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Understanding a Movement

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Jeremy Forbis, assistant professor of sociology, wrote the following op-ed for the 'Dayton Daily News' Sunday, Oct. 16, edition about the Occupy Wall Street movement. This commentary represents the views of the contributor and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Dayton.

Only Time Will Tell if Protests Have Impact on Wall Street

Initiated by the Canadian based non-governmental organization, Adbusters, the Occupy Wall Street campaign started on Sept. 17 with around 1,000 demonstrators. Among the litany of demands, demonstrators had common grievances centered around the perceived corruption of political and business leaders. The demonstration is now entering its fifth week and has emerged as a new social movement with continued demonstrations throughout the United States.

Political observers, columnists and demonstrators have tried to link Occupy Wall Street to other recent successful social movements such as the Tea Party Movement and the Arab Spring uprisings. It is natural to try and connect social movements to one another in an attempt to understand not only why they emerge but also to determine the likelihood of success. However, we need to examine this movement and draw conclusions based on evidence rather than ideology.

The emergence of Occupy Wall Street as a movement is the result of two conditions: grievance and opportunity. The majority of Americans feel that our political leaders no longer work in the best interests of the people, leading to a greater sense of alienation followed by outrage. Corporate executives have also been targeted for their apparent excesses and lack of accountability.

Feelings of anger and resentment directed toward our political and economic leaders are not new to the American experience, however an opportunity exists for those who feel marginalized to unite and confront our leaders. There is a large body of evidence that suggests political destabilization is brought on by rapid economic change, which in turn increases the intensity of grievances between elite and non-elite classes proportional to the degree of economic inequality. In other words, as long as living conditions among the working and middle classes continue to improve, overall inequality with economic elites is less likely to provoke an organized challenge. However, since 2008, Americans are faced with economic challenges not seen since the 1930s. This decrease in overall opportunity and financial well-being has made main street America acutely aware of their position and the perceived role of Wall Street in this decline.

As the Occupy Wall Street movement continues to grow and spread to new cities, we certainly wonder about the impact it will have and if it has the ability to sustain itself. The first of these questions is quite evident. The movement has already had an impact on our society. The fact that we are devoting so much time to media coverage of this issue will result in some political change. However, whether or not the protestors achieve their goals will largely be determined by the second question. Lessons learned from previous successful social movements demonstrate that Occupy Wall Street will need to coalesce into a social movement organization with some structured leadership and a more realistic statement of goals.

Having a reason to protest and an opportunity to do so is enough to start a movement, much more is needed for the movement to survive. I, for one, will be watching with much interest.

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