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Beating Trump in 2020

Why Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is not the US Democrats' saviour

Read our counterpoint to this commentary here.

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When your ship is sinking, any life preserver looks attractive. And so, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who last month surprised almost everyone by winning the Democratic Primary in New York's 14th congressional district against incumbent Joseph Crowley, is being upheld by some progressives as the future of the Democratic Party.

She may well be, but if that's the case, I hope Democrats are enjoying Trump's first term, because another one is on its way.

Ocasio-Cortez ran on a mostly-sensible platform. American police departments should be de-militarised; for-profit prisons should be abolished; campaign financing rules should be reformed. Other planks would be nice to have but are unrealistic: not even Canada's public health care system covers medicine, vision and dental. And some things Ocasio-Cortez purports to advocate for are simply daft. There's no way America could move to a 100 per cent renewable energy system by 2035 without bankrupting itself.

These sort of policies, taken together, qualify as far-left in America of 2018. But what the heck, some Democrats say, if Hillary Clinton's reheated centrism flopped in 2016, let's give it a shot. Ocasio-Cortez, after all, is exciting. She's passionate. She inspires young people.

Ocasio-Cortez does not reflect America's mainstream

But Democrats didn't lose in 2016 because Clinton was too centrist. They lost, in large part, because voters found her personally unpalatable. Yes, through no fault of her own, she was saddled with baggage from her

husband. And yes, Donald Trump tapped into something dark and menacing within America. But Clinton would not have won on Ocasio-Cortez's platform.

Ocasio-Cortez deserved to win — in New York. Her opponent Crowley embodied lazy entitlement. He couldn't be bothered to show up to at least two debates. Ocasio-Cortez says her team knocked on a lot of doors that Democratic candidates typically passed over. That's likely true. Accurate, also, was Trump's assessment that Crowley 'got his ass kicked by a young woman who had a lot of energy.'

But there's a difference between a well-deserved ass-kicking and wake-up call, and overhauling a party's identity and policy foundations.

Ocasio-Cortez does not reflect the mainstream of the Democratic Party, much less so of America. It's true that good politicians can move the centre toward them. But politics is also the art of the possible, and a Democratic Party modelled on people like Ocasio-Cortez would have little chance of success in 2020.

This won't quell the enthusiasm of her most ardent new fans. But it does make one wonder what so many social democrats have against winning.

Social democrats shouldn't take voters for granted

Much of the British Labour Party's base never forgave Tony Blair his three consecutive majority victories. Given the chance in 2010 to choose between David Miliband, a man who would broadly follow Blair's 'New Labour' middle path, and his more left-wing brother, Ed Miliband, the party backed Ed and lost an election they should have won. Then, because that wasn't self-destructive enough, the party picked for his replacement Jeremy Corbyn, a man who has earned thousands of dollars appearing on an Iranian state propaganda network.

In Canada, the New Democratic Party turned its back on leader Thomas Mulcair, the most effective parliamentary debater then in the House of Commons, after he led the party to its second-highest number of seats ever in the 2015 federal election. Polls put the NDP in the lead when the campaign began. But they were swept away by the same wave that carried Liberal Justin Trudeau into office, and Mulcair was blamed for running on a too-moderate platform.

The NDP then chose as its leader Jagmeet Singh, another charismatic

leftist populist who excites his band of youthful supporters and nobody else. The party is now careening toward electoral obliteration in the 2019 federal election.

'Oh, but Bernie Sanders,' I hear you say, 'he could have beaten Trump.'

Maybe. But so might virtually anyone who, unlike Hilary Clinton, didn't seem to project an assumption that she was owed the presidency.

The lesson from the 2016 presidential election, and from Ocasio-Cortez's more recent success, isn't that social democrats should swing hard to the left, or unduly elevate untested populists, but that they shouldn't take voters for granted. That includes recognising that voters will recognise and reject a party whose re-invention is driven by desperation and a desire for shortcuts to victory.



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