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**ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ: A CASE STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN
AGENDA SETTING TOOL IN THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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Abstract

The purpose of “Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez: A Case Study of Social Media as an Agenda Setting Tool in the U.S. House of Representatives” is to explore the impact of a politician’s social media presence on agenda setting in Congress. It was born out of the research question, “*how do freshman members of the House of Representatives seek power and influence in their first term?*” I answer this using Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a case study, as she is a current freshman legislator with undeniable power and influence. I studied Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s tweets from two time periods: the month leading up to her election and her second month in office. I categorized and counted each tweet into 4 categories that yielded quantifiable results. Subsequently, I did a textual analysis of certain tweets from the two periods and explained their relevance to her shift in content and success as a public figure. I found that since being elected, the proportion of Rep. Ocasio-Cortez tweets about National issues increased by four times more than during her primary. Additionally, after being elected, her tweets about her District were proportionally one-fourth of they were during her primary campaign. I interpret this finding as Rep. Ocasio-Cortez’s efforts to influence the national agenda, a task rarely taken on by a freshman Representative. I also found that she had nearly doubled the proportion of tweets that fall under the Extraneous category, utilizing personal anecdotes, inspirational messages, feminist actions and insights, and calls for progressive leadership that connect with her audience and set her apart from strictly policy-oriented politician Twitter accounts. Altogether, I have analyzed Rep. Ocasio-Cortez’s Twitter presence and believe it to be a key element of her success in agenda setting as a freshman Congress member.

Acknowledgements

In all candor, this thesis is not everything I hoped it could be. By the time I was in the thick of writing it, I saw it as a barrier to graduation, not as a “capstone” piece to my college education or my own brainchild. However, I am very proud of my thesis because it represents the only tangible goal I have accomplished during a year where nearly all of my strength and energy went into grieving. For this reason, I am dedicating my thesis to my brother, Brian Lewinstein, who passed away on August 12, 2018, a few weeks before the start of my senior year at Scripps College. In the spirit of brevity, I will say that my brother is my best friend, my role model, my biggest supporter, and my life partner. He was a brilliant scholar, a critical thinker, a baseball lover, a considerate friend, a passionate advocate, and the world’s best older brother. Brian passed away right before his second year at Berkeley Law, where he was pursuing a career in public interest law. He had just finished interning for East Bay Community Law Center, working on juvenile justice matters and supporting at-risk youth with legal assistance. I shed many tears thinking of the loss incurred by all the people he would have helped in his lifetime, people who will never know his compassion or genius. This world is undoubtedly a worse place without him. Our passion for social justice and our interest in politics have tied us together for years and I have yearned for his advice, thoughts, and feedback at every point while writing this. Losing him has been an insurmountable tragedy, and my life will never be the same.

Brian was the first person to introduce me to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. He found her early in her campaign and sent me a video of her with the message “THE REVOLUTION IS TO YOUR 🗳️” and again later with, “THE PEOPLE WANT PROGRRRESSIVESSSS.” From there, I have grown to love her more and more every day I read about her. I wanted to pick a thesis topic that would inspire and uplift me daily, and I could not think of a better person to

spend so much of my time thinking about. So, I secondarily dedicate my thesis to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Even though I am not Puerto Rican, I have never felt substantively and descriptively represented by anyone in Congress until she took office. There has never been a Filipina woman in Congress, so I look up to her as my idol and my voice as she is a young, brown, woman of color who is an unapologetic, feminist force of nature. Her groundbreaking and unconventional success has caused me to rethink my career trajectory and has reframed what being a politician means to me. I have doubled-down on my idea to run for office one day because of her.

This thesis would not have been possible without the enduring support of many people. I would like to thank my parents, Marc and Felicia Lewinstein, for being the best parents and pouring all their love into me, even in the midst of the nightmare we live in now. I want to thank my first reader, Prof. Thomas Kim, for taking on this project and pulling me to the finish line. I also am in debt to my second reader, Prof. Rachel VanSickle-Ward, whose classes have provided me the basis of my collegiate political education and whose passion and wisdom inspire me daily. I must thank my closest friends, specifically Cherish Molezion and Claire Wengrod, and my partner, Spencer Burget. I thank them for being there for me during my darkest hours and still making me feel worthwhile to be around, and also for their continual brilliance and insight. I am grateful for the love and support I have in my life, and I would not have finished my thesis without these people.

Introduction

After her college graduation in 2011 through 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez worked part-time as a bartender to earn more money to help her mother in the wake of her father's death.¹ This is a favorite factoid of many pundits and journalists who have chronicled Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's meteoric rise in American politics. However, the reason many think of Ocasio-Cortez as a political outsider comes from our fundamental understanding of what constitutes a political *insider*: a major party-backed, special interest-beholden, lucrative fundraising elite who is more likely than not a cis-hetero white male with a postgraduate degree, often a JD. But Ocasio-Cortez knows it should not be this way.

Ocasio-Cortez is a 2.5 generation American, the daughter of two Puerto Ricans, her father, a Bronx native, and her mother, an immigrant.² Despite having deep roots in the Parkchester neighborhood of the Bronx, she traveled 40 minutes to high school and watched zip codes determine destinies.³ Her father died when she was 18, during the height of the 2008 economic crisis.⁴ She is among the Millennial generation of Americans that paid no mind to the positive attitudes of the President Clinton era, and came of age having never witnessed American prosperity in their adult life.⁵ Like her generational peers, she became adept at the Internet in high school and college. Also like many Millennials, she had \$25,000 in student-loan debt.⁶

¹ “‘Change Is Closer Than We Think.’ Inside Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Unlikely Rise.” n.d. Time. Accessed April 28, 2019. <http://time.com/longform/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-profile/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

While she has said in her campaign video that she did not grow up envisioning a career in politics, she majored in economics and international relations at Boston University where she graduated in 2011.⁷ During college, Ocasio-Cortez interned for Senator Ted Kennedy's immigration office in the final year of his tenure.⁸ In 2012, she founded Brook Avenue Press, a startup to support Bronx authors, through Sunshine Bronx Business Incubator. In 2016, Ocasio-Cortez was a community organizer for Bernie Sander's presidential campaign, and later that year, drove across the country to Standing Rock to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline.⁹ Until her Congressional campaign, she was working as an educational director at the nonprofit National Hispanic Institute and received their 2017 award for Person of the Year.¹⁰ At 28 years old in 2018, she ran a grassroots, non-PAC or corporate funded campaign and beat a 10-term incumbent and rank and file establishment Democrat, Joe Crowley, to win her seat in New York's 14th District, the Bronx and Queens.¹¹

Ocasio-Cortez's experience working in and for her community defines her origin story as well as her attitude as a Congress member today. Though many people are groomed to become future politicians through institutions like law school, political dynasties, and revolving door

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Time.

¹⁰ Beekman, Daniel. n.d. "Diverse Group of Startups Thriving at City-Sponsored Sunshine Bronx Business Incubator in Hunts Point." *Nydailynews.Com*. Accessed April 28, 2019. <https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/bronx/diverse-group-startups-thriving-city-sponsored-sunshine-bronx-business-incubator-hunts-point-article-1.1115489>;

"Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Named 2017 NHI Person of the Year." 2017. *NHI Magazine* (blog). December 31, 2017. <http://www.nhimagazine.com/2017/12/31/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-named-2017-nhi-person-year/>.

¹¹ "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Proves That Money Doesn't Win Elections: Are Democrats Listening? | Salon.Com." n.d. Accessed April 28, 2019. <https://www.salon.com/2018/07/06/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-proves-that-money-doesnt-win-elections-are-democrats-listening/>.

mechanisms, Ocasio-Cortez’s launch into the political sphere through community organizing represents her authenticity. She is the youngest woman ever elected to Congress, and one of many women of color elected in the Year of the Woman and Blue Wave of 2018.¹² Her heritage, age, background, and commitment to progressive ideals put her in a new category of politicians that show no deference to institutional traditions and dynamics. My thesis explores her one of unique approaches to the job of House Representative—her use of social media.

Currently, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez boasts over 4 million Twitter followers.¹³ Her Instagram live-streams of policy talk while repotting house plants routinely gather thousands of viewers.¹⁴ She already has a Time Magazine Cover and has a feature in Time 100, the most influential people of 2019.¹⁵ She stars in a documentary produced by Netflix called “Knock Down the House,” and has replaced Hillary Clinton as the villain of Fox News.¹⁶ Her signature lipstick, Beso by Stila, sold out the day she revealed it.¹⁷ Though she was misstated as the “second most talked about politician in America,” her news mentions rival big wigs in American politics, namely the candidates of the 2020 Presidential election, and she is not even running for

¹² Hess, Abigail. 2018. “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Is Now the Youngest Woman Elected to Congress.” November 7, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/06/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-is-now-the-youngest-woman-elected-to-congress.html>.

¹³ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Profile. May 1, 2019, 8:00AM. <https://twitter.com/AOC>

¹⁴ Time.

¹⁵ Time.; “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: The 100 Most Influential People of 2019.” n.d. TIME. Accessed April 28, 2019. <http://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2019/5567752/alexandria-ocasio-cortez/>.

¹⁶ “Knock Down The House | Netflix Official Site.” n.d. Accessed April 28, 2019. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81080637>.; Time.

¹⁷ “Lipstick Sells out after Ocasio-Cortez Says She Wore It during Debate | TheHill.” n.d. Accessed April 28, 2019. <https://thehill.com/blogs/in-the-know/in-the-know/394968-lipstick-sells-out-after-ocasio-cortez-says-she-wore-it-during>.

President.¹⁸ AOC, as she is called, (a moniker paralleling JFK, FDR, and LBJ) is a meteoric star of the Democratic Party. But what is she doing that is so different?

My thesis argues that politicians, particularly legislators with little institutional power as freshmen, can leverage power in an outside “institution”—social media— back into Congress because of their popularity and engagement with the American people. I believe that Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is a perfect case study for this, as she is a very prolific tweeter and at the time of her inauguration, she had more followers than all of the incoming Democratic freshman class.¹⁹ I believe the qualities that make her likable and relatable are her pride in her Latina heritage, her intersectional feminism, her commitment to marginalized communities, her unapologetic and unconventional approach to working within the Democratic Party, and her unique ability to root political issues in a clear moral framework.

My thesis contributes to the scholarly conversation on agenda setting in Congress, adding a new layer, social media, to the factors that play into how policy is made. We are in a time where the President’s favorite line of communication with the American people is Twitter, so studying how a young member of the opposing party uses it in a different way with comparable success is becoming more and more relevant.²⁰ But my study aims to prove something more

¹⁸ “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Is Not the ‘Second Most Talked-about Politician in America’ - The Washington Post.” n.d. Accessed April 28, 2019.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/21/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-is-not-second-most-talked-about-politician-america/>.

¹⁹ “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Has as Many Twitter Followers as Incoming Democratic Freshman House Members Combined.” n.d. Accessed April 28, 2019.

<https://www.newsweek.com/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-has-many-twitter-followers-incoming-60-democratic-1251551>.

²⁰ “Trump and Twitter: Here’s Why He Plans to Keep Tweeting as President | Fortune.” n.d. Accessed April 28, 2019. <http://fortune.com/2017/01/17/trump-loves-twitter/>.

substantive than her popularity—her ability to set the legislative agenda and steer national conversation.

Since entering Congress a few short months ago, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez has sparked national conversations on marginal income tax, campaign finance laws, and climate change mitigation. She has put forward the Green New Deal, a House Resolution co-sponsored by Rep. Markey and acknowledged by every 2020 Democratic candidate.²¹ My data shows her increasingly weighing in on national issues, discarding time-tested traditions of freshmen legislators waiting in line, deferring to party seniority, and focusing only on their district for a quick reelection. Though she is often cast as a political outsider, her deep community roots are what American people *want* to see in future political insiders, someone with *inside* knowledge of the community they represent, and a voice determined to put them first. Representative Ocasio-Cortez is a trailblazing woman of color whose impact already in such a short period is nothing short of legendary, and whose future is limitless.

Literature Review

When contemplating why Representative Ocasio-Cortez represents a novelty in American politics, it is important to consider that she is both a freshman and the youngest woman ever elected to Congress. Not only does she have different political views than many establishment Democrats, she has different strategies and mechanisms that have brought her into the spotlight,

²¹ Levitz, Eric. 2019. “Poll: Majority Backs AOC’s 70 Percent Top Marginal Tax Rate.” *Intelligencer*. January 15, 2019. <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/01/poll-large-majority-backs-aocs-70-top-marginal-tax-rate.html>;

“Where the 2020 Presidential Candidates Stand on the Green New Deal.” n.d. *Axios*. Accessed April 28, 2019. <https://www.axios.com/2020-presidential-candidates-green-new-deal-22faff60-3fee-45f3-8636-09e437c82431.html>.

namely, her digital prowess on social media. This section reviews the literature surrounding my topic, covering the standard behavior of freshman, the normal practices of accruing power and influence, how women have historically held power as Freshmen, and the relationship between Congress members and their social media. In doing so, it becomes clear that there needs to be more scholarship on social media as an agenda setting tool, as this is recent development in politics is separate from social media's impacts on fundraising and campaigning. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez represents the cutting edge of the field of political science, as she is a deviation from standard practices and one of the first of a new generation of digital native politicians to enter electoral politics. In order to understand her impact, we must ask, *how do freshman members of the House of Representatives seek power and influence in their first term?*

Herbert B. Asher uncovers the dynamics between freshmen and senior Congress members in the House of Representatives in his article, *The Learning of Legislative Norms*.²² His study emphasizes the individual learning of House norms, and each member's perception of their job, legislative norms, and sources of voting cues. Asher found that the norm learning for the 91st Congress was unexpectedly low, and he attributes this to the idea that freshmen representatives generally know the rules and behavior that are standard because they apply to many institutional settings. His final conclusion was that House norms do not require formal learning, but are accepted and acknowledged regardless of explicit mentioning. This study approaches my topic, as it explores how freshmen Representatives are respectful and reverent to long standing members in the House, and thus proceed cautiously and defer to seniority. While these are the

²² Asher, Herbert B. 1973. "The Learning of Legislative Norms." *The American Political Science Review* 67 (2): 499–513. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1958780>.

norms, certain freshmen within Asher's study acted deviant, and represent a breaking of House conventions. Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is like those deviants, among others in the 116th Congress.

The idea of House norms is elaborated in E. K. Lynch's *Is Time on their Side? The Dynamics of Congressional Party Voting and Constituent Support*, which more specifically addresses voting and toeing the party line.²³ Freshmen typically exhibit high party allegiance, particularly when they are the same party as the President. Evidence also suggests that freshmen vote more in line with their party than Senior members, as they succumb to party pressure in hopes of moving ahead in their party. This is relevant to my study because it emphasizes the standard protocol by which first year Representatives fall in line. Even before her swearing in, Ocasio-Cortez joined Sunrise Movement's protest outside Democratic Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office to advocate for Democrats to stop taking fossil fuel money and to start planning for a real climate change solutions.²⁴ Already, then Rep. Elect Ocasio-Cortez was willing to take on her own party's leadership, and *not* fall in line, as E.K. Lynch theorized.

In Michael K. Moore's *Rethinking Congressional Careers: Career Paths and their Consequences on the United States House of Representatives*, the author expounds on Asher's thesis in a longitudinal test of the relationship between tenure and legislative activity.²⁵ He determined that over the course of their careers, Representatives become more active in

²³ Lynch, Emily K. 2013. "Time Is on Their Side? The Dynamics of Congressional Party Voting and Constituent Support." The Ohio State University. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/pg_10?0::NO:10:P10_ACCESSION_NUM:osu1376563345.

²⁴ Roberts, David. 2018. "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Is Already Pressuring Nancy Pelosi on Climate Change." Vox. November 14, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2018/11/14/18094452/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-nancy-pelosi-protest-climate-change-2020>.

²⁵ Moore, Michael Keith. 1993. "Rethinking Congressional Careers: Career Paths and Their Consequences in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1955--1980." *ETD Collection for University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, January, 1-177.

legislation. But when they are freshmen, most Representatives are concerned with reelection. Junior Congressmen in the 1970s invented what we now refer to as Home Style, a brand or personality that Congressmen use when in their home district to secure reelection. This later became important for all Congressmen, regardless of tenure. The idea of focusing on reelection through appealing your home constituency relates to my topic, but fails to recognize those who do not care about reelection, those who consider appealing to a wider constituency than in their own district, and those who propose and create legislation. While Rep. Ocasio-Cortez does employ home style politics, as evidenced by a speech that went viral for her code-switching while in the Bronx, she defies many of Moore's standards.²⁶ She has already created legislation within the first months of holding office, and is not afraid to speak to a larger audience beyond her home community, as she does on Twitter.

Scott A. Frisch and Sean Q. Kelly's article *Self-Selection Reconsidered: House Committee Assignment Requests and Constituency Characteristics* looks into distributive theory, which asserts members will request to be on committees that are related to their constituency's concerns.²⁷ He found mixed support for this theory, as many Congress members look for placements on committees that have institutional power, such as Appropriations, Rules, and Ways and Means, as opposed to committees whose specialties are more relevant to their district. Additionally, Democrats and Republicans newcomers generally request different committees. This source shows how freshman and junior members of the House of Representatives seek

²⁶ McWhorter, John. 2019. "It Wasn't 'Verbal Blackface.' AOC Was Code-Switching." *The Atlantic*. April 9, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-code-switches-black-english/586723/>.

²⁷ Frisch, Scott A., and Sean Q. Kelly. 2004. "Self-Selection Reconsidered: House Committee Assignment Requests and Constituency Characteristics." *Political Research Quarterly: Salt Lake City* 57 (2): 325–36.
<http://dx.doi.org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/106591290405700213>.

institutional power by getting influential committee assignments, or committee assignments that may help their district and thus help them get reelected. Currently, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is assigned to the Committee on Financial Services and the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, with subcommittee roles within these Environment, Civil Rights, and Consumer Protection.²⁸ These committees are not specific to Bronx related issues, demonstrating her engagement in issues that affect all Americans.

In some cases, when Representatives do not care to get reelected, they get to shout. In an article *House GOP Freshmen Soften their Edges*, reporter Jackie Koszczuk describes the GOP freshman class of 1994's "Republican Revolution."²⁹ While at first, the 74-member class was using for "go for broke politics," after their first year, many members of the class were switching to bridge building and career optimization. Initially, many of the freshmen claimed to "not care about re-election, as long as they upheld their conservative principles." But by the end of their first year, only a few members were willing to lose reelection in order to resist being co-opted by the establishment. This source serves as a foil to the Democratic freshmen class of 2018, who operate on similar principles. Willingness to lose elections is an age-old tactic that new members use in order to stand their ground against their party, and is one of the only platitudes they can make to try and have moral authority as a freshman. On April 3, 2019, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez held an Instagram live-stream where she says, "So what?" at the idea of her being a one-term congresswoman. She said, "So what, because I think and I hope that we're showing

²⁸ "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Representative for New York's 14th Congressional District." n.d. GovTrack.U.S. Accessed April 28, 2019. https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/alexandria_ocasio_cortez/412804.

²⁹ Koszczuk, Jackie. "House GOP Freshmen Soften Their Edges." *CQ Weekly* (February 3, 1996): 280-81. <http://library.cqpress.com/cqweekly/WR409901>.

that fearlessness can make a lot of change, really rapidly.”³⁰ This statement encapsulates Ocasio-Cortez’s greater mission, to lead a revolution of fearless citizens and lawmakers, and shows that this movement is greater than her individual career.

In both *Political Ambition and Women in the U.S. House of Representatives*, and *The Entrance of Women to the U.S. Congress: The Widow Effect*, the authors discuss how in the 20th century, many women entered Congress by replacing their deceased husband, effectively being ‘grandfathered’ onto their husband’s power.³¹ Though there are varying factors such as the husband’s seniority in Congress, the widow’s independent political experience, and the nature of their marriage, these articles explain how women can come into power in Congress in their first term by filling their deceased husband’s seat. While this is an important observation, it is not relevant to this study because the situation which yields this result (the passing of a spouse) is neither desirable nor within one’s agency to recreate. Rep. Ocasio-Cortez was not grandfathered onto anyone’s power, and therefore is historically unique as a freshman woman who created her own power.

Apart from studying how freshmen and women in Congress can hold power given House dynamics, I have looked into standard practices of policy making, specifically agenda setting. *Understanding and Influencing the Policy Process*, by Christopher M. Weible, Tanya Heikkila, Peter deLeon, and Paul A. Sabatier, explores the ways in which policy makers employ strategies

³⁰ “AOC: ‘So What’ If I’m Just a One-Term Congresswoman?” 2019. NTK Network. April 4, 2019. <https://ntknetwork.com/aoc-so-what-if-im-just-a-one-term-congresswoman/>.

³¹ Solowiej, Lisa, and Thomas L. Brunell. 2003. “The Entrance of Women to the U.S. Congress: The Widow Effect.” *Political Research Quarterly; Salt Lake City* 56 (3): 283–92. <http://dx.doi.org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/106591290305600304>. ; Palmer, Barbara, and Dennis Simon. 2003. “Political Ambition and Women in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1916-2000.” *Political Research Quarterly; Salt Lake City* 56 (2): 127–38. <http://dx.doi.org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/106591290305600202>.

to agenda set and pass legislation.³² In this work from 2011, the scholars admit there is no true consensus on the best practices, only many different theories. Each policy and policy maker has vastly different goals, whether it be ensuring successful policy implementation or even just raising public awareness. This journal article explores some of the many different theories that have been created from studying the policy making process. The thesis of their piece stands to say that while policy processes are often a matter of odds, there are tactics that policy makers can employ over time to help their cause. These tactics include creating context, developing deep knowledge on the subject, building and investing in networks, and participating for long periods of time. Scholars Simon and Ericsson identified 10 years as the magic number for the time required to develop the knowledge and skills that catalyze policy influence and creation. This is relevant to my study because freshmen in Congress generally are excluded from these criteria, particularly Rep. Ocasio-Cortez, who can be considered a political outsider prior to her election. Thus, it is surprising that she is able to have policy influence without around 10 years of experience, even though she is beginning working towards the measures identified as being tried and true elements of influential policy making.

Beyond exploring the standard protocol of freshmen Representatives and House dynamics, I have looked into the role of social media as a tool for power. In S. Hong's *Who Benefits from Twitter? Social Media and Political Competition in the U.S. House of Representatives*, the author investigates the relationship between Representatives' Twitter accounts and their fundraising.³³

³² Weible, Christopher M., Tanya Heikkila, Peter Deleon, and Paul A. Sabatier. 2012. "Understanding and Influencing the Policy Process." *Policy Sciences; Dordrecht* 45 (1): 1–21. <http://dx.doi.org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s11077-011-9143-5>.

³³ Hong, Sounman. 2015. "Who Benefits from Twitter? Social Media and Political Competition in the U.S. House of Representatives." *Government Information Quarterly*. Volume 30,

He found that politicians using social media have increased donations from outside their constituencies rather than within their district, and that members with more extreme ideologies benefit more from social media. This is relevant to this study because it demonstrates that politicians are able to use social media to widen their base. In this case, Hong explores how it develops a national donor base, and in my study, I aim to prove that it builds a national constituency. I hope to take this one step further and show social media as an agenda setting tool, as popularity with a wider audience can be yield institutional power, beyond fundraising and campaigning.

Instead of using common practices to seek power and influence, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez utilizes elements of Hong's argument and Koszucuk's observations while deviating from the other scholars' established norms. Because she has little influence or institutional power as a freshman Representative, she is accruing power in a separate institution—Social media, particularly Twitter—which she leverages back into the legislature via agenda setting. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is using her new social media prowess to disrupt the status quo and conventions of Congress by agenda setting to shape the national discourse and policy landscape.

Methodology

In order to understand how Rep. Ocasio-Cortez operates as a legislator, I am going to look at her social media pages, specifically her Twitter account. For this study, I am only interested in what she posts herself and not what other people post about her, or “tag” her in, so that we can get gain an understanding of the issues she chooses to discuss. All of the posts are

public and visible under her handles @AOC on Twitter, formerly @ocasio2018 before her inauguration.

I am looking at these forms of social media because they are at the forefront of our nation's digital culture. While candidates, politicians, lobbyists, and other political actors still use traditional digital campaigning tools such as email blasts and online ads, more and more voters can be found on social media. As of July 2017, the U.S. Census Bureau states that there are over 250 million Americans at or above the voting age of 18 years old.³⁴ Omnicore, an analytic digital marketing agency, has found that Twitter has over 69 million users in the U.S., regardless of age.³⁵ Pew Research has found that 22% of U.S. adults are Twitter users.³⁶ Therefore, the cross section shows that there should be about 55 million voting-age adults on Twitter in the United States. I am choosing to focus my study on Twitter, where as of May 2019, Ocasio-Cortez has currently over 4 million followers.³⁷ Ocasio-Cortez and other politicians and candidates are also vocal on Facebook, but I am choosing to exclude it from this study because most of her Facebook activity is creating events on Facebook, rather than posting her thoughts on the issues of the moment. She also has an Instagram account with over 3 million followers, and posts to it

³⁴ "Estimates of the Voting Age Population for 2017." 2018. Federal Register. February 20, 2018. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2018/02/20/2018-03372/estimates-of-the-voting-age-population-for-2017>.

³⁵ "Twitter by the Numbers (2019): Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts." 2019. January 4, 2019. <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/twitter-statistics/>.

³⁶ NW, 1615 L. St, Suite 800 Washington, and DC 20036 USA 202-419-4300 | Main 202-857-8562 | Fax 202-419-4372 | Media Inquiries. n.d. "Share of U.S. Adults Using Social Media, Including Facebook, Is Mostly Unchanged since 2018." *Pew Research Center* (blog). Accessed April 28, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/10/share-of-u-s-adults-using-social-media-including-facebook-is-mostly-unchanged-since-2018/>.

³⁷ "Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. (@AOC) | Twitter." N.d. Accessed May 1, 2019. <https://twitter.com/AOC>

frequently, but not nearly as much as on Twitter.³⁸ Looking at political postings on Twitter help frame the snapshot of the political climate on any given day, which is why I am using them to chronicle Ocasio-Cortez's political engagement with her constituents and the nation.

My study has a brief quantitative aspect that is supported by a deeper qualitative analysis of Rep. Ocasio-Cortez's tweets. In my study, I look at two different time periods of her social media, the first being the month leading up to her primary (May 27 – June 25, 2018) and the second, her second month in office (February 2 – March 5, 2019). These time frames are important because before her primary election, her target demographic was voters in the Bronx and Queens, who helped elect her. This primary was contentious, as she was running against establishment favorite, incumbent Rep. Joe Crowley. Once she won her primary, she was a shoe-in for the general election against a very low-profile Republican opponent. She won easily and entered the 116th Congress as one of many new women of color to the Democratic Freshmen class.

I am quantifying her posts during this period by categorizing and counting them into three types: 1) District Oriented, or posts related to NY-14, the Bronx and Queens, 2) National Agenda, which contains posts related to issues on the national agenda that reference specific legislation or events, and are part of or creating the national conversation, and 3) Extraneous, posts that fall beyond the previous categories. Sometimes these are inspirational or feminist posts which are in a way, part of the national conversation, but do not directly relate to specific policy or legislation.

³⁸ “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (@ocasio2018) • Instagram Photos and Videos.” n.d. Accessed April 28, 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/ocasio2018/>.

My study aims to ascertain whether there is a quantifiable difference in the amount of District and National Agenda posts in the two different time periods. I am looking for this information because I theorize that she will have posted many more District oriented tweets during her primary, as she was attempting to appeal to her future constituents and get elected. While many freshmen Representatives may maintain this focus on their district in their first term in order to get reelected, I have noticed Rep. Ocasio-Cortez increasingly drawing attention to large scale, federal issues. However, I need to see if the data supports this. To test this, I will categorize and count each tweet from her account @AOC over the course of two separate months. Subsequently, applying qualitative discourse analysis allows me to critically assess the hypothesis that freshmen in Congress use social media to build a national constituency and agenda set.

While I am able to use this qualitative discourse analysis to develop a new framework to view agenda setting and constituency building in American politics, this study is not without faults. Firstly, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is an anomaly of a freshman Representative. She is a Millennial, while most politicians are from the Baby Boomer or Gen X generation. She is the 90th most followed politician on Twitter, where most of the top 90 are not American politicians.³⁹ Her following rivals Vice President Mike Pence and Senator and presidential candidate Corey Booker. Many members of Congress are unfamiliar with social media and have staffers run their accounts. The fact that she runs her own Twitter page with millions of followers makes her unique, she has more followers than nearly all of Representatives and other Senators. I expect her participation to be trend setting and trail blazing, which make it worth studying and paying

³⁹ Socialbakers. n.d. "Politics Twitter Statistics." Socialbakers.Com. Accessed April 28, 2019. <https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/twitter/profiles/society/politics/>.

attention to in the future. Many of her peers in the class of 2018 are using similar methodologies, and they are the politicians worth replicating this study.

Another potential confounding factor of my study is the fact that Ocasio-Cortez represents a historically blue district, and may be more able to weigh in on national issues from a progressive standpoint than another Congress member from a mixed or purple district. This gives her the freedom to truly be a more noncompromising progressive voice in Congress, given that she can be surer her constituency will agree with her. This study should be compared with a study of another politician who represents a swing district, as they may find it polarizing to weigh in on contentious national issues all the time.

Because of the scope of my paper, I am not able to analyze the entirety of Ocasio-Cortez's 7,200+ tweets. The limitations led me to choosing the two one-month periods that carry the largest difference in connotation—the time leading up to her primary election and her second month in office. There are tweets before, after, and in between the time periods I have selected that would also demonstrate her shift into the national agenda, but those posts will go unanalyzed in the interest of brevity and having a set scope. I did not hand select posts from the body of her social media to study, and I hope in pre-selecting dates, I have mitigated some of the risks of selection bias. In future studies, I hope there will be resources and time to log all tweets on record, aggregating Twitter data from all or more Congress members over the same period of time, ideally years. However, it is worthwhile to study even just 2 months of data, particularly because Rep. Ocasio-Cortez has not even been in Congress for 4 months and is already making waves. Looking at a smaller set is indicative of the result of what a larger sample size could yield, allowing me to make an inferential argument on the impacts of the percentage of the three categories of tweets: District, National, and Extraneous.

Next, the categorizing itself is flawed. For example, issues that overlap between the District Oriented, the National Agenda, and Extraneous categories will end up favoring her district. For example, say a tweet contains a discussion about how immigrants make up the majority of her district and contribute dutifully to the fabric of society. This is an example of Ocasio-Cortez catering to her district while putting it in the context of the national conversation on immigration as well as the further extrapolation that we must respect immigrants' humanity. I am counting each tweet individually instead of double-counting these tweets in order to have a number of total tweets and percentages for each category. I count these tweets as District related tweets, because she mentions her district explicitly. In a future study, I hope to be able to code each tweet on different levels and create subcategories that acknowledge overlap.

While aggregating the data, I chose to add a fourth category between District and National Agenda, a Category 1.5, or "Replies." These tweets are quick responses to users or constituents. Often, they will say, "thank you for volunteering!" or "thank you for mailing flyers!" Like casework or town halls, these tweets are part of establishing connections in the community, which is why they are called Replies. However, their brevity and lack of substance require they are put in a separate category than actual District oriented tweets.

Extraneous tweets fall beyond the limitations of the first two categories; however, certain Extraneous tweets can also be seen as a part of the national agenda. Included in this third Extraneous category are tweets supporting other members of Congress (mostly other freshmen women of color), tweets that highlight representation, tweets addressing the sexism she and others face, tweets that highlight Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans, tweets discussing climate change that are not related to the Green New Deal, and other political conversations that serve to demonstrate the need for progressive leadership and progressive solutions in politics. Often, Rep.

Ocasio-Cortez will tweet a “thread” of tweets, intertwining three categories in the thread. This will be discussed in analysis, but for the sake of categorizing, must be separated tweet by tweet, so one thread may contain one District, two National Agenda, and one Extraneous tweet.

Further, the methodology is limited because Representative Ocasio-Cortez actually has a second twitter account, @RepAOC, which currently has only 19 tweets (compare to @AOC which has over 7,700), that I am not acknowledging.⁴⁰ Substantively, this account works a lot like @AOC, just less active. It is unclear if this account is run by staffers or Rep. Ocasio-Cortez herself. This is an additional complication, as @AOC, formerly @Ocasio2018, is her account from her campaign that has morphed into her main account. Many legislators have two accounts, one personal and one official, but Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has blurred the lines. This may make it hard for comparison to incumbent politicians, however, many freshmen politicians have also transitioned their campaigning Twitter account into their main account, likely in order to salvage followers and their continued support. To simplify the study, I have omitted tweets from this account, as it has a much smaller sample size and following.

Representative Ocasio-Cortez is also widely followed on Instagram, with over 3 million followers, and posts there weekly.⁴¹ Her livestreams have become a popular platform for her to connect with followers and voters while making dinner or building Ikea furniture. I elected to not examine her Instagram in this study because Twitter is largely the chosen platform of politicians and thereby is a better measurement of comparison. Also, her most infamous use of Instagram is difficult to measure and quantify, as Livestreams disappear after 24 hours. There is no way of retroactively knowing how many people tuned in on that day, however, her videos of cooking

⁴⁰ “Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (@RepAOC) | Twitter.” n.d. Accessed April 28, 2019.
<https://twitter.com/repAOC>.

⁴¹ @ocasio2018.

dinner, building furniture, gardening, answering questions, and talking about policy are known to have thousands of viewers at once.

Finally, this study does not discuss the virality or the popularity of each tweet individually. This is partially due to certain inconsistencies of Twitter, for example it is nearly impossible to know how many followers or users engaging are real people, or just bots. Some tweets and threads of tweets gain more traction than others, however, for the sake of limiting the scope this study, I am choosing to look at the substance of the tweets rather than how well they are received. Politicians do not have control over their traction, only over their content. In future studies, it would be interesting to examine how certain social media metrics and measurements of user engagement influence lawmakers' actions and statements, online and in Congress.

Despite the limitations of the scope of my study and the flaws in its methodology, I believe the quantitative data and qualitative inferences can contribute to the scholarly conversation around using social media as an agenda setting tool in that it allows politicians to leverage online celebrity into institutional power.

Data

Table 1: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Tweets

Month	District Oriented	Replies	National Agenda	Extraneous	Total
May 26 – June 24, 2018	133/221 60%	14/221 6.3%	22/221 10%	53/221 24%	221 tweets
February 4 – March 2 2019	58/369 15.72%	2/369 0.5%	149/369 40.37%	160/369 43%	369 tweets

First Period Analysis: May 26 – June 24, 2018

The first period of tweets logged was during the month leading up to Ocasio-Cortez's primary election. This was the more contentious election, as her primary was against incumbent and 4th in line Democrat, Joe Crowley. After that, many pundits and other election predictors had her slated to win the general election, FiveThirtyEight gave her 99% chance of winning her general election in the 2018 Midterm Elections.⁴² By the time Ocasio-Cortez won her primary, she could reasonably assume she would win the general, and could begin to focus her image on gaining traction in the national politics and policy arena. This is why the first time period is chosen before she won her primary. Because of this context, we can expect a lot of her tweets at this time to be geared towards her would-be constituents. This is accurately reflected in the data—60% of her tweets are District oriented.

Among many tweets thanking her organizers and volunteers and her 'Get Out The Vote' pushes, candidate Ocasio-Cortez campaigned on Twitter by demonstrating knowledge and experience of Bronx and Queens related issues, retweeting and highlighting her endorsements, and posting attack tweets about her opponent, incumbent Joe Crowley. By articulating her actions and strategies in various types of tweets in her social media campaign, she was able to bolster her campaign online, all while fundraising and spending \$2.6 million less than her opponent, incumbent Joe Crowley.⁴³ Her online popularity skyrocketed as she published a political advertisement video on Twitter on May 30, 2018 that read:

⁴² FiveThirtyEight. n.d. "FiveThirtyEight." FiveThirtyEight. Accessed March 27, 2019. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/>.

⁴³ Steiger, Kay. 2018. "Is a High-Ranking House Democrat about to Lose His Primary?" Vox. June 26, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/6/26/17501194/crowley-ocasio-cortez-new-york-primary-midterms-democrats>.

It's time for a New York that works for all of us. On June 26th, we can make it happen - but only if we have the [#CourageToChange](#). It's time to get to work. Please retweet this video and sign up to knock doors + more at <http://Ocasio2018.com> to bring our movement to Congress.⁴⁴

With the themes of “Courage to Change” and “We’ve got the people, they’ve got the money,” candidate Ocasio-Cortez’s primary campaign was very clearly by and for constituents, residents, voters, and citizens of New York’s 14th district. Her emphasis on Bronx and Queens related issues is rightfully overwhelming during this time period, and while that is to be expected, it is the way she tweets that resonates with and has an impact on her constituents and later, members of a national audience.

On June 11, 2018, Ocasio-Cortez responded to a New York Daily News article and tweet that said

“BREAKING: In a blistering new report, Feds find NYCHA managers lied for years about squalid conditions; City agrees to pay \$2 billion and appoint a federal monitor <https://nydn.us/2sNLPn0> via @NYDNGregSmith”⁴⁵

She herself wrote,

I have walked hallways in housing projects - first as a child, now as a candidate. I have seen buildings without heat; + holes so big you can see light shine through them. What our leaders have allowed in NYCHA is an utter moral failure rooted in the dehumanization of the poor.⁴⁶

First, it is important to note that this tweet contains a recurring trend in Ocasio-Cortez’s Twitter feed: responding or linking to other tweets, commentary, and/or articles. By responding to existing media, she inserts herself in conversations already being had, and can back up her tweets

⁴⁴ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. May 30, 2018, 5:01AM.
<https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1001795660524457985>.

⁴⁵ New York Daily News. Twitter Post. June 11, 2018, 7:30AM.
<https://twitter.com/NYDailyNews/status/1006181994559164417>.

⁴⁶ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. June 11, 2018, 8:26AM.
<https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1006196058723094528?lang=en>.

with more than just her own 280 characters. While she does have agency in choosing which articles and tweets to amplify by responding to them, her interactions show that she is not agenda-setting alone. Involving other sources and people bolsters her fame and continually demonstrates that she is a participatory social media user, attentive to the public and the news, and while being supported by many who interact with her content. This integrative behavior on Twitter is standard practice for many Millennials and Gen Z users, however, represents a break from many other politicians who only use the 280 characters allotted, namely, President Trump. As a Millennial and experienced social media user, Ocasio-Cortez is a master of the interactive, multi-dimensional, high engagement tweet.

In this tweet in particular, Ocasio-Cortez tackles an issue in her district by calling on her own lived experiences and addressing the underlying root of the issue: classism in a public institution. By holding “our leaders” accountable, Ocasio-Cortez lets her audience know that she is affected too and implies that she will be a different kind of leader in New York—one who supports basic human rights like affordable and livable housing. In this tweet, we can begin to see one of Ocasio-Cortez’s strengths: putting individual events, stories, and issues into the context larger framework of political leadership and morality in politics. This tweet is equally about fixing heaters as it is about restoring dignity to working class, low-income, and impoverished Americans, because they deserve a quality of life that is being withheld from them by our institutions.

Though running attack-ads can be a slippery slope, especially for politicians with a self-decided moral high ground, candidate Ocasio-Cortez expertly acknowledged the shortcomings of her opponent in certain tweets. On June 10, 2018, she tweeted a picture of 5 Joe Crowley mailers, saying:

Does Joe Crowley have me down as an undecided voter? Can my mailer make it to his Virginia home in time to vote for me absentee? Do these count as receiving unsolicited selfies? These questions and more will be answered in the dramatic NY-14 season finale on June 26th. 📺⁴⁷

In this tweet, Ocasio-Cortez pokes fun at her opponent, questioning why he or his team would send campaign materials to her home, while proffering to send her own materials to his home far away from their district. By exposing his duplicity in living outside their district (and not even living in D.C.) with humor, candidate Ocasio-Cortez demonstrates that she has been one of the residents in the Bronx and Queens that is concerned that their Representative is not privy to the issues of their district because he does not live there. As with her other qualms with Rep. Crowley's record (including taking lobbyist and corporate money and planning to get arrested at a Black Lives Matter rally after voting for anti-BLM legislation), this is a very fair attack on her opponent, and does not represent a low blow that could cost her credibility.⁴⁸ Finally, she uses her own humorous voice in comparing the election to a reality TV series, all while plugging the election date to galvanize more voters.

After analyzing her tweets, it became clear to me that Ocasio-Cortez is humble in the sense that she does not like to excessively brag about herself unprompted. Instead, she opts to use two methods of explaining to voters why they should voter for her: retweeting and highlighting her endorsements and responding to individual tweets from constituents. On June 15, 2018, she tweeted a link to New York Post article titled "Queens Democratic club snubs longtime Rep. Joe Crowley." Above the article, she wrote in her own words:

Honored to have to broken through to our first Queens Dem Club endorsement.

⁴⁷ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. June 10, 2018, 8:42AM.
<https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1005837593186009088>.

⁴⁸ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. 2018. Twitter Post. June 13, 2018, 11:03AM.
<https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1006960256583389193?lang=en>.

“Ocasio-Cortez is a better representative of our neighborhood. She’s more progressive. She’s not behind the banks, insurance companies and Wall Street,” said the club chairman.⁴⁹

In this tweet and in other endorsements like this, Ocasio-Cortez shows that she is winning over Democratic organizations that are offering their support in recommending voting for her. This is a helpful tool in campaigning because instead of saying, “vote for me because I say so,” it applies the logic of “a vote for me is like a vote for an organization you already support.” This backing and others like it help candidate Ocasio-Cortez prove the strength of the coalition behind her.

Finally, Ocasio-Cortez used a virtual parallel to door-knocking or canvassing on Twitter, by replying to constituents who tweeted at her. On June 1st, she replied to an undecided voter who asked why she deserves their vote, saying:⁵⁰

1. I’m the only candidate who doesn’t take money from corporations. 2. I believe in Medicare for All, Housing as a right, CJ reform, & tuition-free public college. 3. I’m brave enough to call out corruption in NYC (I also reject luxury developer). 4. I actually live here.
51

In this brief summary of her platform, candidate Ocasio-Cortez responded within half an hour to an actual concerned voter with an answer that includes her strengths as well as her rival’s weaknesses, all in under 280 characters. Though Ocasio-Cortez toggles between using this sort of concise tweet and lengthy, multi-tweet threads, the brevity exhibited here is useful because she made the logic of voting for her appear simple and straight forward, and the summary could help lead the voter to more research if necessary.

⁴⁹ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. June 15, 2018, 6:41PM.
<https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1007800226546102272>.

⁵⁰ Dugnut, Not Actually Bobson. Twitter Post. June 1, 2018, 4:45PM.
<https://twitter.com/PositivelyLissa/status/1002697636099559425>.

⁵¹ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. June 1, 2018, 5:12PM.
<https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1002704460848693252>.

Within the first period studied, only 10% candidate Ocasio-Cortez's tweets were in the second category, relating to issues on the national agenda and actual policy. This can be attributed to her wanting to cater to NY-14 residents before the primary, and also not being a part of the wider, federal government yet. In general, her tweets regarding current events and legislation on national agenda were idealistic and platform based, with the exception of her activism against the Trump administration's family separation policy and others of the federal department of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.). This can be epitomized by her mainly talking about vague, idealistic stances on large scale problems in the nation. On June 5, 2018, she participated in a trending Twitter hashtag challenge, tweeting:

#ImproveAnythingIn3Words: Medicare for All / Federal Jobs Guarantee / Criminal Justice Reform / Green New Deal / Abolish ICE Now⁵²

This tweet and others like it demonstrate the progressive would-be agenda of candidate Ocasio-Cortez, and while many view it as naïve, altruistic, or irrational, policy positions like this have allowed her to accumulate a cult-like following of leftist and progressive individuals who are tired of incrementalism as the only option for change. This tweet and her ideas in it represent the seeds Ocasio-Cortez planted for a future in federal politics, a future that many New York residents and national citizens would like to see. Additionally, this tweet showcases candidate Ocasio-Cortez's engagement with Twitter at large, putting a political twist on a trending hashtag at the time, this time showcasing her progressive platform.

One of the few national current events and policies candidate Ocasio-Cortez weighed in on during her primary campaign was Trump's "zero tolerance" policy that led to family

⁵² Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. June 5, 2018, 6:37PM.
<https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1004175390921908224>.

separations at the border of U.S. and Mexico. As we have come to see through the development of this presidential administration, Congress and the nation is split in viewing these actions as rightful or human rights violations. For Democrats like Ocasio-Cortez, family separation and child detention are irreconcilable, yet still, her opponent did not adopt a strong stance against it. In efforts to add this to the NY-14 primary debate, Ocasio-Cortez came out vehemently against I.C.E. and its actions. During this period, nearly all of her National agenda Category tweets were about this particular issue. On June 19, 2018, Ocasio-Cortez participated in a televised debate with incumbent Joe Crowley, and retweeted footage of it on Twitter, adding:

ICE is operating exactly as designed when it rips screaming children from parents. That's exactly why we must abolish it. We MUST have the moral and political courage to [#abolishICE](#). Weak half-measures do nothing. This is a defining moment of our time - the time to act is now.⁵³

In the video attached and the tweet, candidate Ocasio-Cortez adopts a non-compromising position on family separation. Again, she situates the current event into the larger political landscape in insisting that policies like these are “defining moments” in our history, and our lawmakers need to take the steps necessary to not just stabilize the situation and sweep it under the rug, but to have “moral and political courage.”

Next, candidate Ocasio-Cortez furthered her moral position against I.C.E. and family separation by taking personal action. On June 24, 2018, she tweeted a video of herself standing at the fence of a child detention camp, explaining:

The child detention camps are here - I confronted the border officers myself. Using their names, I told them exactly what they are responsible for. One of them made eye

⁵³ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. June 19, 2018, 1:40PM.
<https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1009174044778926081>.

contact with me. I spoke directly to him. I saw his sense of guilt. We can dismantle this. #AbolishICE⁵⁴

In this tweet, Ocasio-Cortez acknowledges something that is often overlooked by news sources and coverage. She acknowledges humanity in I.C.E. officers, which goes to show that institutions, such as this federal department, and not just untouchable structures that exist through funding by other structures. She demonstrates that there are *real people* that make up these structures, and that touching people's hearts and minds can yield actions that influence the leadership in our institutions. Further, this action aligns with her policy position and adds to her credibility, as she is true to her word and "walks the walk" as well as "talks the talk." This issue was highly covered in the news and her rival had a different position, so it makes sense that Ocasio-Cortez would add it to her platform. However, there were other national events around the same time that she chose to stay silent on, including the retiring of Justice Kennedy and the future Supreme Court nomination, the U.S. quitting the UN Human Rights Council, and President Trump's new tariffs on China.

Finally, 24% of Ocasio-Cortez's tweets during this period were placed into the third category of Extraneous, which is a catch-all category ranging from tweets supporting candidates in other races (particularly women candidates), tweets about her own identity and heritage, tweets addressing requests to post her makeup routine, tweets attacking the political status quo, and tweets acknowledging the need for progressive leadership.

In many tweets in the Extraneous category, Ocasio-Cortez allows herself to present as a person, not just a candidate asking for money and votes. Doing this allows her to be authentic and incorporate her identity into her package, in hopes that it will relate to some and inspire

⁵⁴ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. June 24, 2018, 10:53AM.
<https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1010943953837805569>.

many. On May 18, 2018, Ocasio-Cortez responded to a supporter's tweet (it is placed below on the actual tweet) about her campaign ad video which said,

My favorite thing about this video is your pride in pronouncing your name in a Hispanic accent. It took me a long time to be proud to be a Latina and to not whitewash my own name.⁵⁵

Ocasio-Cortez replied to this post in just about 10 minutes, saying,

When I was a kid, my parents moved me 30mins north of the Bronx so I could go to public school in zip code they felt gave me a chance. It had its ups and downs. As a kid, I was embarrassed to speak my native Spanish in public. At 14, a mentor taught me better. This is why 🇺🇸⁵⁶

In this tweet, Ocasio-Cortez reflects on how her candidacy is shaping young people, particularly Latinx youth, but even other English as a second language (ESL) students, and students who have to travel outside their zip code or community to attend school. She knows the feeling of being an outsider, a minority, of being afraid to speak in her native language, and she is here to show these young kids that they can and should be proud of their heritage, even at times when it feels isolating. Though the matter of identity politics is complex and sometimes polarizing, the impact representation and shared identity have on youth is undeniable. This tweet and others referencing her heritage and the challenges that came with it help galvanize part of her base, young people of color.

Similarly, Ocasio-Cortez consistently supports other women, particularly progressive women of color. Among her favorite co-candidates in the 2018 midterm election were candidate Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, and a few other female candidates who did not end up

⁵⁵ Roldán, Julissa. Twitter Post. May 31, 2018, 12:50PM.
<https://twitter.com/julissalee14/status/1002276188822429696>.

⁵⁶ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. May 31, 2018, 1:01PM.
<https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1002278849223233538>.

winning their elections, including Kerri Harris, Cori Bush, and Amy Vilela.⁵⁷ On June 7, 2018, Ocasio-Cortez met candidate Ayanna Pressley and posted a video of them talking about the “Blue Wave” and the larger movement that is its undercurrent. In the video, the two candidates expound on the movement of women into the forefront of politics that began at the Women’s March after President Trump’s inauguration, but has transitioned into women running for office and women being active voters. Along with the video, Ocasio-Cortez tweeted:

Last night I had the honor of meeting @AyannaPressley and our BFF applications are already in 🤝 Ayanna and I are running similar races: neither taking corporate money, both expanding the electorate & taking down political machines that don’t service their communities.⁵⁸

In the video and in the subsequent tweet, Ocasio-Cortez displays a strong sense of sisterhood and solidarity with candidate Pressley. Women supporting other women is crucial to the success of women in office, as explained by gender studies theories such as Shine theory and amplification theory, and the advancement of gender equity in general. Shine theory, created by feminist writers Ann Friedman and Aminatou Sow, elaborates on the mantra, “I don’t shine if you don’t shine.”⁵⁹ This theory goes on to explain that women should not be pitted against each other or compared, and instead women should team up and help each other, which will in turn, help themselves. By endorsing and acknowledging each other’s’ success rather than try to one-up each other, candidates Ocasio-Cortez and Pressley exhibit the Shine theory, and each is proven to be better off because of it as they both won their elections. Amplification theory piggybacks off

⁵⁷ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. June 23, 2018, 8:30PM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1010726838581301249>.

⁵⁸ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. June 7, 2018, 2:02PM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1004831086671736832>.

⁵⁹ Friedman, Ann, and Aminatou Sow. 2013. “Shine Theory: Why Powerful Women Make the Greatest Friends.” The Cut. May 31, 2013. <https://www.thecut.com/2013/05/shine-theory-how-to-stop-female-competition.html>.

Shine theory and was created by Obama's top female aides during his first term. They created a strategy in meetings to "amplify" key points women made, giving credit to their author, in this way, forcing men to acknowledge their contributions and ensuring they not claim the idea as their own.⁶⁰ By crediting each other for their ideas and accomplishments in their own races, these two candidates can amplify their successes and ensure they are being heard. In moments like these, and in other tweets where she addresses sexism, Ocasio-Cortez proves she is both an inherent and intentional intersectional feminist, in a time where many women on the left—particularly young women of color—demand intersectionality in their feminism. Much of Ocasio-Cortez's cult following can be attributed to her strong feminist values, showing that acting on identity politics is a much more motivating factor for young Americans. It also did not hurt that Ocasio-Cortez used an emoji and the youthful acronym term of endearment, "BFF," or "best friends forever," to describe her friendship with then-candidate Pressley.

In typical Ocasio-Cortez fashion, she uses humor and repurposing pop culture trends as a means to get a larger message across. On June 4, 2018, she retweeted an article from the news source The Intercept that addresses the Democratic Party's support of Sen. Menendez despite his corruption, with the message:

A refusal to attempt to improve the Democratic Party, to inject a new form of politics and new voices, to change what has caused its collapse as a national political force, will ensure more victories by more Trumps and more Republicans for years to come.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Crockett, Emily. 2016. "The Amazing Tool That Women in the White House Used to Fight Gender Bias." Vox. September 14, 2016.
<https://www.vox.com/2016/9/14/12914370/white-house-obama-women-gender-bias-amplification>.

⁶¹ Intercept, The. Twitter Post. June 4, 2018, 7:52AM.
<https://twitter.com/theintercept/status/1003650718484529152>.

In her own words, Ocasio-Cortez responded to this article by co-opting and rewording the oft-used American Serenity Prayer, tweeting:

Lord, grant me the serenity to speak truth to calcified Democrats I cannot change/ The courage to beat incumbents who enable them/ And wisdom to know the difference.⁶²

This tweet falls under the third category, as it addresses the need for progressive leadership, as supporting “calcified Democrats” and “incumbents who enable them,” will only lead to more conservative wins, as The Intercept assessed. Here, Ocasio-Cortez implies that she is among the “new form of politics and new voices” that need to be supported in order to combat Republicans and moderate Democrats gaining ground in Congress. This tweet speaks to her theme of having the courage to change, not by changing the minds of already established Democrats, but rather having the courage to elect new, progressive members.

Candidate Ocasio-Cortez hammers this angle in other tweets, including one retweet of Free Speech TV, a left-leaning news network. Free Speech TV endorsed her, saying:

It's up to young people to bring the Democratic party back to the values of working-class Americans @Ocasio2018 #ProgressivePath18⁶³

Candidate Ocasio-Cortez responded:

To be frank, the old guard won't have to live with the problems they helped create: climate change, housing crises, skyrocketing levels of student loans. We need a healthy and justified sense of urgency now more than ever. Young people will bring it.⁶⁴

This tweet is placed in the Extraneous Category and not the District Category which includes district-related campaigning for two reasons: 1) Free Speech TV is not a New York or

⁶² Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. June 4, 2018, 3:52PM.
<https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1003771411075346432>.

⁶³ TV, Free Speech. Twitter Post. June 14, 2018, 5:42PM.
<https://twitter.com/freespeechtv/status/1007422971168739328>.

⁶⁴ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. June 14, 2018, 5:57PM.
<https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1007426733660934145>.

Bronx/Queens specific news source, and 2) Ocasio-Cortez herself takes a different angle in her response. Instead of putting herself first, she emphasizes the urgency of replacing the “old guard,” and insinuating that “young people,” not specifically herself, will accept this responsibility and catalyze the changes that are needed for the country to deal with these problems and eventually prosper.

Furthering that message of “we not me,” Ocasio-Cortez addresses her hesitancy to join politics, in hopes of resonating with voters who have felt disenfranchised or disenchanted with our political institutions. On May 31, 2018, Ocasio-Cortez linked a Splinter article that claimed she “did the near impossible by making a good ad,” and added:⁶⁵

Above all, I want people to know that you don’t have to sacrifice your values to run for office. For so long it seemed that was the requirement - which is why I never thought politics was for me. Not anymore. We can run as we are. Let the people decide.⁶⁶

Again, while at first this tweet seems suitable under the District Category because it responded to a tweet about campaign materials, I have categorized it under Extraneous for the same reasons as the last tweet. It is important to note that Ocasio-Cortez retrospectively relegates herself in recalling a time where she had low political efficacy herself. In her last line, “I never thought politics was for me. Not anymore. We can run as we are. Let the people decide,” she invites members of the electorate who were not participatory before, and for good reason. This behavior exemplifies a main theme of her campaign—that she is unlike candidates that came before her, and her voters can be unlike voters that came before them.

⁶⁵ Roller, Emma. n.d. “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Does the Near-Impossible By Making a Good Ad.” Splinter. <https://splinternews.com/women-like-me-arent-supposed-to-run-ny-candidate-relea-1826431309>.

⁶⁶ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. May 31, 2018, 6:46AM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1002184429496946689>.

Together, they can be uncompromising and feel like politics can be “for them,” even if it has not been previously.

Analyzing the different categories of tweets is important to understanding Ocasio-Cortez’s online fame, which her influence in Congress rests on. Overall, the first period of logged tweets shows us a lot about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s platform, campaign style, beliefs, and personality—all factors that combine and account for her skyrocketing in American politics. On June 26th, Ocasio-Cortez defeated incumbent Crowley by a wide margin, winning over 57% of the vote.⁶⁷ She won over her constituents from the Bronx and Queens with her emphasis on their district’s issues, her bold national agenda, and personal messages that were inspirational to many. On June 2, 2018, she tweeted that her account had 30.5 thousand followers on Twitter, surpassing her rival, incumbent Rep. Crowley.⁶⁸ She currently has over 4 million followers, showing exponential growth in her popularity and fame on social media.⁶⁹ Ocasio-Cortez has used this fame and translated it into agenda setting in Congress.

While in the first period analyzed, Ocasio-Cortez shied away from many current events in the national political landscape, and mostly talked about national issues in terms of idealistic bullet points as a part of her platform. Once in office, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez has begun to use her Twitter fame and celebrity online as leverage in Congress for agenda setting. She tweets over 1.5x more now that she is in office, and the tweets themselves are

⁶⁷ Goldmacher, Shane, and Jonathan Martin. 2018. “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Defeats Joseph Crowley in Major Democratic House Upset.” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2018, sec. New York. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/26/nyregion/joseph-crowley-ocasio-cortez-democratic-primary.html>.

⁶⁸ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. June 2, 2018, 1:43PM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1003014384321466368>.

⁶⁹ @AOC. Twitter.

more substantive, as there are less occasions where she has to thank campaign organizers and volunteers, even though that is/was important. Because of her wide following outside her district, she now writes and appeals to a national constituency. Though the most obvious example is her Green New Deal, a House Resolution co-sponsored by Rep. Markey, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez also agenda sets in other ways, particularly in exemplifying a new precedent of transparency, activism, and accountability that many present lawmakers do not hold a candle to.

Second Period Analysis: February 4 – March 2, 2019

The next period of tweets logged and analyzed accounts for Rep. Ocasio-Cortez's second month in office. By this time, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez had more Twitter followers than all the other incoming freshmen Democrats combined.⁷⁰ By her swearing in, a month before this period, she had 2.44 million followers and held a special Twitter lesson for Congressional Democrats in her first week in office.⁷¹ Now, equipped with a new handle, @AOC (instead of her former account handle, @Ocasio2018) and with her Twitter prowess recognized and properly credited, she began wielding even more influence in the national conversation and the Congressional legislative agenda.

Staying true to her roots, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is careful to not leave behind her own district in her whirlwind fame. Fifteen percent of her tweets during this time fall under the District

⁷⁰ EST, Chantal Da Silva On 12/10/18 at 5:04 AM. 2018. "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Has as Many Twitter Followers as Her Democratic Freshman Peers Combined." Newsweek. December 10, 2018. <https://www.newsweek.com/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-has-many-twitter-followers-incoming-60-democratic-1251551>.

⁷¹ "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Twitter Lesson for House Democrats." 2019. ABC News. January 17, 2019. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/alexandria-ocasio-cortezs-twitter-lesson-house-democrats/story?id=60443727>.

Category, a noteworthy drop proportionally to the first period studied, where this category represented 60% of her tweets. However, during this second period, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez takes examples and events from her home district and applies them to the rest of the country. In 2018 and the early months of 2019, Amazon was looking for a new city to add a headquarters office and was in talks with New York City. However, considering the gentrification and rent pricing changes that come with tech entering cities, many residents and organizing groups challenged Amazon's arrival.

In response to the pushback, Amazon decided to change its decision. On February 14, 2019, New York Time's Reporter J. David Goodman tweeted,

AMAZON CANCELS PLAN TO COME TO NEW YORK "After much thought and deliberation, we've decided not to move forward with our plans to build a headquarters for Amazon in Long Island City, Queens" - Amazon spokeswoman Jodi Seth⁷²

to which Rep. Ocasio-Cortez responded,

Anything is possible: today was the day a group of dedicated, everyday New Yorkers & their neighbors defeated Amazon's corporate greed, its worker exploitation, and the power of the richest man in the world.⁷³

Even though Rep. Ocasio-Cortez was an outspoken advocate against Amazon's construction, she credited the community and organizers who put pressure on Amazon to move. By centering their success and crediting their contributions, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez uses this as a teaching moment, to signify that other citizens like the residents in New York can have an impact on stopping corporate greed.

⁷² Goodman, J. David. Twitter Post. February 14, 2019, 8:43AM.

<https://twitter.com/jdavidgoodman/status/1096087641953632258>.

⁷³ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 14, 2019, 10:42AM.

<https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1096117499492478977>.

In participation in the conversation over the backlash of stopping the move, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez responded to a tweet from New York reporter Josefa Valesquez, in which she added a video of Ocasio-Cortez explaining why New Yorkers should choose for themselves. That tweet and video read:

We need to make sure that we're not imposing things on communities. But that communities have the ability to determine for themselves what they'd like to bring in," [@AOC](#) says of Amazon.⁷⁴

Replying to her own quote in Valesquez's tweet, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez herself tweeted on March 5, 2019:

As it should always be, this is about putting impacted communities first, centering their concerns, and ensuring that they have real say in a just, open process that lets the people whose lives will change ask real questions, get real answers, and have a seat at the table.⁷⁵

While in the retweeted tweet and video by Valesquez, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez addresses the specific community in New York, albeit outside her own district, in her own tweet, she extends the lesson learned to other communities that may be dealing with similar circumstances. By tying the New York specific event into the greater moral problem—corporations ignoring the needs and desires of the communities they move into—Rep. Ocasio-Cortez shows she is capable of leading national issues, given the experience she has in her own city.

On March 1, 2019, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez used an example from her work for her own district to challenge other politicians and the voters that elect them. She tweeted,

Spending a few hours today doing calltime. But instead of calling donors, I'm calling constituents to personally follow up on casework they've brought to our office, and

⁷⁴ Velasquez, Josefa. Twitter post. March 4, 2019, 8:58 AM.
https://twitter.com/J_Velasquez/status/1102614392749854720.

⁷⁵ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. March 5, 2019, 1:51 PM.
<https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1103050358518099968>.

give them progress updates myself. Getting big money out of politics means your Reps can do more of this.⁷⁶

In this tweet, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez proclaims that she does some of her own district's casework, personally contacting her constituents to handle their problems. This is beneficial to only her district, which is why this is a District Category tweet. However, she then lets her national audience in on the secret to accomplishing this—she does not spend any or all of her time in office contacting donors. Many politicians who depend on Political Action Committee (PAC), corporate, lobbyist, or industry money in donations are beholden to their interests later while creating and voting on legislation. Again, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez extends a lesson she is teaching to the wider national electorate, showing them that it is possible to have a Representative or any other elected official who can focus on them, not just donors. Hopefully, this incentivizes others nation-wide to put pressure on their elected officials to do more casework in their community.

Finally, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez also tweets about her actions when she is physically in her community. On February 5, 2019, Ocasio-Cortez visited a school her district to talk with students. She tweeted, twice:

Yesterday I visited a school assembly w/ teens in Queens. One of them asked, "What can WE do to combat climate change?" 2 recs: - Skip disposable razors+switch to safety razors - Give your tummy a break! Skip meat/dairy for a meal (easiest is bfast, I do banana & peanut butter)⁷⁷

My other tips: - Start incorporating thrift, consignment & second-hand clothes in your wardrobe (host a clothing swap w/ friends for a no-spend option) - Walk, bike, & use

⁷⁶ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. March 1, 2019, 12:00PM.
<https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1101573021020631041>.

⁷⁷ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 5, 2019, 8:09AM.
<https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1092817526399078400>.

public transit more often - Bring your own bag/coffee mug. It's okay if you forget, 1x/week is still a win⁷⁸

In this short thread, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez shows that part of her job is to actually *be* in her district and speak with her youngest constituents about topics that are important to them and to the world. When asked about what everyone can do personally to combat climate change, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez listed some examples that all of us can do, regardless of where we live. In this example, Ocasio-Cortez takes a district-oriented situation—visiting a school—and applies a national lesson—personal mitigation of our contribution to climate change.

In the second period, around 40% of her tweets were in the second category or pertaining to the national agenda. To be fair, her job now includes being a part of the national legislative agenda, and thus, certain tweets are responses to her duties on the job, such as hearings, committee meetings, and so on. However, what is interesting about this category in this period is that she still manages to bleed into the Extraneous Category, creating overarching lessons and explaining moral positions while responding to specific national legislation. Finally, this period also featured Rep. Ocasio-Cortez's own piece of legislation, the Green New Deal, a House resolution co-sponsored by Rep. Markey. This is an exceptional example, as many freshmen in Congress do not propose and attain agenda-setting legislation, however, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez's credibility and visibility allowed her to do so. Very quickly, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez has established herself as a national leader, which may be partially credited to this shift in her media of addressing national issues.

Because one of her committee placements is the Financial Services Committee, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez spends a lot of time in committee and subcommittee meetings. Even though these

⁷⁸ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 5, 2019, 8:14AM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1092818634500648960>.

meetings are not often in the interest of the greater public, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez has found a way for her lines of questioning during hearings to go viral on multiple occasions, on topics ranging from campaign finance, corruption and money in politics, the Green New Deal, the Michael Cohen hearing, and more. In one specific Financial Services subcommittee meeting, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez asked a marijuana entrepreneur if marijuana legalization is “compounding the racial wealth gap,” as heard in a video tweeted out by the Twitter account of Drug Policy Alliance, a New York City-based nonprofit that seeks to end the War on Drugs. That tweet with attached video read:

Much appreciation to [@AOC](#) for speaking truth to power. We must legalize marijuana in a way that recognizes & repairs the disastrous, disproportionate harms of the drug war & mass criminalization on people of color. [#MarijuanaJustice](#) [#NoMoreDrugWar](#)⁷⁹

On February 15, 2019, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez herself, replied:

You can't separate marijuana legalization from the injustices of the War on Drugs. If you do, those who profit from private prisons can get another payday w/ marijuana. \$ is a justice issue. Communities decimated by mass incarceration need to see investments w/ legalization.⁸⁰

In this case, she was present at the subcommittee hearing because her job now called for her to do that, so it makes sense that she tweets like this now that she is in office, as opposed to the period while she was still campaigning. However, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez took it upon herself to link the national policy issue into the larger political problem of racial justice, again, demonstrating that she can be a leader on these issues in a national context. Even though many

⁷⁹ Alliance, Drug Policy. Twitter Post. February 15, 2019, 11:45AM.
<https://twitter.com/DrugPolicyOrg/status/1096495811729543173>.

⁸⁰ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 15, 2019, 12:52PM.
<https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1096512666649141248>.

Americans would not listen to subcommittee meetings, when Rep. Ocasio-Cortez frames them into the systemic problems that plague the country, many stop to listen.

Finally, from this second period studied emerged Rep. Ocasio-Cortez’s Green New Deal, a House Resolution (a non-binding legislation that needs no Presidential approval to pass) that seeks to acknowledge the urgent need to slow the effects of climate change while also providing services and infrastructure through “green” jobs.⁸¹ Named after President Roosevelt’s New Deal of the 1930s, the Green New Deal is an aspirational piece of legislation that serves a greater purpose in agenda setting, forcing Congress to reckon with what our country can and should do regarding climate change—acknowledging it and transitioning to renewable energy by 2030.⁸² This is particularly noteworthy considering the country has never taken federal action on climate change (some places acknowledge it on a state-by-state basis), and because it was proposed by a freshman legislator. The visibility and discussion of the Green New Deal is a direct testament to Rep. Ocasio-Cortez’s power and influence.

In her inaugural address to her community at a school in the Bronx, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez explained her plans for the Green New Deal. A tweet from the NBC Latino account which announced the event posted:

Ocasio-Cortez returns to her Bronx neighborhood for her inaugural address By [@Nicolemarie_A](#) [@PhilMcCausland](#) With [@AOC](#) [@RepAOC](#)⁸³

Rep. Ocasio-Cortez herself responded,

⁸¹ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. 2019. “Text - H.Res.109 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Recognizing the Duty of the Federal Government to Create a Green New Deal.” Webpage. February 12, 2019. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Latino, N. B. C. Twitter Post. February 16, 2019, 12:56PM. <https://twitter.com/NBCLatino/status/1096875880801095680>.

The Green New Deal belongs to indigenous communities, it belongs to the residents of Flint, it belongs to Puerto Rico, it belongs to the victims of wildfires.⁸⁴

Here, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez took an event that was held in her district to explain what is happening nation-wide and who her legislation will specifically not ignore. This tweet was not placed in the District Category even though it did occur in her district because in her own words, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez talked about wider communities affected, not specifically the Bronx. This tweet goes even further than many of her other tweets that put her own district's issues in a national context, because she chooses to name-drop communities that face environmental racism, injustice, and natural disasters—Flint, Michigan's water crisis, indigenous communities like the Sioux tribe defending its land from the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, Puerto Ricans suffering in the aftermath of devastating hurricanes, and victims of wildfires that have been particularly disastrous in California. Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is one of few lawmakers not only showing the connections between climate change, weather patterns, structural racism, and territorial nationality, but actually putting forward a policy that puts first communities that are impacted heaviest yet are routinely overlooked by Congress.

In her defense of the Green New Deal, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez posted a multi-tweet thread on February 10, 2019. She tweeted sequentially, starting with linking a tweet from The Economist which contains an article about the advantages of the Green New Deal:

The Green New Deal bundles together the issues of climate change and economic inequality⁸⁵

“Climate change is not a market glitch to be fixed through pricing... but part of a dire social crisis.” The GND Resolution's purpose is to *define the scope* of a climate

⁸⁴ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 16, 2019, 1:52PM.
<https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1096890000912855042>.

⁸⁵ Economist, The. Twitter Post. February 10, 2019, 4:42AM.
<https://twitter.com/TheEconomist/status/1094577338312941568>.

solution. Now, from investing into battery tech to fixing water pipes, we can draft projects in the plan.⁸⁶

For far too long, ideas like a carbon tax or cap-and-trade were touted as the premier solutions to climate change. While those things could be *part* of a solution, the GND resolution says they are inadequate as the whole answer. The pipes in Flint weren't a "market failure."⁸⁷

The pipes in Flint weren't a market failure, they were a social failure. It was a failure to see the people in Flint as important as the WH. Those decisions were predicated on a legacy of racism + dehumanization of the poor. The enviro issue of water is how that was expressed.⁸⁸

And part of what the #GreenNewDeal says, at last, is that Flint wasn't an accident. The folks dying in West Virginia aren't an accident. The Bronx having one of the highest child asthma rates isn't an accident. It's a structural failure to care, & treat these communities fairly.⁸⁹

Finally, the reason we scope out with a resolution is bc I am not here to say that only one member of Congress will solve a global crisis. Think of the GND Res as a "Request for Proposals." We've defined the scope and where we want to go. Now let's assess + collab on projects.⁹⁰

This 6-tweet thread by Rep. Ocasio-Cortez summarizes the need for the Green New Deal and the need for our country and its institutions to change our policy prescriptions. These tweets were coded under the National agenda Category because they feature actual legislation. However, this thread epitomizes Rep. Ocasio-Cortez nuance and skill on Twitter by rooting events and policy in systemic, structural oppression. Like the last tweet, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez shows the connections between racism and environmental justice. She explains that our past actions cannot be written

⁸⁶ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 10, 2019, 7:43AM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1094622889054212096>.

⁸⁷ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post February 10, 2019, 7:47AM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1094623850141224962>.

⁸⁸ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 10, 2019, 7:55AM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1094625873083465729>.

⁸⁹ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 10, 2019, 7:58AM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1094626691794812928>.

⁹⁰ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 10, 2019, 8:05AM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1094628470100017154>.

off as “market failures,” which has served as a way to remove human accountability from issues that should be looked at as “*social* failures.” While in the first period, candidate Ocasio-Cortez would tweet vague but aspirational platform positions, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is ready to delve into policy and create real legislation that both rings true to her idealism while having pragmatic and tangible next steps. Finally, this thread again shows us Rep. Ocasio’s influence in agenda setting, as well as her expertise in tying the national legislation into larger problems, like climate change and social justice. Threads like this help her turn often boring policy related National agenda tweets into the excitement of inspirational messages and moral outcries within the Extraneous Category.

The final category analyzed in the second period is the Extraneous Category, which represents 43% of her tweets during this month, making it the plurality slightly above the National agenda Category. Trends within this category remain constant throughout both periods—Rep. Ocasio-Cortez maintains the same unapologetic progressive rhetoric, calls out opponents from the GOP and Democratic establishment, shows pride of her Puerto Rican and Latina heritage, while being an intersectional feminist icon combatting sexism and uplifting other women. Her input in this category is likely what makes liberals love her and conservatives hate her. Either way, she became famous on Twitter, and the plurality of her tweets are in this category, warranting analysis and discussion.

Because Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is tech savvy and engages with other content on Twitter rather than just blasting her own tweets, she is constantly replying to news articles and user tweets. One time on February 3, 2019, Rep. Ocasio Cortez responded to a random Bloomberg tweet and attached article that was headlined:

Yacht owners with priceless art need to beware of flying champagne corks.⁹¹

In response to this random article, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez replied,

People are using GoFundMe to beg for insulin while this is happening in the same time and place. 📌 It's no wonder logical, compassionate ideas are called "radical" when the present is dystopian. We're living in the upside-down, asking for the rightside-up.⁹²

In this tweet, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez juxtaposes the lavish, exorbitant wealth documented by Bloomberg with the struggle of reality for many Americans who have a hard time paying for an overly expensive medical resource that keeps them alive. She sees the present as "dystopian," and "the upside-down"—a reference to *Stranger Things*, a streaming-based Netflix show popular among Gen Z and Millennials, demonstrating her fluidity in digital native language and references. She laments the new understanding of "radical," a word many people call her, and rationalizes how what she does only *seems* radical because the norm is "upside-down." This type of tweet works well for her, as she uses juxtaposition, pop culture references, and righteous indignation to reject the normalization of the status quo.

Other times Rep. Ocasio-Cortez finds random tweets on Twitter and makes them go viral while breathing new life into them. On February 23, 2019, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez responded to a random user, Erin Glass', tweet that said:

what if public libraries were open late every night and we could engage in public life there instead of having to choose between drinking at the bar and domestic isolation⁹³

Though this tweet was not directed at her, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez retweeted it and added:

⁹¹ Bloomberg. Twitter Post. February 3, 2019, 8:10AM.

<https://twitter.com/business/status/1092092881521856514>.

⁹² Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 3, 2019, 10:44AM.

<https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1092131620306518022>.

⁹³ glass, erin. Twitter Post. February 23, 2019, 2:02PM.

<https://twitter.com/erinroseglass/status/1099429250979979265>.

What I love about this tweet is that it embodies something we desperately need right now: public imagination. When we focus on imagining and debating new possibilities of what we want to accomplish, instead of relentlessly fixating on limitations, we build the will to do more.⁹⁴

This tweet is typical of the Extraneous Category tweets because it is not regarding a specific piece of legislation but rather an idea that can be used as a springboard. Rep. Ocasio-Cortez has shown that being idealistic can be the most pragmatic thing to do in order to get buy-in. By highlighting this focus on “imagining and debating new possibilities” instead of “fixating on limitations,” Rep. Ocasio-Cortez shows her preferred method of policy brainstorming and rewards the kind of attitude and ideas that should shape the country’s future.

While that tweet celebrated a Twitter user’s idea, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez constantly rewards and uplifts women who act on behalf of others. Though the State of the Union was delayed because of the government shutdown, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez still made sure to give credit to Ana Maria Archila, the woman who confronted Sen. Jeff Flake before the Senate Judiciary Meeting for the hearing and confirmation of Justice Brett Kavanaugh, the accused sexual assailant. Awhile before, in September, Make the Road Action, an immigrant and people of color oriented non-profit and grassroots organization, tweeted an introduction to Ana Maria Archila on the day she confronted Sen. Jeff Flake about how he could vote to support survivors. Then in February, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez revived the tweet, which read:

NOW: [@AnaMariaArchil2](#) confronts [@JeffFlake](#) before Senate Judiciary Committee. Shares her story of sexual assault and demands an explanation on his statement saying he will vote to confirm Kavanaugh. He refuses to answer. [#StopKavanaugh](#) [@CPDAction](#) [@BeAHeroTeam](#)⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. 2019. Twitter Post. March 1, 2019, 4:20PM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1101638447750676482>.

⁹⁵ Action, Make the Road. Twitter Post. September 28, 2018, 6:47AM. <https://twitter.com/MaketheRoadAct/status/1045671233650667520>.

While re-introducing Ana Maria Archila to give her context, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez wrote:

This [@AnaMariaArchil2](#), the NY-14 shero that will be accompanying me to the State of the Union tomorrow. She wasn't planning on leaping into that elevator ahead of the Kavanaugh vote, but after hearing the stories of survivors across the country, she went in. A defining moment.⁹⁶

This action is another example of Rep. Ocasio-Cortez rewarding a feminist “shero” for speaking on behalf of survivors, women, and other victims of sexual assault and rape everywhere. Again, she links an article to contextualize her own message and show that she is not alone in her gratitude for Ana Marila Archila and support of sexual assault survivors. By bringing her to the State of the Union address, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez reminds the other lawmakers and the President himself that the disrespect to survivors implicated in the Kavanaugh hearing and confirmation will not be forgotten, and that even average citizens can demonstrate political courage.

In addition to supporting other women heroes, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is unafraid to give herself the credit she deserves. After the Finance Committee hearing where Rep. Ocasio-Cortez exposed the corruption in campaign finance, she retweeted and responded to a tweet from an account praising her performance and giving reason for it. That tweet from user Mitra Kalita reads:

Seeing the words “prepared” and “authentic” to describe [@AOC](#), often with surprise that she’s made it so far. This is the superpower of women of color: to prep more than everyone else, read the room, yet stay true to yourself because the alternative ain’t worth it. Just guessing.⁹⁷

In her own words, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez added,

People think it’s a joke when folks say we have to work 2x as hard for the same seat. Whether you believe it or not, the upside is when we do get here, we’re used to being

⁹⁶ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 4, 2019, 10:52AM.
<https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1092496062156341248>.

⁹⁷ Kalita, S. Mitra. Twitter Post. February 27, 2019, 8:23PM.
<https://twitter.com/mitrakalita/status/1100974788493959168>.

held to a diff bar. To being doubted. To getting new hoops thrown @ us last min. So we know how to perform.⁹⁸

In this tweet, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez acknowledges the challenges, adversity, and strength of herself, and other women of color. In this first tweet from Mitra Kalita, the user explains feeling annoyed that news recounts of the hearing were surprised to describe Rep. Ocasio-Cortez as “prepared” and “authentic,” while other women of color know how intelligent, poised, prepared she must be to have made it this far at all. In her own tweet, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez shares that she knows what it is like to be held to a different bar and to be doubted, as many have done to her in her months since campaigning and winning her seat in Congress. This tweet and others like it are well received, particularly by women of color that feel like their challenges and resilience are not only being seen and recognized, but *experienced* by an elected official, especially one who is not afraid to call attention to it in public.

Overall, this Extraneous Category is where her personality really shines through and has consistently differentiated her from her peers. Her tweets in this category are engaging, interactive, reflective, feminist, personal, and inspirational. Her audience knows they can catch her attention with more than just policy talk, because she acts like a person as well as a political figurehead. However, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has always been like this, which is a testament to her authenticity. Her *growth* on the other hand, can be seen in the quantitative and qualitative evidence of the National agenda Category, as she contributes to more conversations within the national political landscape and even agenda sets legislation in the second period studied. After reviewing her Twitter feed in my analysis, I have concluded that her strength is not any of the

⁹⁸ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter Post. February 28, 2019, 5:37AM. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1101114273286230017>.

categories individually, but her ability to navigate the areas between them, blending district, national, and aspirational messages in both succinct tweets and nuanced threads.

Conclusions

My thesis explored Rep. Ocasio-Cortez's Twitter presence, a platform she has turned into a foundational part of her job and personal brand. In general, Ocasio-Cortez employs a digital strategy that could only come from years of personal experience with social media. She consistently replies to constituent tweets, news articles, and Twitter trends. She weaves her inputs into pre-existing conversations, integrating videos and photos, sneaking in elements humor, and using emojis and pop culture references that land with her audience. Rep. Ocasio-Cortez has a distinct tone and voice on Twitter, and it is clear that she writes her own tweets, something that is not always a given for politicians.

In her first period of District oriented tweets, candidate Ocasio-Cortez demonstrated first hand experiences in the Bronx that resonated with her community. During this time before her primary, she relied on activists, organizers, and running a campaign by the people and for the people. I have explored tweets where she explained that the reason the New York City Housing Agency is falling short at fixing holes and heaters is because of the dehumanization of the poor. She called out opponent Joe Crowley for not even living in their district. She gave an under-280 character summary of why an undecided voter should choose her. She spoke with Bronx students about personally slowing climate change. From the start, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez connected current events and policy and government failures to the large, oppressive systems that enable them. Finally, in the second period studied, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez's District oriented tweets showed her extending the lessons learned in her district to communities across the country facing similar

issues. Even while talking about New York, she widened her audience, letting other Americans know that they have the power to make the change they want to see, such as driving out corporations like Amazon that could gentrify neighborhoods. She implored citizens in districts across the country to elect politicians who will spend time doing constituent casework, not constant fundraising that leaves them beholden to special interests later.

The main goal of my thesis was to show quantitative evidence and qualitative analysis of Rep. Ocasio-Cortez's transition to direct engagement in national agenda conversations and agenda setting. In the first period studied before her primary, she engaged with national issues largely in theory and vocalized popular dissent over the Trump administration's actions at the border and admonished I.C.E., which are near-universal, uncontentious stances from a Democrat. During the second period studied, she began her federal responsibilities by attending hearings and used those opportunities to draw attention to injustices in marijuana legalization, campaign finance, and the handling of certain environmental crises such as Flint. She took on unpopular positions within her own party, showing her bold and uncompromising tactics that represent a departure from standard freshmen decorum. She brought climate change mitigation and climate justice into the forefront of the national conversation, creating the Green New Deal that has not even passed yet still amassed press, endorsements, and acknowledgement from both parties and presidential candidates. These accomplishments prove her agenda setting merits, as her actions in Congress routinely go viral, are talked about on every major news source, and have landed her a landmark piece of legislation on a topic that has never been addressed at the Federal Level.

Her personality shines through in the Extraneous category tweets during both time periods. She routinely references her Puerto Rican roots, supports other women of color, and rewards acts of civilian political courage. She exposes the sexism she faces, rebukes wealth

disparities, and masterfully explains the need for truly progressive leadership in government. People love her because she is personable, inspirational, and forthright. Her personality is part of her package, and she makes it clear that her identity is not going to be de-coupled from her politics. This resonates with young Americans who are increasingly cognizant of how their identity, presentation, and traumas affect their treatment in this country. Her following and base know that she will fight for their equity because she experiences and/or recognizes their hardships. I believe her inputs in this category demonstrate that she is an American citizen before she is a politician, and her followers can trust that they have a political “outsider” on the inside.

Though this is not reflected in my data as it was limited to not overlap in counting, a strength of hers lies in connecting these different categories. Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is able to captivate and engage with her following in multi-tweet threads that acknowledge a surface problem and explain in a simultaneously succinct and nuanced way that acknowledges the power structures that engender it. In an interview with the Intercept at South by Southwest Festival (SXSW) on March 9, 2019, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez explains this strategy as “foregrounding the moral question.”⁹⁹ While many people may not have policy prescriptions for their problems or fluency in political jargon required to weigh-in, everyone has values and morals that they are true to. When Rep. Ocasio-Cortez brings out the real moral questions that arise from policy discussions and current events, she taps into the hearts of Americans that feel disenfranchised and unrepresented by their own government. She lets people know that everyone has a place in politics because everyone has their own experiences in this country and morals they live by.

⁹⁹ “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the New Left.” *The Intercept* (blog). March 9, 2019. <https://theintercept.com/2019/03/09/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-aoc-sxsw/>.

In this fashion, freshman Rep. Ocasio-Cortez began voicing her positions even though they were considered to be radical and divisive against the favored incrementalist approach of the Democratic Party. This behavior is new territory for House freshmen, but Rep. Ocasio-Cortez is not alone. On April 14, 2019, House Speaker Pelosi went on CBS 60 Minutes and was prompted about the “left wing” of the Democratic Party. Before correspondent Lesley Stahl could even finish her question, Speaker Pelosi interrupted, saying, “that’s like 5 people.”¹⁰⁰ Seconds later, Speaker Pelosi claimed to be a progressive herself, without repenting for her previous statement that downplays the groundswell of the party shifting left. Even though Speaker Pelosi and the Democratic establishment believe the leftist wing of the party to be a small minority, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez and her alliance with “like 5 people” has grown traction as a movement with millions of Americans, particularly in the Millennial and Gen Z generations. I believe it is meaningful that 4 million people follow Rep. Ocasio-Cortez on Twitter because her power is derived directly from the American public in the present, not because of structural power that comes from an institution that is historically elitist and has excluded and oppressed marginalized identities.

Whether or not the Democratic establishment agrees with the left wing of the party, it is important to acknowledge the growth and mobilization that Rep. Ocasio-Cortez and her fellow Democratic freshman have brought out. Even during the few months of my thesis writing process in 2019, I have had to adjust AOC’s Twitter following number by almost 2 million. As our population ages, Millennials will soon become the plurality of Americans, and Democratic Millennials and Gen Zs will be the future of the party and the country. I hope that over time, a

¹⁰⁰ “Watch Nancy Pelosi Confront AOC: Your Caucus Is ‘like 5 People.’” n.d. MSNBC.Com. Accessed April 29, 2019. <https://www.msnbc.com/the-beat-with-ari/watch/watch-nancy-pelosi-confront-aoc-your-caucus-is-like-5-people-1494358595691>.

paradigm shift will occur, with more and more “everyday Americans” running and holding elected office, as newly invigorated and enfranchised voters decisively take back governance of their communities from the political elite. Thus, a new type of *political insider* can emerge, with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as the archetype. I feel lucky to be alive at the same time as AOC, and I eagerly await to see the impact of her and her peers’ careers as they unfold and leave their mark on American history.

My hope is that this research is expounded on, providing further evidence of the integral role social media can play in connecting politicians to the people. Social media has the power to bolster the fame and influence politicians wield because following someone online is just a mechanism of the public self-selecting its leaders. While not every follow is indicative of or equal to a vote in a free and fair democratic election, I think that political social media exists as a foil to actual democratic elections, even if only as far as agenda setting. I believe that Rep. Ocasio-Cortez’s popularity on Twitter has allowed her to agenda set in Congress, as she has amassed a large, vocal, national constituency that is too large to ignore. Though agenda setting is not the endgame of any politician, that would hopefully be successful policy implementation, it is surely a step in the right direction. Agenda setting determines whose problems will be addressed, whose needs are catered to, and who is deemed important in this country. By centering marginalized communities and everyday Americans, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the part of the electorate that follow her symbiotically choose each other, strengthening efficacy in government and increasing the likelihood of creating transformative, systemic change. Her agenda is their agenda, and demands attention—now.

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