

The New Face of Congress **B1+** **B2**



Corey Torpie

“Women like me aren’t supposed to run for office.” That was the opening line in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign video to become a candidate for U.S. Congress. Like many other women in the 2018 midterm elections, 29-year-old Ocasio-Cortez proved such assumptions wrong. On 6 November, she became the youngest woman ever elected to the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.

By “women like me”, Ocasio-Cortez meant young, working-class, Hispanic, with Puerto-Rican origins. She could also have simply meant a woman: although the Democratic Party, to which she belongs, fields more female candidates than its Republican rival, women are still in a minority in Congress. Before the midterms, there were 20.2 per cent women. When the new Congress starts sitting in January 2019, there will be 23%.

Ordinary People vs the Political Establishment

Ocasio-Cortez’s video wasn’t for her campaign to become the Representative for New York’s 14th District. It was for the campaign in the Democratic primary in June, in which she opposed Joe Crowley, the district’s Representative for 20 years.



High five! Meeting voters on the streets.

Corey Torpie

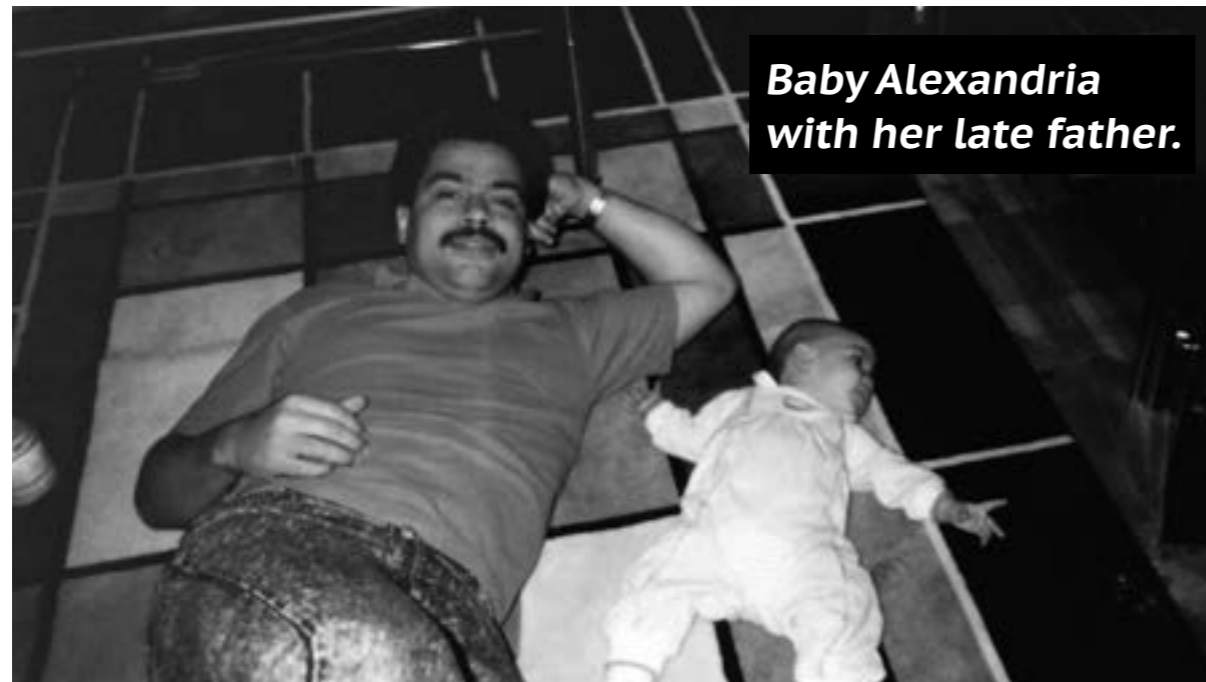
Ocasio-Cortez campaigned tirelessly on the streets of the Bronx.



Corey Torpie

It was a David and Goliath battle. Crowley had the Democratic machine behind him, a proven track record in Washington, and a big budget. *Business Insider* estimates that Crowley had a budget of \$3 million for the primary, whereas Ocasio-Cortez only had \$200,000. Ocasio-Cortez was working as a waitress and was unknown, never having run for office before. However, she was born in the Bronx district she wanted to represent, worked and lived there and pitched herself as “one of us”.

She felt that politicians in general, and Crowley in particular, were too dependent on companies and wealthy individuals who made financial contributions to political parties and campaigns, in the hope that candidates would represent their interests, which often were not the same as the ordinary voters’ interests. As she said in her campaign ad, “A Democrat who takes corporate money, doesn’t live here, doesn’t send his kids to our schools, doesn’t drink our water, or breathe our air, cannot possibly represent us.”



**Baby Alexandria
with her late father.**

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

On 26 June, Ocasio-Cortez seemed as stunned as everyone else when she won the primary with a score of 57.5 per cent. Once she became the Democratic candidate, her election to Congress was more or less assured – the 14th District is solidly Democratic.

Born in the Bronx

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was born in 1989 in the Bronx, one of the poorest parts of New York City. Both her parents were of Puerto Rican origin, although her father was born in the U.S.A. The family moved to a suburb where the public schools were better, an experience Ocasio-Cortez says made her realize how unfair it is that the type of school a student can attend depends on their zip-code.

Ocasio-Cortez went on to study Economics and International Relations at Boston University, but when she was just 19, her father died of cancer. The family really struggled financially, with both Alexandria and her mother having to work long hours and often two jobs. Ocasio-Cortez worked as a waitress and bartender, but also taught high-school kids leadership and job skills and encouraged child literacy as a community organizer.

Puerto Rico is a Caribbean island and U.S. territory. Population 3.2 million (bigger than 15 of the states' populations.)



Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens but don't have the right to vote in U.S. elections unless they are resident in one of the U.S. states.

The first language is Spanish.

There has been a large Puerto Rican population in New York since the early 20th century. (One of the opposing gangs in the 1957 musical *West Side Story* is Puerto Rican.)

Getting Political

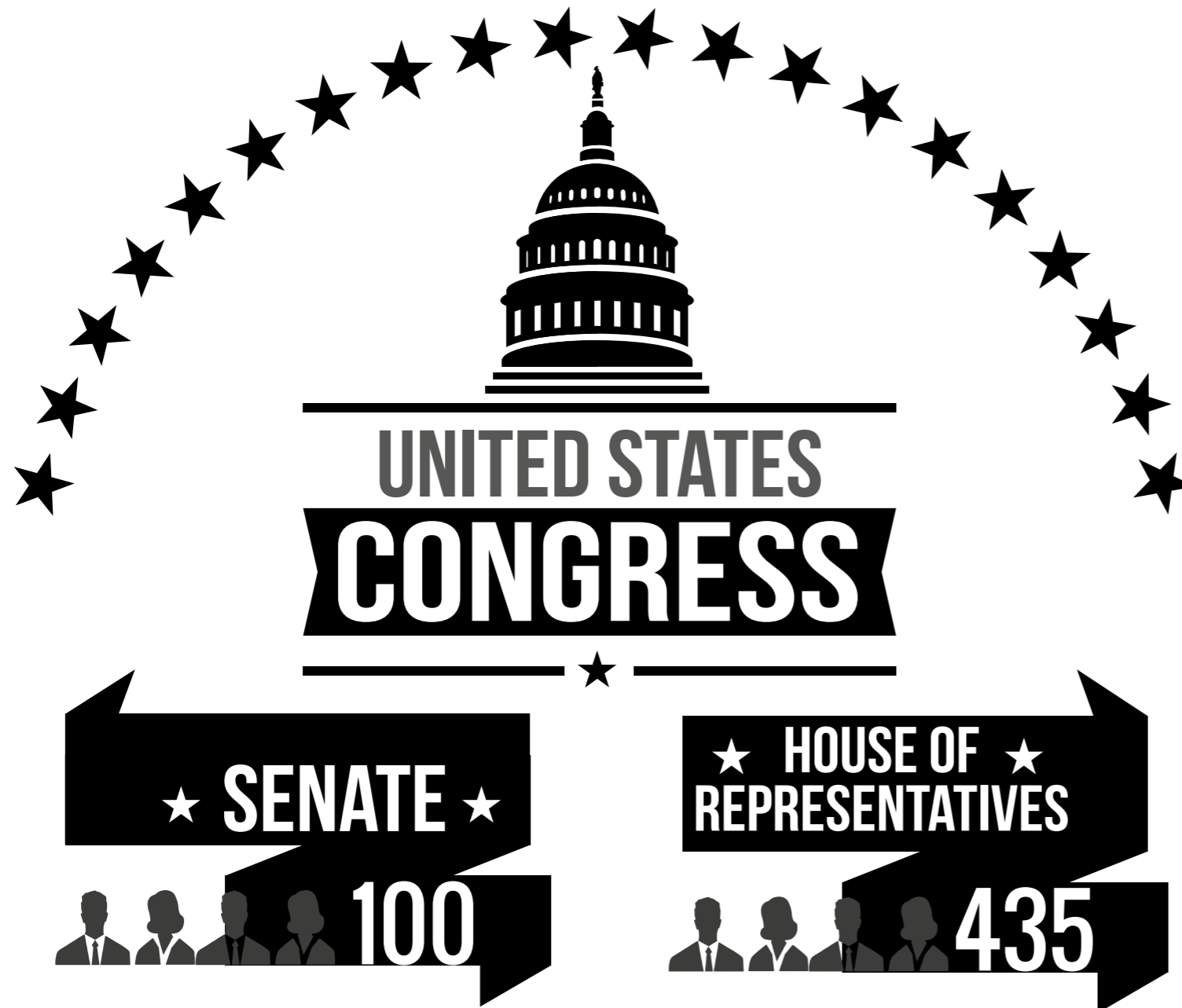
Ocasio-Cortez was interested in politics from a young age. As a teenager, she participated in summer programmes on leadership at the National Hispanic Institute, participating in mock parliament sessions. At Boston University, she worked for Senator Ted Kennedy's office. In 2016, she was a volunteer with the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign. It was an organization founded by former Sanders volunteers, Brand New Congress, that encouraged her to stand as a candidate.

Ocasio-Cortez's politics are close to Sanders', which puts her on the left wing of the Democratic party. She describes herself as a Democratic Socialist. She wants universal healthcare, as President Obama tried to do, and free public university education. She supports a movement to guarantee jobs in the public sector, and to institute a national minimum wage of \$15 an hour (about €13). Currently the federal minimum wage is only \$7.25, and has been the same since 2009. That is set by Congress, and applies to five states that don't have their own minimum wage legislation. In the other states, the minimum wage varies from \$5.15 in Wyoming to \$13.50 in the District of Columbia.

Ocasio-Cortez also wants to abolish the controversial Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, which detains and deports illegal immigrants, and reform the prison system.



Ocasio-Cortez showing how surprised and delighted she was to win the Democratic primary.



The Next Obama?

Ocasio-Cortez has quite a few points in common with former President Barack Obama. He also had a foreign-born parent, was part of a minority and also a community organizer. Most donations to his presidential campaign, like Ocasio-Cortez's for Congress, were small donations of a few dollars from individuals: lots of individuals. It could be tempting to see her as the next Obama. She has quite a way to go yet, and is actually too young to stand for the next presidential election (candidates must be 35 years old). Let her get used to being a lawmaker first, when the 116th Congress convenes in Washington, D.C., on 3 January 2019.