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Occupy Elections, With a Simple Message

by **George Lakoff**

What's next? That's the question being asked as cities close down Occupy encampments and winter approaches.

The answer is simple. Just as the Tea Party gained power, the Occupy Movement can. The Occupy movement has raised awareness of a great many of America's real issues and has organized supporters across the country. Next comes electoral power. Wall Street exerts its force through the money that buys elections and elected officials. But ultimately, the outcome of elections depends on people willing to take to the streets -- registering voters, knocking on doors, distributing information, speaking in local venues. The way to change the nation is to occupy elections.

Whatever Occupiers may think of the Democrats, they can gain power within the Democratic Party and hence in election contests all over America. All they have to do is join Democratic Clubs, stick to their values, speak out very loudly, and work in campaigns for candidates at every level who agree with their values. If Occupiers can run tent camps, organize food kitchens and clean-up brigades, run general assemblies, and use social media, they can take over and run a significant part of the Democratic Party.

To what end? All the hundreds of the occupiers' legitimate complaints and important policy suggestions follow from a simple general moral principle: American democracy is about citizens caring about one another and acting responsibly on that care.

The idea is simple but a lot follows from it: a government that protects and empowers everyone equally, a government of the Public -- public roads and buildings, school and universities, research and innovation, public health and health care, safety nets, access to justice in the courts, enforcement of worker rights, and practical necessities like sewers, power grids, clean air and water, public safety including safe food, drugs, and other products, public parks and recreational facilities, public oversight of the economy -- fiscal and trade policy, banking, the stock market -- and especially the preservation of nature in the interest of all.

The Public has been what has made Americans free -- and has underwritten American wealth. No one makes it on his or her own. Private success depends on a robust Public.

The rationale for the Occupy movement is that all of this has been under successful attack by the right wing, which has an opposing principle, that democracy is about citizens only taking care of themselves, about personal and not social responsibility. According to right-wing morality, the successful are by definition the moral; the one percent are taken to be the most moral. The country and the world should be ruled by such a "moral" hierarchy. Except for national security, the Public should disappear through lack of funding. The nation and the world should be ruled for private profit alone -- and by force.

That idea is what is destroying American democracy, and America with it. That idea is what is behind everything the Occupy Movement opposes -- and everything that is going wrong with America today.

Not only is America divided between two opposing principles, but a great many individuals are of those two minds at once: progressive on some matters, conservative on others -- with all sorts of variations. They are called variously independents, moderates, or the center. They are mostly the population that elections depend on. They have not one fundamental principle, but are split between two.

What makes one of these ascendant in the individual brain is the language one hears most. That is why the domination of public discourse is so important. It is why advertising in the media is important, why talk radio and tv and social media matter. Elections are what focus attention on public discourse. That is why the next step for the Occupy Movement should be to occupy elections.

The way to begin any discussion should be: Do you care about your fellow citizens? If so, do you take responsibility to act on that care?

The next question is: Do you realize how much every American, no matter how rich or poor, depends upon The Public?

Only when those questions are answered can detailed policy questions make sense.

Those are the questions that should be dominating our public discourse. They are the implicit questions asked by the Occupy movement. It is time to make them explicit, and to do so where it counts: in occupying elections.