



# States Under Stress

## Protest Movements Achieve Different Levels of Success

**T**wo large-scale populist movements emerged during the first term of Barack Obama's presidency: the Tea Party movement and the Occupy movement. Participants in both were angry about the influence and power of large institutional forces in society. The two movements' platforms were diametrically opposed, however, and the approaches they took to trying to influence American politics were completely different.

The fast-growing Tea Party movement began in 2009, shortly after Obama became president. It was made up of individuals angry about the size of government—a backlash against the president's \$800 billion stimulus program, a bank bailout plan that Congress had passed under President George W. Bush to the tune of \$700 billion, and a deficit that in 2009 topped \$1.4 trillion. “The Republicans for the last two decades have been a party whose litmus tests have been cultural issues, especially abortion,” explained conservative columnist Michael Barone in 2010. “The tea partiers have helped to change their focus to issues of government overreach and spending.”<sup>a</sup>

Members of the movement also derided Obama's health care legislation, which they saw as obtrusive and a threat to individual liberty, since it mandated that most people buy health insurance. Not surprisingly, then, they aligned themselves largely with the Republican Party—even if many participants in the Tea Party movement insisted that they were independent.

The Tea Party movement, which derived its name from colonial-era protests against British taxation—quickly claimed more than 1,000 different affiliate groups around the country.<sup>b</sup> Tea Party–endorsed candidates prevailed in numerous GOP primaries in both 2010 and 2012. Republican strategists largely welcomed the burst of energy that tea partiers brought to their cause, which had been discouraged by widespread electoral losses in 2006 and 2008.

Some criticized the Tea Party for being too unyielding. Some of the candidates backed by Tea Party groups in primaries were unable to prevail in contests Republicans might have won had they nominated

more “establishment” or mainstream candidates. And those Tea Party favorites who did win elections drew criticism once in office for refusing to compromise at all on budget matters, nearly forcing the country into default in 2011.

But while the Tea Party was influencing Republican politicians in Congress and the statehouses, those politicians were trying to co-opt the Tea Party, to harness its energy and enthusiasm without letting its agenda dominate the party's direction. “That's the secret to politics,” GOP consultant Scott Reed said in 2011. “Trying to control a segment of people without those people recognizing that you're trying to control them.”<sup>c</sup>

During the 2014 primary season, it was tough to see whether the GOP had absorbed the Tea Party or if the reverse was true. Particularly in U.S. Senate contests, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other so-called establishment entities heavily supported candidates they thought stood a better chance of winning than others who were Tea Party darlings. Those groups largely succeeded, but many thought the Tea Party had really won by forcing incumbent Republicans to embrace more conservative positions on issues such as immigration and federal spending. “Despite the losing record of the tea folk in Senate primary battles, it's apparent they are winning the war with the Republican establishment by pushing the entire party even further to the right,” wrote liberal commentator Ed Kilgore.<sup>d</sup>

Being co-opted seemed to be the main thing the Occupy movement wanted to avoid. The movement began with a protest in September 2011 in a park near Wall Street in Lower Manhattan; the demonstrators complained that too much wealth was concentrated in the hands of too few individuals.

The slogan “We are the 99 percent” went global, as did the idea of protesting by camping in place for 24 hours a day, which quickly spread to hundreds of cities. The issue of income inequality and the question of whether the wealthiest 1 percent held too much power soon became central concerns of the movement.