

United States, New York: Why Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Won

Thursday 12 July 2018, by [KINNUCAN Michael](#) (Date first published: 29 June 2018).

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's victory is a shot across the bow of the Democratic machine. Here's how it happened.

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The more you know about New York politics the more surprising Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's victory over Joe Crowley is [1]. Crowley wasn't merely the fourth-ranked Democrat in the House; he was the dominant force in Queens politics for a decade, the king of the Queens machine. The extent to which Crowley and "county" exerted power over every race in Queens and over New York politics more broadly is hard to overstate; only six months ago, Crowley minted a new city council speaker — the second-most-powerful position in city government. The fact that he got taken down by an outsider is nothing short of breathtaking; the power centers of New York politics are reeling. If Crowley can be beaten, no one is safe.

I'm a member of the New York City Democratic Socialists of America [2] and do electoral work in Brooklyn. I did very little work directly on the Ocasio-Cortez campaign but watched it closely.

You should respect my views on New York politics a little less from now on because never in a million years did I expect this to happen. I started out thinking, "This will be cool because she's surprisingly good, she'll get 30 percent which will dent Crowley's aura and loosen the machine's grip, and most importantly it will build capacity for DSA." I had a post ready to go for when she lost about how it had built capacity for DSA (which it did, enormously, as electoral work so often does). It was only in the last couple of weeks that I started dreaming of 40 percent. When she won I was blown away.

So it was a shock to the machine and it was a shock to us. But there are still lessons we can take from it now.

Machines, Money, and Media

So, ex post facto, why did it happen? How did it happen? I mean again, don't listen to me, but:

- I've been saying for a long time that the "machine" terminology is a source of confusion. Historically an urban political machine doled out huge amounts of patronage directly to large numbers of people and therefore had the allegiance of large numbers of people. This was good,

actually: delivering jobs to the working class in exchange for political allegiance ain't socialism but it's better than what the reformers were often trying to do. But in the course of history the machine lost its capacity to deliver that kind of patronage, and currently "the machine" as it exists at the county level doles out things like judgeships to a small number of people behind the scenes and that's it. For that reason its interest in turning out votes and capacity to turn out votes has declined massively, and it has developed a strong interest in suppressing turnout and driving disengagement from politics. This makes it vulnerable. "Double turnout and win" may not be a plausible strategy in a presidential general election where 60 percent of people are turning out, but when you're dealing with a primary where 3 percent of voters (10 percent of Democrats) are turning out, well, there are those people who are close enough to being politically engaged that you can push turnout up to 15 percent. And if you can do that (by knocking on doors) you're in a position to dominate elections.

- Crowley was very powerful but "powerful" meant "holds the strings of power within the party," not "magically capable of turning out votes." These things aren't unrelated — Crowley could and did control money, endorsements, etc. — but they're not identical. It was foolish to think, as I did think, that just because Crowley was the most powerful Democrat in Queens he was the most invulnerable electorally. There was a tendency to think that no one *could* challenge him when in fact it was the case that no one (no sitting politician with a career to think about) *dared* challenge him.

- Candidate quality, man. If you've ever been in a room with Ocasio-Cortez [3], you know what I mean. She has the thing. You don't need the thing, lots of sitting politicians don't have it, but when you find it — it's something else.

- White people representing majority-minority districts are intrinsically vulnerable [4]. There are more of them in Queens. Make a list and come at them.

- The Democratic base is consistently and almost universally to the left of the Democratic elected party. *Well* to the left. Not just DSA people but lots of Indivisible people are to the left of their reps. There's a real gap between the politicians whose instincts were forged by Reagan-Clinton and the rest of us whose instincts changed with 2008 and changed more after Trump. Extremely favorable national press coverage gave Ocasio-Cortez a certain amount of credibility and a vast amount of money. It's very hard when you're a political outsider to separate yourself from the dozens of cranks who run for office and get 5 percent every year; getting covered in the *Intercept* [5] matters for that. It also matters for attracting small-dollar donations. This element of AOC's campaign isn't really systematically reproducible, however: if we want to run not one but dozens of socialists for Congress (and boy do we want that), they can't all be the focus of media attention or viral small-dollar donations. We need to think more systematically about where the money will come from.

- Speaking of money: AOC raised more than \$300,000, concentrated heavily late in the campaign after she went viral. However, she was outraised and outspent roughly ten-to-one. That might convince you that money doesn't matter, which would certainly be the wrong conclusion to draw. A version of Ocasio-Cortez campaign without staff, an office and campaign lit (without well over \$100,000, in other words) wouldn't have gone anywhere. What her win illustrates, instead, is the *diminishing utility* of campaign money: your first \$100,000 gets you the absolute essentials, your thirtieth \$100,000 just buys you another couple of TV spots. We can win when we're massively outgunned, but we can't win without a serious fundraising infrastructure to buy the basics.

- Something I can't emphasize enough: There is no replacement for strong volunteer canvass. \$3 million dollars is not a replacement for volunteer canvass. If you're wondering what you can do to change the political situation right now, the answer is "volunteer canvass."

Coalitions Matter

If anyone tells you this was DSA's victory solely, they're wrong. Ocasio-Cortez — a brilliant candidate at the right moment — brought in a whole mess of volunteers from all over the place, from other organizations as well as off the street. What's true, I think, is that DSA was the biggest organized bloc of her volunteers. I hope Alexandria or someone else is out there organizing the rest of them! The worst thing about electoral work is that sometimes there's no organization ready to build on the connections it creates; we need to make sure that doesn't happen here.

Some people in DSA need to get used to the fact that its wins will almost always be in coalition.

No One's Safe Now

We're a lot more powerful in New York City than we were on Monday. Like a lot. By "we" I mean DSA, the Left, and progressives — all of us. But let me be clear: we're NOT more powerful because we have an extra vote in Congress that will do what we want. She probably will — her politics are evidently good and pretty fearless — but it doesn't matter as much as the other thing.

The other thing is that a very powerful incumbent was challenged from the left, and went down. Believe me when I say that there isn't an incumbent in New York who didn't watch and learn from that, and from how close Yvette Clarke's challenger came. They're quaking in their boots, because that never happens; incumbents never lose. This one did — the guy no one expected — and now they're all looking for ways to insulate themselves from left challenge.

On the night of, I said, "This is our Eric Cantor moment." The moment when the Democratic incumbents realize that the base is angry and no one is safe. The Republican Party has gone insane mainly because most incumbents are more vulnerable to a primary challenge than to a general challenge, and the Republican base (and its vastly wealthy donors) has demonstrated that it will come for you if you're not a psychotic white supremacist. Now Democrats know that we'll come for them if they're not some shade of red. Shit's gonna be great.

This totally changes the map of NYC politics; people are looking vulnerable who weren't even thought of before. Plus there's a massive power vacuum in Queens. I hope you're recruiting candidates *today* for 2020 and 2021. Start now. Start making a list.

Build the Organization

Obviously electoral work builds power, builds organization, and builds membership. I hope that's a conversation we can put to rest.

DSA in New York suddenly has a bit of cred, a bit of power. This is our first big win in New York. Let's be careful and thoughtful about how we conduct ourselves; the world — not the world of media but the world of power — suddenly has an eye on us.

Michael Kinnucan

P.S.

* Jacobin, 06.29.2018:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2018/06/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-election-crowley-democratic-socialists>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2018/jun/28/this-is-the-beginning-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-victory-speech-video>

[2] <https://www.socialists.nyc>

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAb2QMw9h_w

[4] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C55fmEc5QIY>

[5] <https://theintercept.com/2018/05/22/joseph-crowley-alexandra-ocasio-cortez-new-york-primary/>