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Occupy Wall Street Seeks Mainstream Appeal

Two-thirds of New Yorkers back protests; organizers aim for broad consensus.

By [Will Oremus](#) | Posted Tuesday, Oct. 18, 2011, at 1:13 PM ET



Mounted police try to block Occupy Wall Street participants from breaking through a police barricade in New York's Times Square on Oct. 15.

Photo by Emmanuel Dunand for AFP/Getty Images.

If Occupy Wall Street is a fringe movement, it's looking like a pretty big fringe.

In a [Quinnipiac University poll](#) released Monday, two-thirds of New York City voters said they support the protests. The backers included 81 percent of Democrats and, perhaps more surprisingly, 35 percent of Republicans. And an overwhelming majority, 87 percent, said it's "okay that they are protesting."

And for all the criticism lobbed at the protesters for not having a formal list of demands, their general message seems to be getting across. Nearly three-fourths of New York City voters said they understand the protesters' views "very well" or "fairly well."

Respondents split evenly on whether police are handling the protests well.

And who's to blame for the nation's economic mess? Thirty-seven percent of New York City voters fingered George W. Bush, while 21 percent blamed Wall Street, 18 percent Congress, and 11 percent President Obama. Those figures are probably not representative of the nation at large, however. The survey's [demographic summary](#) shows that 55 percent of those polled were Democrats, while just 13 percent were Republicans, reflecting New Yorkers' liberal bent.

Still, the numbers suggest it's not just hippies and socialists who are rooting for the movement. The [Washington Post's Plum Line blog](#) asks, "What if working class Americans actually like Occupy Wall Street?" Blogger Greg Sargent quotes union leader Karen Nussbaum as saying that the protests have helped organizers sign up tens of thousands of recruits in recent weeks:

"These are not the folks who normally wear dreadlocks and participate in drum circles," Nussbaum says. "They're working class moderates who work as child care employees or in cafeterias or in construction. They're people who work in lower middle class suburbs around the country." Pressed on whether the movement's excesses and lack of a clear agenda risk alienating such voters, Nussbaum said: "We're proving every day that that's not the case."

Indeed, a national poll last week found that the Occupy movement is [twice as popular as the Tea Party](#). A Siena poll of New York state voters this week [turned up similar numbers](#), with 49 percent saying they'd rather join Occupy Wall Street, while 28 percent picked the Tea Party.

And the movement's resonance isn't limited to the United States. [The Guardian's](#) Jonathan Jones looks its global popularity and argues it represents a significant new crack in the capitalist consensus. One [photograph of this weekend's Times Square protests](#) in particular, he writes, captures "a turning point in history, not because the Occupy movement will necessarily succeed (whatever success might be) but because it has revealed the profoundly new possibilities of debate in a world that so recently seemed to agree about economic fundamentals." Jones adds:

[There were "anti-capitalist" protests in the boom years](#) but these were self-evidently marginal to a society lapping up the joys of credit. Today, the world is ready to listen to Occupy Wall Street and its claim to speak for the 99% against the profiteering 1%. Everyone knows what they are talking about and everyone can see some truth in it.

Perhaps not everyone. [Fox News' Bill O'Reilly](#) sums up the mainline conservative view of the protesters as, basically, wingnuts. "Some are hardcore communists; some are socialists; some are just confused and/or looking for some action."

Meanwhile, the [Associated Press](#) points out that the movement has been short on ethnic diversity, though leaders have been working to change that. "We, the 99 percent, have to be reaching out to the cross section of the communities that we live in," Occupy Atlanta organizer Tim Franzen said. "If you come down to the park and spend a day I think you might have a hard time saying this is an all-white movement. We are reaching out, but we've got some bridges to build."

How could Occupy Wall Street broaden its appeal? The [San Francisco Chronicle's Kathleen Pender](#) surveyed branding and marketing experts, who said it needs to work on formulating a simple, clear message. A management professor and former Coke marketing officer gave Occupy Wall Street an A-plus for creating awareness but a failing grade for articulating a promise or benefit. While the Tea Party stood for lower taxes and smaller government, the Occupy protesters so far "don't know what they want to do."

But a longtime activist who has joined Occupy DC told the [Wall Street Journal](#) she believes a concrete platform could limit the movement's potential. "The second we start making demands, we start splintering, and we are no longer the 99 percent."