

Change Now, Vote Later

Political answers will come when we build a network of solidarity and action that pushes on all fronts for a true democracy.

by Nathan Schneider

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There was a joke told during one of the warm-up actions the week before Occupy Wall Street began, across the street from the Stock Exchange: “How many politicians does it take to change a lightbulb?” None of the tourists watching hazarded a guess. The answer? “Politicians don’t change anything!”

It’s this kind of thinking that drove a few hundred protesters to transform the political discourse with their bodies last September by taking and holding a small park in downtown New York. But it’s also why the Occupy movement, at least in the short term, looks to be a good thing for someone like Mitt Romney—a man beautifully suited to play the role of law-and-order technocrat on behalf of the “silent majority,” and thereby to benefit from an election year noisy with unrest. Just think of the effect of the Greek and Spanish Occupation-based movements last year, whose agitations fragmented the Left and put the right wing in office. Or think of 1968 in the United States.

There’s another thing the Greeks and Spaniards have in common with the kids who made Occupy Wall Street happen, many of whom cheerfully knocked on doors and sparred with their parents on President Obama’s behalf in 2008 (as did I): They’ve learned that no matter which candidate you elect, the global financial system is going to find a way to stick it to you. Many in the movement think that the answers are not primarily to be found by joining a political machine already bought off by the corporate establishment. The answers lie in building a network of international solidarity and action that will push on all fronts for a truly democratic global politics and economy.

One of the things that made occupied Zuccotti Park such a refreshing place is that it was full of political conversations that had nothing to do with the personal foibles of elected officials or our various professional candidates. Rather, they were about the kinds of things that the Occupiers actually wanted for themselves and their communities—necessities of life and fairness, mostly—and how, then and there, they could start making it happen.



Counterpoint:

Now, Let's Occupy the Ballot

The challenge the movement faces now is to convince the American people that, while elections do matter, they don't matter nearly enough, and that's the problem. Until politicians figure out how to serve human needs rather than corporate profits, they can't be allowed to claim legitimacy. At a recent all-afternoon, long-term Occupy Wall Street planning session, I heard exactly one sentence that was devoted to the elections. The gist of it was: Incumbent, brace yourself—protests at both conventions and voter noncooperation.

Of course, if the Occupy movement ultimately wants to defeat the kind of shameless corporate personhood-ization that goes largely unchallenged in government, it will have to show its power at the ballot box as well as in the streets. But the surest way to loosen the corporate death grip on both Democrats and Republicans is to make stands for justice on specific issues by mobilizing people to take back what's theirs. It will need to occupy the narrative this election year, showing the country that while politicians on their own won't change much of anything, courageous and organized people can.



Nathan Schneider wrote this article for **9 Strategies to End Corporate Rule**, the Spring 2012 issue of YES! Magazine. Nathan is an editor of WagingNonviolence.org. He has written about the Occupy movement for *Harper's Magazine* and *The Nation*, as well as for YES! Magazine's book *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement*.

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