Occupy Movement (Occupy Wall Street)

Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

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The Occupy Movement began on Sept. 17, 2011, when a diffuse group of activists began a loosely organized protest called Occupy Wall Street, encamping in Zuccotti Park, a privately owned park in New York's financial district. The protest was a stand against corporate greed, social inequality and the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process.

The idea was to camp out for weeks or even months to replicate the kind, if not the scale, of protests that had erupted earlier in 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt.

The group's slogan — "we are the 99 percent" — touched a raw nerve across the nation. The 1 percent refers to the haves: that is, the banks, the mortgage industry, the insurance industry, etc.; and the 99 percent refers to the have-nots: that is, everyone else.

Within weeks, similar demonstrations spread to dozens of other American cities, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, Chicago and Boston, as well as cities in Europe, Asia and the Americas, drawing thousands of people. Occupy protests rapidly sprouted on major campuses across the country.

In the United States, the political impact of the movement was increasingly plain. Democrats offered cautious support and Republicans were generally critical, but both parties seemed to agree that the movement was changing public debate.

Whatever the long-term effects of the movement, protesters succeeded in implanting "we are the 99 percent" into the cultural and political lexicon. Soon after the protests began, politicians began using "Occupy" lingo. Democrats in Congress began to invoke the "99 percent" to press for passage of President Obama's jobs act — and to pursue action on mine safety, Internet access

rules and voter identification laws, among others. Republicans pushed back, accusing protesters of class warfare; Newt Gingrich called the “concept of the 99 and the one” both divisive and “un-American.”

The Struggle to Maintain Visibility

In the months since it began, the Occupy Movement has been at risk of fading to the edges of political discourse. Driven off the streets by local law enforcement officials, who have evicted protesters from their encampments and arrested thousands, the movement has seen a steep decline in visibility. That has left Occupy without bases of operations in the heart of many cities and has forced protesters to spend time defending themselves in court, deterring many from taking to the streets again.

With less visibility, the movement has received less attention from the news media, taking away a national platform.

Occupy does not have a traditional leadership structure, making it difficult for the movement to engage in conventional political organizing in support of state legislators and members of Congress, like the Tea Party has. And some activists, angry at politicians across the board, do not see electoral politics as the best avenue for the movement, complicating efforts to chart its direction.

Occupy activists acknowledge that building and maintaining a populist movement is daunting and that the clashes over the right to protest have drained some energy.