking, opposing reform and drawing much of its support from older Americans, while the Occupy Wall Street seems to be more forward looking.

Even recognizing these differences, the relationship between the Tea Party and the Republican Party is comparable to the nascent relationship between the Occupy Wall Street and the Democratic Party. While it is unlikely that the Occupy Wall Street movement will take over the Democratic Party the way the Tea Party has come to dominate the Republican Party, the Democratic Party may, in the coming months and years, have to listen more to the Occupy Wall Street activists, and their supporters, who could begin to play a bigger role in the party.

For the Republican party, this relationship has been forged in the context of an open presidential primary with most candidates seeking court the Tea Party supporters whose votes are perceived as critical in many Republican primaries. The smarter candidates, notably and perhaps only, Mitt Romney have simultaneously sought to distance themselves from the Tea Party in anticipation of needing to appeal to a wider range of voters in the general election. The Tea Party, for its part, has rallied around various radical, unelectable and quirky candidates including Michelle Bachmann, Rick Perry and now Herman Cain, thus undermining their power within the Republican Party.

The Democratic Party finds itself in a different situation as the sitting Democratic president is running unopposed for the nomination and already has a sufficiently enormous lead in fundraising and organization that any primary challenger who would emerge at this point would be badly defeated. The Occupy Wall Street movement is wisely not even talking about running somebody against President Obama in the Democratic Party, but this would be about the best thing that could happen to the Obama campaign. If such a candidate were to emerge, Obama could move to the center now, run up a string of impressive primary victories and use his ample resources to marginalize the Occupy Wall Street, largely through attacking the credentials and credibility of whichever flawed candidate was supported by the Occupy Wall Street. This would put him in a strong position for November especially as once he secured his nomination Obama would then be able to use his resources to again court the activist wing of the party. Additionally, running somebody against Obama would, in of itself, erode much of

the Occupy Wall Street movement's support because many liberals would see the movement as seeking to destroy President Obama and behaving counter-productively.

This scenario could be good for the Obama campaign, but it would be a disaster for the Occupy Wall Street movement and, fortunately, is unlikely to occur. Instead, if the Occupy Wall Street movement does not get involved in electoral politics at that level, it will create a much tougher decision for Obama. There are some who still think [attacking Occupy Wall Street and positioning himself in the center](#) would be the best move for Obama, but absent a candidate against whom to run, this strategy is a lot more difficult to implement. Instead of running against an individual who would be ill-equipped for a presidential campaign against an incumbent, Obama would have to focus on the activists themselves. However, given the [widespread support](#) enjoyed by these activists, this would be a tough strategy.

Without a candidate who would allow Obama and much of the liberal establishment to frame Occupy Wall Street in purely electoral terms, Occupy Wall Street must be taken far more seriously. Obama's challenge is further complicated because he cannot simply court Occupy Wall Street now, in part because this might alienate some voters he still needs, but more significantly, because he is not popular among the activists in Zuccotti Park and elsewhere. Occupy Wall Street is, among other things, the physical expression of the liberal disappointment and, at times, anger towards a Democratic administration that has too frequently proven unwilling to adopt bold progressive positions on economic issues.

The way the president can best resolve this dilemma is to develop an Occupy Wall Street strategy that is oriented more on demonstrating to those activists that he hears them and understands their concerns than on either seeking to triangulate Occupy Wall Street into irrelevance or seeking to get in front of the movement and try to become its leader. This should, in the short term, also be the goal of the Occupy Wall Street movement. The longer term goals of the movement, which are aimed at restructuring tax policy, financial regulation and income inequality cannot, of course, be addressed between now and November of 2012, but building a relationship with the Democratic Party that shows Occupy Wall Street to be a force within the party is probably a good start. If this is done right, as the movement grows, it will become a bigger force.