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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

The **Democratic Strategist** has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As **The Democratic Strategists'** editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
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PROGRESSIVES: LET'S NOT LOSE PERSPECTIVE. OCCUPY WALL STREET IS INDEED VERY POPULAR, BUT NOT AS WILDLY POPULAR AS RECENT POLLING MAKES IT SEEM. THE POLLS PROVIDE A BASIS FOR REALISTIC OPTIMISM BUT NOT FOR EUPHORIA OR PREMATURE DECLARATIONS OF VICTORY.

BY
ANDREW LEVISON

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By ANDREW LEVISON

A number of recent national polls have shown remarkable levels of public support for the Occupy Wall Street protests. In [two¹ recent surveys](#),² solid majorities have said that they either “agree” with the protestors or “view them favorably.” Perhaps even more striking are the results for groups who would ordinarily be expected to react with hostility. [As Greg Sargent has noted](#),³ a majority of the non-college educated, working class whites in these surveys expressed clear support for the Wall Street protests. Adding icing to the cake, these same polls show that Occupy Wall Street is substantially more popular than the Tea Party.

Looking at these results, progressives can be forgiven for feeling almost giddy. It is no longer unreasonable to seriously ask the questions: *“Has the long night of conservative ideological hegemony finally reached its end? Has the long-sought populist holy grail been discovered at last?”*

As with all polling data, however, one must be cautious about jumping too quickly to conclusions. When the question was posed simply as “is your opinion of the Occupy Wall Street movement favorable, unfavorable or haven’t you heard enough about it” in [a recent Quinnipiac survey](#)⁴ the results were less encouraging. Only 30% of the respondents were favorable, 39% were unfavorable and 30% had not heard enough. Even when the questions include enough information for most people to formulate opinions, the questions end up probing general attitudes about Wall Street and the banking and financial industries rather than gauging the level of support for any specific agenda or strategy of the protests. The Time survey question, for example describes the protestors as opposing policies that *“favor the rich, the government bank bailouts and the influence of money in our political system.”* For many years now—well before the 2008 meltdown—surveys have shown that there is a very broad current of “populist” distrust and antagonism toward these same economic actors, policies and institutions. The problem has always been that this cluster of attitudes never found any meaningful outlet for practical social or political expression.

A more important reason for caution in interpreting the recent polls, however, becomes apparent when one looks more closely at those surveys that use a variety of different question wordings—wordings that more closely track the actual contours of today’s ideological and partisan debate between progressives and conservatives and that use the actual language employed by the two sides.

¹<http://nationaljournal.com/daily/occupy-d-c-most-back-protests-surtax-20111018>

²<http://swampland.time.com/full-results-of-oct-9-10-2011-time-poll/>

³http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/post/yup-blue-collar-whites-do-support-occupy-wall-street/2011/10/19/gIQALBC7xL_blog.html

⁴<http://www.quinnipiac.edu/x1295.xml?ReleaseID=1670>

The most **recent opinion survey by Democracy Corps**⁵ asked a number of questions with these key characteristics. At first glance, the results seem solidly encouraging. Here are three statements that received strong majority support in the D-Corps survey:

“The big banks got bailed out but the middle class got left behind. Our economy works for Wall Street CEOs but not for the middle class. America isn’t supposed to only work for the top one percent.”

Agree: 75% Disagree: 20%

“Our economy is upside down. The majority of America is in a recession, but Wall Street is doing better than ever. Regular people work harder and harder for less and less while Wall Street CEOs enjoy bigger bonuses than ever. If American’s economy isn’t working for the 99 percent, it’s not working”

Agree: 81% Disagree: 15%

“The promise of the American Dream is that if you work hard and play by the rules you can make a good life for you and your family. But right now, 99 percent of Americans only see the rich getting richer and everyone else getting crushed. And they’re right.”

Agree: 72% Disagree: 25%

These are genuinely powerful levels of support for clearly “populist” propositions and seem completely unambiguous in their progressive outlook. But, in the very same survey, respondents also gave very strong majority support to the following set of statements:

“The only way to create prosperity in America is to give our economy back to the free market, not try to destroy it. The liberal elite who are now occupying Wall Street do not understand how capitalism and business work”

Agree: 62% Disagree: 29%

“America has succeeded because of hard work and competition, not because we expect government to give us things for free. For too long, Americans have spent money they couldn’t afford, driving up personal and government debt.”

Agree: 85% Disagree: 11%

“The top 1 percent are the ones who create jobs in this country. They are already overburdened with job-killing regulations and high corporate taxes. We need to create a climate that encourages business, not one that gives in to protestors.”

Agree: 61% Disagree: 32%

⁵<http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/economyfq.pdf>

It is understandable if these conflicting results make progressives feel like pulling out their hair. These results necessarily imply that well over a third of the respondents simultaneously endorse two utterly contradictory points of view at the same time.

It is extremely hard for politically engaged progressives (or committed conservatives for that matter) to imagine how anyone could actually entertain both these sets of ideas at the same time; they appear mutually exclusive. The inescapable fact, however, is that many relatively apolitical Americans simply do not commit themselves to any organized political ideology nor do they systematically adjust all their individual viewpoints to bring them into conformity with that perspective. They hold ideas they know to be contradictory in memory and, when called upon to make choices based upon those ideas, compare and balance them using what they call “common sense” or “my way of looking at things”

Although most political commentary implicitly assumes that most people have their opinions reasonably well-organized into either “conservative,” “moderate” or “progressive” frameworks, this eclectic kind of thinking is actually quite widespread. One extremely frequent result that arises in opinion polling, for example, are polls that find people agreeing with the proposition that “*government regulations are needed to protect the public interest*” and also with the proposition that “*government regulations do more harm than good*” in the same survey. When the respondents are asked about the contradiction in follow up interviews they will generally reply that, in deciding specific cases, “*you have to use common sense*” or “*weigh the good and bad*” or “*try to see both sides.*”

Ideologically committed individuals see this as sloppy thinking but many non-political Americans see it as being open or fair-minded. Regardless of how one views it, the existence of this substantial group necessarily forces one to reconsider just how meaningful the massive levels of support for the first, “populist” set of propositions can be if people can simultaneously endorse the second set of very extreme conservative propositions at the same time.

One can get some insight into how individuals resolve this ambiguity in practical situations by noting how this same group of respondents views which of the two political parties has “the right approach” in different areas. It quickly becomes clear that the respondents do not view one party or the other as having “the right approach” in all areas—as a strict partisan ideologue would—but rather tend to credit one with having the better approach in certain specific fields while crediting the other party with a superior approach elsewhere.

For example, in the recent Democracy Corps survey Democrats are seen as clearly having a better approach to “standing up for the middle class” than Republicans (by 49% to 37%). In contrast, Republicans are seen as having a better approach than Democrats to both “spending and deficits” and “business and big business” (by 47% to 33% in both cases). In effect, both parties are viewed as having a “better” approach in the areas where they traditionally focus their political rhetoric and messaging.

The most striking result, however, is that, despite the massive support for the three populist propositions above, the two parties are exactly tied (at 38-39 percent and 40-41 percent) on which political party has the better approach to “banks and the financial system” and also to

“jobs.” Somehow, the massive “populist” sentiment reflected in the response to the first three propositions above does not translate into a forceful rejection of Republican and support for Democratic approaches.

One seemingly plausible explanation for this could be that the lack of support for the Democrats is a reflection of the disillusionment many progressives feel with the Dems’ timidity and capitulation – in effect a rejection of the Democrats from the left rather than the right. The data, however, do not support this conclusion. Only about 10% of the respondents on the D-Corps survey indicated that they felt that “neither” party had the right approach and this group necessarily includes a large proportion of disgruntled conservatives and other non-progressives as well as progressives disgruntled with the Democrats from the left. Yet, even if one combines the entire “Democrats plus all disgruntled” into a single group, the total barely reaches 50%. There is still a massive gap between the commanding 70-80% majorities who agree with the populist propositions above and those who actually use those propositions to guide their political choices.

Recognizing this fact does not diminish the power and importance of what Occupy Wall Street has accomplished or diminish its potential to dramatically transform the national debate. The protests have given voice to a deep well of populist sentiment that has up to now been unable to find expression. They have forced the mainstream media to discuss the banking and financial systems and the growth of inequality in American society. And most important, they have begun to build the confidence that a meaningful long-term movement of protest is possible.

But a careful reading of the data show that OWS has not won the allegiance of the vast majority of Americans overnight. The Democracy Corps Strategy Memo notes a whole series of attitudes—ranging from views about government corruption and the role of money in politics to hostility to debt and deficit spending and doubts about the ability of government to create jobs—that all come into play in voters general political attitudes and which prevent their embrace of an entirely populist view. [Previous Democracy Corps Memos](#)⁶ (as well as [a recent TDS Strategy Memo](#)⁷) have summarized this extensive body of research and have outlined its implications for democratic political strategy.

The bottom line, however, is simple. Occupy Wall Street has done something that is indeed remarkable. In only a few weeks it has put progressives on the strategic offensive for the first time in decades. But it has not already won the war for public opinion. The polls showing widespread and forceful support for populist views provide a solid basis for realistic optimism but not for euphoria or premature declarations of victory.

⁶<http://www.democracycorps.com/wp-content/files/A-Path-to-Democratic-Ascendancy-on-the-Economy-.pdf>

⁷http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/10/progressives_there_are_two_pro.php