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## Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

**Date of birth:** October 13, 1989

**Occupation:** Politician

On June 26, 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a native of the Bronx who had never run for public office, defeated ten-term US representative Joe Crowley in the Democratic primary in New York's Fourteenth Congressional District. Ocasio-Cortez, a self-proclaimed democratic socialist, garnered more than 57 percent of the vote, stunning those who had counted on Crowley's larger war chest and entrenched authority—as chair of the House Democratic Caucus, he held the fourth-highest ranking position in House Democratic leadership—to carry him to easy victory. (Crowley had not faced a primary challenger in almost a decade.) Political observers credited Ocasio-Cortez's win to a savvy grassroots



campaign and progressive agenda that included strong gun control, Medicare and higher education for all, and the dissolution of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency.

After that upset—fueled in part by a compelling viral video in which Ocasio-Cortez, who is of Puerto Rican descent, declared, “Women like me aren’t supposed to run for office”—few were surprised on November 6, 2018, not long after her twenty-ninth birthday, when she soundly defeated Republican candidate Anthony Pappas in her bid to represent the Fourteenth District, a Democratic stronghold that encompasses areas of the Bronx and Queens and in which half the residents are Hispanic and nearly half are foreign-born. That victory made her the youngest woman ever elected to Congress—and an integral part of a new wave of young congresswomen of color.

### EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was born on October 13, 1989, to Sergio Ocasio-Roman, an architect who ran his own small business, and his wife, Blanca. Sergio had been born in the South Bronx and Blanca hailed from Puerto Rico.

The couple initially raised Ocasio-Cortez and her younger brother, Gabriel, in the Parkchester section of the Bronx, a community of some 170 mid-rise, brick apartment buildings that had been erected by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company to provide middle-income housing. Originally segregated, the units were largely occupied by African American, Hispanic, and South Asian residents by the time of Ocasio-Cortez’s birth.

When she was five years old, Ocasio-Cortez’s father, worried about the quality of the schools in the Bronx, moved the family north to a small but comfortable home in the New York suburb of Yorktown in West Chester County, purchasing the two-bedroom dwelling for \$150,000 with the help of relatives. Her political opponents would later seize upon this fact to prove that she was misrepresenting herself as “a girl from the Bronx,” when in fact she grew up in the wealthier northern suburb.

However, Ocasio-Cortez, who often traveled the forty minutes back to the Bronx to visit extended family, maintains she has always felt a deep connection to the borough. “My aunt and my uncle were just talking last Christmas about how they literally heard Malcolm X evangelizing on street corners. That is the institutional memory of my family and multigenerational New York families,” she recalled to Bridget Read for *Vogue* (25 June 2018), explaining that three generations of the Ocasio clan had by then counted the Bronx as home. “It’s actually kind of a rarity, and the reason it’s a rarity is because of the changes that the city has gone through. This city is becoming too inaccessible and too unaffordable for normal people to live in anymore.”

Not all the family members who remained in the Bronx fared well. “Their stories are not really mine to tell,” she told David Remnick during an interview for the *New Yorker* (23 July 2018), “but growing up they were wearing t-shirts with pictures of their friends who had died—and that’s just scraping the surface.”

Ocasio-Cortez was a highly motivated and accomplished student—despite insinuations from some of her teachers that she might not be ready for advanced work. As a teen she read the *New York Times* each day and became outspoken about her political and social views. (Her mother has quipped to journalists that it was difficult to get her to stop talking at the dinner table.) With an eye to becoming a physician, she threw herself into her science classes, and in 2007 she garnered a second-place prize in the highly competitive Intel Science and Engineering Fair, with a project that explored the anti-aging effect of antioxidants in roundworms. (As part of her prize, an asteroid, 23238 Ocasio-Cortez, was named in her honor.) Invited to give a presentation to the local Board of Education, she was so poised that one late-comer, missing her introduction, thought he was listening to a representative of a tech company, rather than a high school senior.

Ocasio-Cortez, who volunteered as a phone-bank caller for the Obama campaign in 2008, next entered Boston University, where she paid tuition with a cobbled-together package of loans and scholarships and majored in biochemistry.

Early in her sophomore year, her father died of cancer. Rather than becoming mired in grief, Ocasio-Cortez took just one week off from college and then tackled her studies with a new sense of purpose. “The last thing my father had told me in the hospital was ‘Make me proud,’” she told Remnick. “I took it very literally.” She

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switched her major to economics and international relations and began working part time in Senator Edward Kennedy’s Boston office, where she worked to solve problems presented by constituents.

After earning her bachelor’s degree in 2011, Ocasio-Cortez returned home to help her mother, who had been forced to take on work as a house cleaner and school bus driver to make ends meet after Sergio’s death. For her part, Ocasio-Cortez founded a small publishing company, Brook Avenue Press, dedicated to producing children’s books that contained positive depictions of life in the Bronx. (Her critics have pointed out that during her brief stint as a business owner, she came out in favor of tax deductions for startup costs, a position they characterize as hypocritical.)

That venture was less than successful, and Ocasio-Cortez turned to waiting tables and tending bar to earn money. In 2016, with the family house in danger of foreclosure, Blanca sold it and moved to Florida, where she found work as a secretary. Ocasio-Cortez, who spent some of her free time teaching courses in community leadership to high school students for the National Hispanic Institute, returned to Parkchester to live.

## **POLITICAL CAREER**

Despite the demands of waiting on tables and tending bar, Ocasio-Cortez remained involved in political activism. In 2016 she volunteered on Bernie

Sanders' presidential campaign, helping set up his Bronx headquarters in a former nail salon and knocking on doors to get out the vote. She also protested the Dakota Access Pipeline at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, took part in a 100-day vigil after Hurricane Maria, and explored the Black Lives Matter movement.

When it became apparent that Sanders was losing his bid, some of his staffers—reasoning that they had proven that grassroots, non-corporate campaigns could be viable—started the organization Brand New Congress (BNC), aimed at recruiting candidates similar in ideology to Sanders for the House and the Senate. One day, the group got a letter from Gabriel Ocasio-Cortez, who was writing on behalf of his politically minded sister. A BNC staffer subsequently called Ocasio-Cortez, who happened to be in Standing Rock at a protest. She was initially hesitant. “Where did I get off?” she asked Remnick rhetorically. “I mean, I’m going to tell people that I, as a waitress, should be their next congresswoman?”

Still, she was intrigued by the possibility of making a real difference in a major race. Working with the group, she learned about policy issues, debate tactics, the fine points of the Federal Election Commission (FEC), and how to use social media effectively. She particularly excelled when interacting with potential supporters personally, and over the course of a year, she and her campaign workers sent some 170,000 text messages, made about as many phone calls, and knocked on as many doors as possible in the Fourteenth District. (One of her most popular Twitter posts included a photo of her tattered walking shoes with the comment: “Respect the hustle.”) She also forged ties with such local groups as the Bronx Progressives, the 7 Train Coalition, and Queens Neighborhoods United, winning over even those who had lost faith in electoral politics. It was a tactic diametrically opposed to that used by the powerful incumbent, Joe Crowley, who ran a more tradition-bound campaign with glossy mailings and much less field work.

Political observers have opined that one of her most effective moves was spending a modest \$10,000 to make a two-minute-long campaign video that depicted her on a subway platform, in a neighborhood deli, buying cupcakes from a group of children, and in other workaday settings. In the voiceover, after her comment that “women like me aren’t supposed to run for office,” she declared: “It’s time we acknowledged that not all Democrats are the same. That a Democrat who takes corporate money, profits off foreclosure, doesn’t live here, doesn’t send his kids to our schools, doesn’t drink our water or breathe our air cannot possibly represent us. What the Bronx and Queens needs is Medicare for all, tuition-free public college, a federal jobs guarantee, and criminal-justice reform.”

While Crowley was the son of a police officer and had attended a public college in Queens, Ocasio-Cortez managed to paint him as an out-of-touch elitist beholden to big-money donors. His cause was not helped by his complacency: by the time he realized Ocasio-Cortez posed a serious threat he had skipped two of three debates with her, earning the ire of the *New York Times* editorial board

and setting himself up for charges that he was discounting her because she was a young minority woman. When she trounced him in a near-landslide on June 26; however, he conceded graciously.

While Ocasio-Cortez acknowledged that her youth, gender, and ethnicity had played a part in her victory, she told Remnick, “When you hear ‘She won just for demographic reasons,’ or low turnout, or that I won because of all the white ‘Bernie bros’ in Astoria—maybe that all helped. But I *smoked* this race. I didn’t edge anybody out. I *dominated*. And I am going to own that.”

Similarly, she dominated in the general election on November 6, winning some 78 percent of the vote and becoming the youngest woman ever elected to Congress. (Newly elected Iowa Democrat Abby Finkenauer is a close second: also twenty-nine, she is older than Ocasio-Cortez by some ten months.)

## PERSONAL LIFE

Although she will now have to maintain a home in Washington, DC, Ocasio-Cortez continues to live in her eclectic neighborhood in the Bronx: journalists have commented on the nearby sari emporium, halal grocery stores, and corner pizza parlors. She is still paying student loans and until shortly before the election had no health insurance.

## SUGGESTED READING

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—Mari Rich