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Occupying the Progressive Landscape

Progressive Politics in the United States AFTER Occupy Wall Street

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Overview

Emergence of the Occupy Movement in 2011 represents a sea-change in US politics. The landscape for strategic action is now transformed, enabling dramatic new opportunities for bold progressive policies to be implemented on the national stage.

This strategy brief maps out the core strengths and potential risks for progressive organizations and elected officials to build on the major advances made throughout the last year as we move into a critical election cycle.

This work was commissioned by Progressive Congress¹ to serve its mission of supporting progressive members of Congress and the vast ecosystem of organizations they depend on to advance a progressive vision for America.

This Changes Everything

The world has shifted dramatically in the last year. We have seen the rise of a global movement that started in Tunisia and spread throughout the Middle East, Europe, then most dramatically out from the tiny Zuccoti Park of New York City where a small protest exploded onto the global stage.

The relevance of *Occupy Wall Street* to US politics takes many forms. Most important for progressive leaders are:

- ◆ The appearance of new language for the Progressive Movement;
- ◆ A new political reality that is global in scope and yet locally grounded in cities and towns throughout the United States;
- ◆ A cogent “cross ideology” platform for visioning the future.

Let’s look at each of these in turn.

¹ <http://www.progressivecongress.org>

A New Language for Progressives

Two principle frames have been introduced into the discourse, fundamentally re-orienting the distribution of power held in the past by a conservative media and the Republican Party. These frames are the **99% Frame** and the **Occupy Frame**.

The 99% Frame evokes a maximal inequality that resonates deeply with the lived experiences of working-class people in the US and around the world. The power of the Occupy Frame does two things: (1) It is a verb that represents action taken by one who has power to influence the world, and (2) it demarcates an abstract spatial location that is scalable -- readily applied to both local places (e.g Occupy Oakland) and grand themes (e.g. Occupy Democracy).²

The language of 99% is now widely adopted and has played a crucial role in the elevation of economic inequality and moneyed corruption of our political system. At the same time, the language of occupation provides a pathway to empowerment for the large swaths of citizens who have felt powerless and marginalized for quite some time.

A New Political Reality

The rapid emergence of protest groups in hundreds of cities across America, seemingly out of nowhere, has done much more than alter the language of politics. It's greatest power is the realization that a vast community *already exists* that wants fundamental (and deeply progressive) change in the United States.

For most Americans, the world has changed in two fundamental ways:

1. They feel the power of grassroots democracy may not only be possible, but inevitable, through digital organizing with mobile devices and the internet.
2. They no longer feel isolated and alone, now that a vast number of people has congealed around sentiments they share at a deeply emotional level.

The existence of this nascent movement has become *readily perceived and impossible to ignore*. It is now a tangible and powerful force in the body politic.

² To learn more about the framing of Occupy read *Strategic Frames of the Occupy Movement*, available at <http://www.cognitivepolicyworks.com/blog/2011/12/26/strategic-frames-for-the-occupy-movement/>

A “Cross Ideology” Platform

Just as profound is the observation that Occupy Wall Street has emerged through a breakdown of old political labels. A visit to one of their general assemblies demonstrates that anarchists and libertarians share cause with progressives. Even some who in the past were aligned with the Republican Party are deeply critical of corporate corruption, outsourcing of jobs, and the gridlock of partisan wrangling that keeps Congress from successfully addressing our chronic economic crisis.

While some risks bubble forth from this unlikely stew (discussed below), it is clear that new alliances can be formed around a bold vision for the future. The majority of Americans want affordable health care, living wage jobs, and strong communities. And they want to believe in American democracy again.

It is here that progressive leaders have the most to contribute. We have called for election finance reform, universal health care, and a robust social safety net as central policy recommendations for years. Our opportunity rests on the ability to build lasting trust with a movement that has grown from a deep cynicism with politics-as-usual.

Risks to Consider

Engaging successfully with the Occupy Movement will require some thoughtfulness and care, otherwise it could backfire. Let’s look at a handful of important risks that must be included in any attempt to build on OWS success:

Risk #1: Avoid Being A “Co-opter”

OWS is built on a foundation of distrust in prior sources of power. Attempts to “take their message and run” will be seen as opportunistic and reinforce the cynicism of politics-as-usual.

Recommendation: Elevate the movement itself by joining with it. Acknowledge that OWS emerged on its own and that you want to be a part of it. This will affirm the legitimate role of OWS leaders while showing sympathy with their cause.

Risk #2: Take Care Not to Marginalize the Grassroots

Many supporters of Obama’s 2008 campaign have disengaged from politics because they felt marginalized by an “insider agenda” advanced by the Obama Administration. This neglect of the grassroots, whether real or perceived, has created the power vacuum from

which OWS swept onto the stage. Many have an attitude of “once bitten, twice shy” and will balk at top-down approaches that place them on the margins.

Recommendation: Restore the language of “Yes We Can” and seek meaningful partnerships with grassroots organizations. Use social media tools to elevate ideas from everyday citizens and credit them for inspiring you to adopt them. Be interactive!

Risk #3: Avoid Being A “Tinkerer”

OWS is principally a rebuke against the massive gap between the scale of threats and responses offered by elected officials. There is no incremental policy change that restores integrity to our democracy, nor faith in the direction of our country.

Recommendation: Boldly advocate for meaningful and transformative change. Popularity of OWS demonstrates that the American people want nothing less than a full-scale redistribution of power away from corporations and the obscenely wealthy. Respond accordingly with Constitutional Amendments that curtail corporate power, legislation that restructures our economy toward a clean energy future, and posturing that demonstrates your strong opposition to status-quo politics.

Risk #4: Don't Let The Real Culprits Shift Blame

The majority of Americans are suffering right now. They know in their bones that something is wrong with our country. And the instigators of the shock doctrine that created this mess continue to get away with it.

Recommendation: Lay blame where it belongs -- with the reckless bankers and their enablers who have infiltrated our government. Demonstrate how the Republican Party is in bed with these criminals. And, vital to your own legitimacy, acknowledge that some culprits reside in the Democratic Party. Go on a crusade to weed these contaminants out. Bring down the full force of righteous indignation of a people who have been betrayed by past leadership.

The only way to take advantage of the Occupy Movement is to take its demands seriously. Our country is fundamentally threatened with total economic (and moral) collapse. Take this threat seriously and you will win the support of the American people.

About Cognitive Policy Works



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Cognitive Policy Works is both an educational center that provides professional training to people in politics and a research/consulting firm that analyzes the workings of the political mind for non-profits and social businesses. We're a team of experts in political behavior and social change with a powerful combination of skills ranging from psychology and linguistics to media studies and strategic planning.

We seek to empower non-profit leaders and grassroots activists alike, through innovative marketing models inspired by the open source software movement. Our goal is to develop new "best practices" and make them widely available to advocates of progressive social change as they face the major challenges of the 21st Century.

Find us online at <http://www.cognitivepolicyworks.com>.