

Occupy Election Season!

April 29, 2012

As spring comes to life and the Occupy movement stirs from hibernation, it finds the American electoral machine in full swing for the 2012 race. National elections are anathema to many on the radical left, but to most Americans they represent the only avenue of participation in the political process. That voting via the Electoral College for one of two pre-selected politicians every four years is the extent of citizens' interaction with our democracy is reason enough to scoff at it intellectually, but its material importance can't be overlooked. Not only are the (minor) policy differences between the two parties significant for many of the most vulnerable populations, the difference between President Obama and President Romney would be massive for the movement and the prospects for advancing the left. Obama is clearly better than Romney, but not better enough. The election is an opportunity for Occupy Wall Street and the American left to publicly stake a claim to our country, and try to leverage a government that is as progressive as possible.

Following Republican victories in the 2010 midterm elections there was open talk among Democrats about giving President Obama a primary challenger for the 2012 race. Perennial lefter-than-usual-Democrat Dennis Kucinich called for this, but ruled himself out as a potential candidate, as did other usual suspects. Nevertheless, the idea of challenging Obama from the left was a sound one. Since there is so much on the line, the circumstances surrounding the general election are very different from those of the primary, and now that it is spring and the Republican nominee is all but finalized, a challenger from the left can be expected to encounter stiff resistance. Democratic strategists still bemoan Ralph Nader's success in 2000, when the 97,000 votes he boasted in Florida appeared to rob Al Gore of a victory in that decisive state, and have since used that example to bully any and all independent candidates on the left. It doesn't take much bullying, since Green, Socialist or left independent candidates have never managed to contest seriously for presidential office in the United States. But the Occupy movement might have opened up space to change that, and Democratic candidates ignore us at their own (and maybe all of our) peril.

At present the American left is incapable of beating Obama in a national election, but the Democratic fear mongers are probably correct that we have the capacity to lose him the election. At the same time, none of us should want to see a President Romney. Hopefully the callous "accumulation of misery" argument that the worse conditions get the faster the revolution will come was put to bed for good after the 2000 and 2004 elections. The disastrous presidency of George W. Bush resulted in tens of thousands of deaths worldwide, plenty of misery, and no revolution. Mitt Romney is an unimpressive candidate anyway, so the reality we face is very likely a second term Obama in 2012. The question is how we can push him to be as progressive as possible. Obviously he won't do as many good things in office as we would like, but he'll do some if we scare him enough. Thus far the President has been scared of losing to the right, and it shows, as he bends further and further to their side to guard against their political attacks (often in vain). But he has bent too far, and it is time to remind him to fear us as well.

We don't want Romney in the White House, but the fear of that outcome is not a sufficient excuse to allow the Democrats their unchecked descent into the political right. If they want to win the support of progressives and the left, they must bring their policies to us, not the other way around. If not, we will all share the blame for Republican victories. In our broken and dysfunctional system, elected representatives have little to worry about from their constituencies most of the time, but on Election Day they do. Left and independent candidates need to step up and run for office (any and all offices) on the platform of abolishing corporate personhood, taxing the rich, reforming our social welfare system and other Occupy-popularized policies that can raise the standard of living for the

people who need it the most.

A full third of the voting public is registered independent, but despite the hoopla television pundits raise over that fact, taking it at face value is clearly misleading. The vast majority of those "independents" are that in name only and vote heavily along one or the other party lines. Nevertheless, a Gallup poll in October 2011 showed that 26% of Americans supported Occupy Wall Street (OWS), with 40% of Democrats and 13% of Republicans saying they believed in the goals of the Occupy movement. And these numbers represent people's feelings toward Occupy despite the often less-than-flattering corporate media coverage we received. Given that, one can imagine that OWS positions—such as financial accountability and abolition of corporate personhood—would resonate widely across the American electorate if they were to be adopted by mainstream politicians. If the Democrats want to preserve the base they take for granted in progressive regions, they will be forced to advocate for these popular policies.

Voting doesn't take much. In fact, in many ways voting is the easiest and emptiest form of democratic participation. The most it takes is a couple of hours. In this author's hometown in New Jersey people wait on longer lines to buy confectionary from a reality show bakery. You don't even need to be able to think to be able to vote. Spending time organizing and sleeping out on the street, finding ways to protest a system of exploitation while creating a miniature society with egalitarian democracy, medical care, food, compost and indy media is much more work than checking a name and pulling a lever (never mind getting clubbed, pepper-sprayed and arrested). In other words, compared with what we have been doing, it costs us nothing to vote—but it could potentially help a lot.

Whether or not progressive politicians are able to enact meaningful change in this country can be debated, but they can certainly help *us* create meaningful change. Our work on the ground—building a dual power movement capable of challenging the superstructure of power and exploitation and simultaneously building liberating institutions and norms of our own—is what ultimately has the ability to win. Good politicians, and those they appoint, can help tremendously by keeping the police off our backs here and there, and by enforcing the parts of the law that defend what we are doing, as opposed to straining to find the parts that criminalize peaceful demonstrations.

As OWS reminded us all, voting is not the only way we can interact with politics, just as working and shopping are not the only ways we can interact with the economy. Those in political office are already worried about our own version of participation in the election process, as Obama recently signed into law a bill that makes it a felony to protest in the vicinity of the president, a candidate for president or anyone under secret service protection. But we are clever and creative and that will not stop us from making our points.

Spring is here, and we are back. The corporate media would love to leave us in 2011, but our fight is too important to let that happen. And what better time for revitalization than the six months normally dedicated to the "democratic" selection of our nation's leader, and along with it, our nation's principles.

The Occupy Wall Street movement that re-energized the left is comprised of a diverse set of groups and individuals, hungry for radical change to the political, economic and social systems in America. But we are smart and we are strategic. We recognize that real (as opposed to rhetorical) reform to the systems that we oppose can make life materially better for millions of struggling people in our country, as well as make it easier for us to push for deeper change.

Whether President Obama is sincere in his progressive rhetoric, is a hypocrite, or is simply too weak to effect much meaningful change is irrelevant at this point. What is clear is that pressure from

the Republicans has pushed him and his administration's policies to the right, and the Republicans wisely used the Tea Party to strengthen their bargaining position to that end. Unlike the Tea Party though, OWS wasn't manufactured by corporate television. We represent years of organizing and a population that is increasingly marginalized and jeopardized. OWS is real, and is only one face of a growing left movement in the US. It's high time for left politicians to wise up and begin using our momentum to get themselves elected, and push Democrats to start acting based on the principles they claim to uphold. Meanwhile, we'll be out here, organizing and working and struggling and growing, laughing and fighting and sweating and building the beautiful future we know is possible.

Ben Case is an activist and writer living in New Jersey. He is a correspondent for the Inter Press Service newswire and volunteers for the Restaurant Opportunities Center. He is also a professional Muay Thai kickboxer, teaching and coaching fighters at a gym in NJ. Ben has been an active participant in Occupy Wall Street, Bloombergville, and other political actions in New York City.

[This article is part of a symposium on the elections organized by *New Politics*.]