

Shaking U.S. Establishments: The Ocasio-Cortez Effect

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[Dana Milbank](#) wrote it off as a victory of demographics, a minor, inconsequential point which left the “down-the-line liberal” Rep. Joe Crowley in its wake, a simple ploy that avoids any hard headed analysis of the Democrats themselves. “The argument that there is a Democratic establishment resisting the progressive tide is a straw man.”

This was as one such reaction to the [victory](#) of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the Congressional primary for New York’s 14th District, secured against the secure middling Rep. Crowley, who had been fairly immune to challenges – three in all – the last being in 2004. This fact tended to induce a certain failing not found in other seasoned politicians: an ultimately fatal vulnerability in campaigning.

The primary night debate between an ill-prepared Crowley and confident Ocasio-Cortez last month left the veteran exposed. Ocasio-Cortez, in contrast to her overly seasoned opponent, “presented,” in the words of [Briahna Gray](#), “as a well-studied newcomer with natural talent: delivering a summary of her agenda in a manner which was confident and sharp, if not effortless. The theme of her remarks was clear: ‘Not all Democrats are the same.’”

Fundamentally, and critically for the Democrats, the youthful usurper was pitching an angle neglected by the card carriers of orthodoxy in the party. “It’s not enough to fight Trump. We have to fight the issues that made his rise in the first place.”

All Crowley was effectively doing was using Trump as an alibi for was believed to be a certain victory: a vote for Crowley would have been a vote for an old, steady hand against the absurd. In contrast Ocasio-Cortez was insisting on single-payer healthcare, invigorating the Democratic Socialist platform nationally, and abolishing the immigration enforcement agency.

The vanquishing of Bernie Sanders by a ruthless, and ill-sighted Clinton machine in 2016 left a testy vacuum that may well be finding some filling at long last. Party, with its assembly of officials, does not come first. The movement does. Hence the emergence, with some consequence, of the Democratic Socialists of America, which has also given a taster of how Sandersland, the sort despoiled by the Clinton apparatus, can be repositioned and reclaimed. In the Trump-era, the DSA has found itself with [surging membership](#). The party founded by Michael Harrington is thriving with resurgent intoxication.

As the DSA National Director Maria Svart [explained](#) to CNN,

“Democratic socialism speaks to people’s fears and anger and offers a positive vision. We remind people of the power of collective action and we help people overcome the isolation and loneliness that they experience and that sense of powerlessness.”

There is little doubt that the establishment is shaken. Joe Lieberman seemed [frightened](#). Ocasio-Cortez “didn’t speak much about foreign policy during the primary, but when she did, it was from the DSA policy book – meaning support for socialist governments, even if they are dictatorial and corrupt (Venezuela), opposition to American leadership in the world, even to alleviated humanitarian disasters (Syria), and reflexive criticism of one of America’s great democratic allies (Israel).”

The other approach is somewhat more guileful, such as that of the Democratic governor of Rhode Island. Gina Raimondo has been making an effort to capture a bit of the Ocasio-Cortez lustre in the hope that it will fireproof her against progressive contenders. This has been noted as a fairly absurd proposition, given her Wall Street links.

Another angle is to simply avoid the issue altogether, or view it in tactical, localised terms. Yes, goes E.J. Dionne Jr. in [The Washington Post](#), the victory was impressive. But in such roots was a basic traditionalism inherent in New York politics: “the transition of power from one ethnic group to another.” Seeing this “as a prelude to a radical takeover of the Democratic Party badly misreads what has been happening.” No apparent “lurch”, merely a sprinkling of modest moderates getting their due in some bloodletting of the old guard.

For all that qualified dampening, the Ocasio-Cortez victory might well be catching. Eoin Higgins of [The Intercept](#) detects one aspect of this trend, suggesting the prospect of young women of colour in the offing on the broader US political stage. [Tahirah Amatul-Wadud](#) is another such contender, vying for Massachusetts’s 1st District. Her intended opponent is the firmly ensconced Richard Neal.

This has all the makings of a New York re-run: confident upstart youth in a direct challenge with party plutocracy. Neal’s problem is very much one of established, long-in-tooth politicians who have essentially treated Washington as a retirement village stacked with delightful, seemingly endless perks buttressed by the incurably seductive power of the establishment.

The local [Weekend Gazette](#) demonstrated this point in taking out a missing person’s ad: “Has anyone seen this man (yes, he’s our congressman).” The jibe was fittingly sharp: Neal had been near invisible, lost in the capital’s obscure undergrowth. “All we’re saying is this: Come to Williamsburg to meet the voters in a Town Hall and let’s have a conversation about issues that are important to rural voters.”

That’s the crucial, and perhaps fatal point of many such practitioners of party, as opposed to representative politics. If the victory of Ocasio-Cortez is anything to go by, such absentee, even petrified figures in Congress protected by the armour of their parties are viewing a possible, and healthy removal, from the scene of US politics. And just to add some ballast to that prospect some of Hillary Clinton’s former advisors, one of them [Jake Sullivan](#), admit to a reality that is fast thumping on the doors of those in denial: That the centre of gravity in US politics “is moving, and this is a good thing.”

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