

INTERVIEW

# United States Left: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, In Her Own Words

Friday 13 July 2018, by [DENVIR Daniel](#), [OCASIO-CORTEZ Alexandria](#) (Date first published: 11 July 2018).

**In an extensive interview, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez discusses the nuts and bolts of her recent victory, why centrist Democrats are vulnerable to left-wing challengers, voter disenfranchisement, the political status of Puerto Rico, and much more.**

It took a little while to nail down Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for an interview, because she's been a little busy over the last two weeks.

In a primary victory in New York's fourteenth district that nearly no one saw coming, Ocasio-Cortez defeated ten-term incumbent and Democratic Party power player Joe Crowley. A twenty-eight-year-old member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) who was working as a bartender last year unseated a potential Democratic House speaker.

Daniel Denvir spoke with Ocasio-Cortez this week for his *Jacobin* Radio podcast *The Dig*, covering the nuts and bolts of her campaign, why centrist Democrats throughout the country are vulnerable to left-wing challengers, the necessity of candidates putting forward a bold political vision, voter disenfranchisement, the political status of Puerto Rico, and much more. The conversation has been edited for clarity.

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**Daniel Denvir (DD)**

**Let's start with a pragmatic question: how did you win? What did the on-the-ground field operation look like?**

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC)

Starting off the campaign, I didn't know everything I was getting into, but I knew the kind of campaign that my opponent was going to run: a standard DCCC [Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee], corporate Democrat campaign. Usually those campaigns don't focus on the field. I was coming into this race with a background as an organizer. From the beginning, I was always focused on organizing people, building a coalition, and deepening that coalition with other organizers. The campaign was almost entirely focused on physical organizing and digital outreach to reinforce that physical organizing.

Almost everybody involved in this campaign was a first-time organizer. I built relationships with other previous organizers, but many of the organizers I knew were not electoral organizers. I come from a background focused more on education, so a lot of the activists and organizers that I knew were very cynical towards electoral politics. Most of them deliberately do not get involved in

electoral politics. I spent a good six months building trust with grassroots organizations and earning some of that trust and credibility to turn out people who normally do not believe in electoral politics.

We knocked on 120,000 doors. We sent 170,000 text messages. We did another 120,000 phone calls. Before we even got to that phase of the Democratic turnout, a year earlier, we ran an entire get-out-the-registration campaign, because New York is one of the most suppressive states for voting in America. If you're already registered to vote in New York and you're an independent or unaffiliated voter, you have to switch your party registration almost a year in advance to be able to vote in the next year's primary.

**DD**

**That hurt the Bernie campaign a lot.**

AOC

Yeah, we have three million independent and unaffiliated voters in New York State. It's the largest voting bloc, and they are consistently disenfranchised.

A year before the election we did a registration drive where we pulled our voter file and pulled every independent and unaffiliated voter. We made another about 10 to 13,000 phone calls a year ago letting people know, "Hey, there's going to be a progressive candidate running for Congress next year. She doesn't take corporate money. But the only way we can win this election is if folks like you decide to register as a Democrat so we can count on your vote next year."

Honestly, that was the hardest canvassing of the entire campaign, a year ago. That was the most slammed doors I got, the most people yelling at me. I picked up the phone, and people would be cussing me out. And I said, "Listen, I get it. I get why you don't want to be a Democrat." We don't even know how effective that organizing was, because the state (understandably) gives you no real method of tracking whether that person actually registered once you sent them to that page.

That effort a year ago, whether it was successful or unsuccessful, really helped us cut our teeth in the basics of door-to-door electoral organizing: cutting the turf, identifying your supporters. That was the basis for our entire campaign.

We didn't rely on people who knew how to do these things. We counted on having a message that got people fired up. Once they were fired up and asked, "What can I do?" we trained them ourselves. We said, "Hey, listen, it's not that hard. Download this app. Here's what you do."

Electoral organizing is not that difficult. Sure, there's a little process to it, but it takes an hour or so of practicing and then you just learn while you're out in the field. That's exactly what we did. We trained everyday people who wanted to get involved and we taught them the ABCs of doing it.

Our field operation was pretty much our entire campaign. We didn't run any television ads. My opponent ran ads the entire month of June. He sent ten to fifteen glossy mailers to almost every single registered Democrat in the district. I call them the Victoria's Secret catalog.

**DD**

**Straight to the recycling bin.**

AOC

Yeah, they're this four-color glossy thing with a headshot on the front. And people's mailboxes were getting buried with them. We sent about three postcards to about fifty thousand people because that's what we could afford. So we were completely outspent in commercials and at the mailbox.

But we were not outworked in the street. There was a very light field presence. He had people out there, but it wasn't that many. We had hundreds of volunteers coming in. Towards the end, people were driving in from Massachusetts, from Ohio. A guy flew in from Iowa. That is the advantage of an enthusiasm gap. The media may not have been paying attention to our race, but everyday people very much were.

**DD**

**Establishment figures have attempted to reduce your win to you better matching your district's demographics, which seemed to me a very convenient way to deny the magnitude of the insurgency underway that poses a threat to those very same people. What do you make of how the system that you ran against is interpreting and spinning your win?**

AOC

I'm not too concerned with it. At the beginning, within those first twenty-four to forty-eight hours, I saw all of the excuses that were being tossed out about my win. It didn't bother me, because none of these people had studied this race or paid any attention to it.

I also knew that part of the dynamic was that it was a kind of emperor-has-no-clothes situation for both the political establishment and for a lot of mainstream media, because this huge, shocking national political development happened and nobody was paying attention to it.

A lot of these people that were scrambling and trying to make sense of this race, they all had pitches from my campaign explaining everything. I had spent hours talking to New York Times reporters before my race, so it wasn't that they hadn't been talked to about it. I had talked to reporters about who I was. They decided not to cover the race. It wasn't that it was this little thing that was under the radar. The story seems to have come from nowhere, but it didn't.

Before the win, it wasn't like I had no social media presence. Now things are completely different, but I had fifty thousand people following me on Twitter before our win — reporters from CNN, the New York Times, MSNBC. When I went on Chris Hayes's show after the win, he said on air, "I've been following your race for quite some time."

People were paying attention to this race. I think that it was an issue of networks — and probably an issue of the political establishment — making active decisions not to cover it. Honestly, that's fine, because in a way it was an advantage to my campaign.

I remember being taken so aback because after this whole week of insane back-to-back-to-back media, many journalists were asking the same exact questions. Multiple reporters at Univision that I had sat down with asked me, "How do you define yourself?" That was the first time that a reporter, especially one at a TV network, asked me that question.

**DD**

**What was your answer?**

AOC

I said, "I'm an educator, I'm an organizer, and I am an unapologetic champion for working families." The way that I think of myself is as an organizer. No other network allowed me to tell that story, and that's fine. Honestly, it's good. It's a good thing if the political establishment wants to dismiss my win for superficial reasons. If someone is going to say that my win is due to demographic reasons — frankly, I think it's a form of intellectual laziness, but let that happen.

Let them not learn the lessons, because the people, the progressive movement, the movement for

working families, the movement for economic, social, and racial justice, the movement to empower working-class people, the movement for Puerto Rico, the movement for Ferguson, the movement for criminal justice reform — those people are paying attention. Those people are saying, “How did she actually win?”

You’re asking me this question. DSA wants to know this question. They authentically want to know, because these are the communities that we built a coalition of.

DSA played a very important role, but so did Black Lives Matter of Greater New York, so did Justice Democrats, so did a lot of labor and tenant organizers, Muslim community organizers, young Jewish organizations. We were very deliberate about building a coalition of people that were on the forefront of activism in the progressive movement.

I could not have won without the support of DSA, but our success isn’t entirely thanks to one individual group. If there was, it would probably be Justice Democrats or Brand New Congress, because they’re the ones that convinced me to run in the first place. I would not have chosen to run if they hadn’t nudged me, but our electoral organizing was successful because we built a coalition.

DD

**There was this incredibly powerful moment in your televised debate with Crowley when he pledged to support you in the general election if you won the primary. Then he tried to set a trap by asking if you would do the same if he won. Your response was that you’d have to go back to the organized people who backed you, groups like DSA, and ask them — that you couldn’t make that decision on your own.**

AOC

I was not anticipating him to ask that question. I came up with that answer so quickly because I personally did the work of all this coalition building. I didn’t send anybody. It wasn’t even that I had brought their organizers onto “my team” or anything. I physically had to go in person to all of these organizations. DSA, I had to go to the Queens electoral group, the Bronx electoral group, then the Queens general, then the Bronx general, then the Citywide. And that was just for one organization.

This question had come up before. I had been asked by these groups. So when I was asked that question live on this televised debate, I knew that there were people that would take serious issue with me making any kind of unilateral decision live on television.

My candidacy is a movement candidacy. It operates in a very unusual way, because when I first started this race, I thought about how people just do this for themselves. I still can’t believe that someone will wake up and say, “I want to be the congressman or a senator.” They organize their entire campaign around that person’s individual identity. They’ll say, “I’m the best person for this job,” and then they literally try to organize thousands of people around the rallying cry of, “I’m awesome.”

For me, that’s way too much pressure. And I don’t think that that’s what resonates with people. Even when you look at how people rallied around Barack Obama — regardless of how you feel about his politics, it wasn’t just him, it was what he represented to so many people. For me, on that stage, I knew that I represented a movement — a movement that operated with input.

I got a lot of heat from the establishment afterwards, but the only people that were upset about that [comment] were people that already work for the Democratic Party. I got a lot of respect from voters for that. I went to the bodega a week or two after the debate, and my cousin was there with some friends. They watched the debate, and everyone was like, “That was gangster.”

**DD**

**I've never seen anything like it.**

AOC

There is this illusion among Democratic incumbents that New Yorkers love them, that New Yorkers love the Democratic establishment.

**DD**

**Just because they find themselves reelected.**

AOC

It's a hostage situation. Because no one is going to vote for the Republican Party, but there is such tight control over who the Democratic nominee is in any given situation that New Yorkers are forced to vote for whatever Democrat is on the ballot in November. Especially because our primary system is so broken, it is so underreported on, deliberately. People don't want attention paid to Democratic primaries. Democratic primaries are the election, especially in New York City.

Anyway, I think I was just doing what the movement asked of me in that moment.

**DD**

**How do you plan on maintaining that relationship of accountability down the road?**

AOC

I am committed to continuing my grassroots organizing. Just [last week] we had a meeting in this little banquet hall in Queens with all of our organizers and volunteers. We probably have a core group of 150 in our congressional district. There are all of these news articles coming out like, "What's her next move? What is she going to do next?" But I don't make a whole lot of these decisions alone.

That first week after winning was very difficult for me personally because it was the longest amount of time that I had spent a) away from the district, and B) away from that constant communication with our organizers. That was emotionally difficult, because it's like a constant conversation. We have all these different platforms. We have all these different group chats — an all-supporter group chat, a field organizing group chat, a press team group chat, a Spanish organizing group chat, a multilingual group chat. On any given day I could fire up the supporter chat and see what people were talking about, what their sentiment was. I would pop in with my own thoughts here and there. Same thing with all of our other groups.

So it was really easy for me to keep a pulse on things because not only was I on the ground, not only was I knocking doors myself, but I would listen and see the stories that other people were sharing constantly. The first few days after the win, it was very strange because it was really fourteen-hour, back-to-back media days, so I didn't have that opportunity to stay in that contact. Now that the dust is settling a little bit we're able to recommit ourselves.

So we had this meeting with 150 people, and we asked two questions. We all broke out into smaller groups and said, a) what should our campaign's focus be in the next three months? Then b) what specific solution can we implement to address prior weaknesses or injustices in our campaign? Because every time you have a group of people that come together, there are going to be systematic injustices and systematic weaknesses that occur. If we're conscious about them and we actively try to think of and implement solutions on a regular basis, we can avoid communicational or organizational breakdown. I think in terms of maintaining that.

For me, I actually don't think that campaigns ever end. There's a negative and a positive side of that. The negative way is that in an environment of big money, post-Citizens United, it feels like the transactional type of campaigning never stops — and that is exhausting, because I don't want to see campaign ads all year round. On the flip side, I don't think the organizing should ever end.

**DD**

**An important opportunity for left challengers everywhere is turning low turnout to our advantage — growing the electorate and catching the people who occupy these seats unaware.**

AOC

Absolutely. The idea that we should focus on this middle is such a waste of resources to me. Because here's the thing — that middle never decides until the week before the election. If you don't know who you're voting for the week before the election, no amount of resources is going to make you make that decision earlier.

What you need to do is rally and expand. There were people who had never voted before who were committed to voting for me months before the election because we were speaking to them. They knew that we cared, because I didn't do this nonsense of only pull up your "triple prime" voters — the people who have voted in the last three primary election — and only talk to those people.

I knew that triple prime was actually not my first priority. I knew it was my second or third priority. The people who are activated, who care about Medicare for All, who care about tuition-free public college — they're going to be on board first if you take those positions. Those people care enough to actually organize their friends and family.

**DD**

**Senator Tammy Duckworth recently said that your approach won't work in the heartland — that your strategy is somehow Bronx-specific. I thought your response was excellent. You listed all of the states that Bernie won, many of which were in the Midwest and many of which were then lost in the general election, and you asked, "What's the plan to prevent a repeat?"**

AOC

I was always talking to voters, and we're saying, "We've lost a thousand seats, we've lost the House, we've lost the Senate. We have lost the presidency in an election that we most certainly should not have lost. Are we going to continue to commit to voting for the same people, the same strategy, and the same plan?" Because we haven't changed our game plan as a party. There really seems to be almost no change in our plan. What have we learned from 2016? How are we doing things differently?

**DD**

**They tried out their strategy. It was a failure.**

AOC

That's the case that I made: "Are we going to choose to continue this course that has proven to lose literally everything?"

**DD**

**I think people start demanding that the establishment change course, when we really need to replace the establishment and be the ones who change the course ourselves.**

AOC

My opponent, 99 percent of his financing came from corporations, lobbyists, and big-money donations. Less than 1 percent came from small-dollar donations. I had the flip. If you have an incumbent that continues to be overwhelmingly financed by corporations and corporate money, who is saying the same things that they were saying in September 2016, you should be concerned.

If the Trump presidency has not jolted a person into changing their fundamental approach, then they're not going to change. I do think some folks have. I'm not saying, "burn the whole thing to the ground," because I do think that there are legitimately some folks that are having a change of heart.

To be honest, this is what Crowley did as well. I received his mailer — he didn't take me off his mailing list, so I have ten of these mailers in my home with my name on them, and a lot of them have Trump's face on them.

**DD**

**"This guy is scary, trust me to fight him" — and that's it.**

AOC

Yeah.

**DD**

**He did that during your debate too?**

AOC

Exactly, that was the message. As a matter of fact, that was the strategy going into the general election: "Trump is a terrifying demagogue, and he's going to be a disaster for our democracy." Guess what: Trump is a terrifying demagogue and he is a disaster for our democracy, but we lost the election on that narrative. It feels like a lot of Democratic incumbents are on autopilot.

I think there was a real attempt to get me to really rip apart the establishment and create this antagonistic fight in the wake of my win. I rejected that because that was a narrative that some others were trying to advance, but that was not my plan. I'm not going to allow this movement to get hijacked by an energy of antagonism when what we are really trying to advance is a positive and progressive vision for America's future.

I'm not going to get bogged down in Democratic infighting — not because I'm trying to do the establishment a favor, but because we have a movement to build. I'm focusing on what we're trying to accomplish.

**DD**

**A lot of people hope that your win will inspire and bolster this new wave of socialist and left challengers. Where do you see the movement going from here? And what upcoming races are you most interested in?**

AOC

There's an enormous opportunity to build our own force, and you can start from anywhere. You don't necessarily have to capture a congressional seat — there are plenty of seats that there's enormous opportunity in.

A lot of people are cynical and disaffected and believe that electoral organizing is not worth it. I hope those folks know that I understand them. I understand the cynicism. But I beg those people to reconsider, because it's actually not the unvanquishable behemoth that people like to pretend it is. Money in politics has been so influential because there's a lot of laziness on the ground. A lot of

these “unassailable” political machines are shells — they do not have strong turnout. They’re decrepit.

A lot of these Democratic — especially state Democratic — parties are asleep at the wheel. They’ve been kind of taken over, as, like, these little legal forms of money laundering units. That is what they’ve been used for. That was certainly the case in my backyard. The Queens County Democratic Party was seen as so powerful, but the reason it was seen as powerful is because lobbyists used it to wash money into local elected political campaign.

But they didn’t have bodies. If you are a person that can mobilize bodies, you can make change.

**DD**

**I think that’s the real lesson from the 2016 campaign. A lot of people were cynical afterwards, because of former Democratic National Committee chair Debbie Wasserman-Schultz or whatever. But the real story is that Bernie — who I think initially wasn’t even running to win — caught the system unaware and exposed the emperor wearing no clothes and almost knocked out the coronated standard-bearer out of nowhere. Because they are actually not as powerful as we like to think they are.**

AOC

Yeah, and most power operates on that illusion. Ninety percent of this campaign was organized in living rooms, literally. I worked in a restaurant. I started this campaign out of a Trader Joe’s bag, for real. It’s not some quaint little story — it’s the truth. After work, I would pull out a change of clothes from my Trader Joe’s bag. I would have my little clipboard, and there would be one person that would be interested. And they would invite their friends and their neighbors to their living room. I would take the train to that person’s living room and just talk to people, ten at a time, for eight months.

That is what my campaign was. Those little groups of five, ten people — they eventually became the little army of hardcore organizers in our campaign. The story that I always told at these little living rooms was the story of The Wizard of Oz. We built our little ragtag group, and we walked down this yellow brick road, and we got to the Emerald City. We knocked down the door and we walked in, and there’s this huge intimidating behemoth, but it’s really just a guy behind the curtain. Once that truth is exposed, people realize it’s just this one little guy behind one little curtain.

**DD**

**With a big microphone.**

AOC

With a big microphone, determining the fate of thousands of people, hundreds of thousands of people. Then you realize that it’s actually not too crazy to change that — that you actually can change it with a small group of ragtag people. There are so many places like that.

The Democratic Party, for a very long time, has not invested resources in organizing on the ground. Because of that, we were able to exploit a lot of openings. I hope that my win shows what the true strengths of the party or any party that is accountable to working people should be.

There is this cottage industry of electoral consultants. They recommend candidates spend money on things — not things that work but that are commission-based. A lot of consultants make 10 percent on every television ad that they place for a candidate. They’re not going to recommend things that win, they’re going to recommend things that earn commission. That is just the market-based incentive of a lot of this industry.



Here's what we know wins: knocking doors wins, phone banking wins, direct voter contact wins. But it doesn't make people money. We knew that that was a dynamic. I knew that [Crowley] was going to spend money on the mailers. I knew that he was going to spend money on the TV ads. But I had a hunch that he wasn't going to spend a whole lot of money on field, because you can't make a big commission on field. And it's a big pain in the butt.

Where we win is on the ground. Anybody who wants to run a winning grassroots campaign needs to be counting how many doors that they knocked, and they need to be counting their IDs — your ones and twos. You make contact with the voter, and you rank that voter on a scale of one to five every time. We counted 15,900 ones and twos, and 15,900 people went out and voted for us on election day. It was not a coincidence.

I was amazed because for me as an organizer it's like, counting how many people are voting for you just makes sense. I was talking to this person that has been involved in a lot of other campaigns before. I said, "Is this how everybody runs their campaign?" and he was like, "No," and I was just like, "Well, what do other people do?" He said, "They run television ads and they run a lot of radio, and they get maybe like five to 10 percent of their win number. If you need 15,000 people to vote for you, you count 1,500 people." I was like, "How does the person know if they're going to win?" He said, "They don't. They just spend a ton of money on TV, you do a really light amount of field, and then you just like pray." I was like, "That's how a three million dollar congressional campaign has run?" "Yeah, pretty much."

This is why we're losing. That's why I think it's important for us to open the hood on this stuff.

**DD**

**Looking ahead to you entering Congress (I'm feeling fairly confident about November but don't want to jinx you), the Right has successfully used groups like the House Freedom Caucus to push their agenda. Do you think that the Progressive Caucus, which has been much lower profile for a long time but is significant, can do the same for the Left?**

**AOC**

There's potential. It all depends on how unified that caucus is. The thing that gives the Freedom Caucus power is not their size but their cohesion. Right now the Progressive Caucus is bigger than the Freedom Caucus, actually. But sometimes they vote together, sometimes they don't.

The thing that gives a caucus power is that they can operate as a bloc vote to get things done. Even if you can carve out a sub-caucus of the Progressive Caucus, a smaller bloc but one that operates as a bloc, then you can generate real power.

I think with that, it's just really about, "We'll see." As unapologetic and strong as I am in my messaging and my belief, my personal style is as a consensus builder. I like to think that I'm persuasive. I'm usually able to make the pragmatic case for doing really ambitious things. Not to say that I can carry a caucus on my back or anything, but I think that there's a willingness right now. We'll see if that willingness is still there in January. I think that if you can even carve out a caucus of ten, thirty people, it does not take a lot if you operate as a bloc vote to really make strong demands on things.

**DD**

**Your victory makes me more confident than ever that the Left will one day, in the maybe medium term, be the political majority in this country. But so many of our political institutions are so radically undemocratic, and it seems very likely to me that a conservative minority in the coming years will use institutions like the Supreme Court, like**

## **the Senate, to block the popular will.**

Political scientist David Faris recently published a book laying out a program of measures that could constitutionally democratize the American system that includes expanding the number of seats on the Supreme Court, and granting Washington DC and Puerto Rico statehood. The future of Puerto Rico should be decided by the people of Puerto Rico, but I would welcome those two Senate seats. And passing federal legislation that would require states to make it easier rather than harder to vote. Do you think that it's time to begin a discussion about more radical, constitutional measures to democratize the system?

AOC

Absolutely. It's unfortunate what is being called radical nowadays. Enfranchising Americans that already have the constitutional right to vote — radical? Like, really? This is where we're at? But it is where we're at. I'm entirely supportive of it. Right now, if you have a deadline for voter registration in a state like mine, that is an artifice. Because with our technology, there's no reason that that should be the case.

For me, as a Puerto Rican woman, I'm looking towards my elders and trying to have an authentic conversation on the status of Puerto Rico. The very fact that we have literally millions of people who are American citizens that to this day are disenfranchised and denied the right to vote in presidential elections is so foundationally wrong — one of the most premier injustices in our democracy today.

It's not just Puerto Rico. This is the US Virgin Islands, Guam, every United States territory — which are their colony — of the United States. Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States. The fact that you can be born in the United States as an American citizen and denied the right to vote and denied federal representation — that's why four thousand people died in Puerto Rico.

I'm not making a stance on statehood, but I guarantee you that if Puerto Rico had votes in a presidential election, if they did have two senators, if they did have representation, four thousand people would not have died. I guarantee you. It's gross and it's cynical, but it's true. If they're independent, perhaps four thousand people wouldn't have died. But the fundamental political status of Puerto Ricans and people who are colonized by the United States makes them second-class citizens. It's not radical to make all US citizens full persons in the eyes of the law.

**DD**

**Any final thoughts?**

AOC

We've got a bunch of primaries between now and September, and there is room for more upsets. Statewide I'm looking at races in New York City. I'm very excited about Julia Salazar. She's incredible, she's amazing. On a national scale, I'm very excited about Kaniela Ing running out in Hawaii. I'm very excited about folks like Brent Welder in Kansas. Brent can win, and he can win not only his primary but he can win in a red-to-blue district on a progressive vision. I think that's so exciting. And Cori Bush, in Ferguson.

I just really want people to see those candidates as legitimate because my entire race, I was dismissed as illegitimate. To me, that was difficult. Before even the win, I triggered the first primary election in fourteen years in the district, because in New York you have to collect thousands and thousands of petitions in a manner that is inaccessible to working people.

I triggered the first primary election in fourteen years in our community, and I was still not seen as

legitimate. We had made history before even the election day, and I was still not seen as a legitimate candidate.

I want people to see Cori Bush as a real contender, because she is a real contender. I want people to see Julia Salazar as the real deal, because she is the real deal. These are real candidates, they're bottom-up organizers, and if no one else wants to give them a platform, I'm happy to do so. I think that's it. Go out, organize. That's the end-all, be-all of our democracy.

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## **P.S.**

\* Jacobin, 07.11.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/08/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-interview-democratic-primary>

### **\* ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is the Democratic nominee for New York's 14<sup>th</sup> congressional district.

### **ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER**

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