FEMALE POLITICIANS AND RHETORIC: THE CASE OF ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

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ABSTRACT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional and Digital Media Writing to the Office of Graduate and Extended Studies of East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania.

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Abstract

This year, more than 100 women were elected to serve in Congress. Additionally, several women have announced their major-party campaigns for the 2020 Presidential Primary. In light of this historic progress, we must evaluate the ways in which female politicians are portrayed.

The field of politics is still primarily dominated by older white men, and therefore many discrepancies exist in the expectations and standards men and women are held to.

This thesis provides an in-depth discussion of the stereotype-based rhetorical constructs that female politicians face in their careers.

Through extensive research of the rhetoric of many politicians, this thesis also identifies and explains four major rhetorical negotiation strategies that female politicians may use to counter these stereotypes.

Lastly, this thesis provides a critical feminist case study examining the rhetoric used by and with regards to freshman Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Historical Context and Justification

When our founding fathers formed the U.S. in 1776, they had no interest in sharing political power with women. These framers left an entire half of the population out of the political realm. At this time, there was a separation between the public and private spheres. Men were in control of the public spheres, handling things such as politics, industry, and country formation. Women were delegated to the private sphere, tending to their families, cooking, cleaning, and mending.

In his seventeenth-century journals, John Winthrop, a prominent New England founder, warned that the "mental breakdown of a governor's wife" stemmed from her "'giving herself wholly to reading and writing.'" She would have been able to keep "her wits," he argued, if she had "'attended to her household affairs, and such things belonging to women, and not going out of her way and calling to meddle in such things as proper for men, whose minds are stronger'" (Braden, 1996, p. 13). Though Winthrop

and his sentiment seems ancient and outdated, the attitude that women were of weaker mind and should stay out of the public sphere persisted. Because of the continued separation of the public and private spheres, men held most of the power in our new country. Anderson (1999) even argues that our society historically "had strong prohibitions against the use of power by women" (p. 605). Many of the women who held government positions in the first half of the century were "relatively easy for the press to ignore," because they were "seat warmers, temporarily filling congressional seats for a few days or months until men could assume their rightful place" (Braden, 1996, p. 30).

In 1917, Jeanette Rankin of Montana was elected to serve in the House, making her the first woman elected to hold a federal office (Herman, 2019). Rankin was sworn in to serve in the 65th congressional session exactly 128 years after the first U.S. Congress convened (Herman, 2019). At the time of her election, national suffrage for women was still three years away.

As time progressed, women began to move into the public sphere and claim more power as politicians. The media dubbed 1969 "Year of the Women" to celebrate the record number of female politicians elected to the House (Braden, 1996, p. 119). By the 1970s women were making strides with bills such as the Equal Rights Amendment, organizations such as the National Women's Political Caucus, and the Women's Campaign Fund. Despite this progress, female politicians were still seen as "novelty acts" and society was skeptical of their power (Braden, 1996, p. 63). Braden (1996) explains, "Even as the public became more accepting of women holding public office . . .

there remained an undercurrent of fear of what was viewed as potentially destructive

social change" (p. 63).

This fear did not stop the progress. Women held office in increasing numbers.

The media once again dubbed 1984 "Year of the Women" to celebrate record numbers

of women elected to Congress. Then again in 1988, 1990, and 1992 (Braden, 1996, p.

119). In the 2008 presidential election, the U.S. had both a female major party

presidential primary candidate and a major party vice presidential candidate. Then, in

the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton became the first woman nominated by a

major party for the presidential race against Donald Trump.

In the midterm elections of this year, 102 years after Rankin was elected, the

U.S. elected 131 women to serve in Congress (Herman, 2019). As of March 2019, six

women have announced their presidential candidacy for the 2020 election. Braden

(1996) stated, "Whether Americans are ready to elect a female commander-in-chief

won't be known for sure until a woman leads a major party ticket" (p. 184). The 2016

presidential election was the opportunity Braden was hoping for, and Hillary Clinton

successfully won the popular vote. The American people showed that they were ready,

though the Electoral College disagreed. Next year's election will serve as another

chance.

Part of the road to electing a female commander-in-chief, or any female

politician, is understanding the ways that the media frame feminine stereotypes and

female candidates. In today's political climate most voters do not have the opportunity

to interact directly with their national representatives. Therefore, we rely heavily on the

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media to provide information regarding their policies, personalities, and qualifications. We must be aware of the way the media and other sources use stereotypes and rhetorical constructs to portray female politicians.

Though there is a significant amount of research on the issue of female politicians and their portrayals in the media, much of the scholarship focuses on the election of 2008 or prior years. These elections are exceedingly important to understand what has happened in the past, but, as discussed above, the last decade has been host to significant leaps in the prominence of women in the government. This research provides an update to previous work with an emphasis on stereotypes as rhetorical constructs and the media's use of containment rhetoric as a means to negate or restrain the power of female politicians. Additionally, this research defines four rhetorical negotiation strategies that have been used by female politicians to counter these damaging rhetorical constructs: redefinition, defiance, embrace, and exposure. This research is accompanied by a case study analyzing rhetorical strategies used against and by Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, a freshman congresswoman. This study is necessary because we need to identify and understand how these rhetorical strategies work in order to create a truly gender-inclusive space in the political field.

1.2 On Gender

Because this research focuses heavily on gender for the basis of stereotypes and rhetorical negotiation, it is important to establish a definition for this concept. Sex refers to the biological determination of a person based on external sex characteristics.

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Gender is a social and cultural construct based on compliance to or deviation from a set of expectations attached to the biologically determined sexes (Gender and Sexuality, 2019). Because this paper focuses on media and public perceptions of politicians, the terms woman and female will apply to those who are identified as such through public perception. Though this definition may include those who are transgender, I will not specifically address these issues. I acknowledge that more than two genders exist and that the field of gender study has many intricacies and spectrums; however, this paper will focus primarily on the male/female dichotomy. In the future, further research should be conducted to address the issues of gender identity, gender fluidity, their unique rhetoric, and their effects on the research within this paper.

Additionally, I will use female and woman as labels to identify the politicians according to their perceived gender. This terminology is only truly appropriate in the context of this paper because of the need to differentiate the genders for the purpose of analysis. Outside of this context, applying these modifiers implies that a woman holding the position of a politician is unnatural or out of the ordinary. This modifier also implies that gender is integral to the identity of the politician, which should not be the case. A male politician is rarely identified as such, and therefore neither should a female politician (Waldman, 2016).

1.3 On Intersectionality

The 2008 Democratic primary race was packed with historical implications. The two top candidates embodied groups who have long been excluded from consideration:

Hillary Clinton, a woman, and Barack Obama, a black man. Democrats knew that this election was going to be a first regardless of which candidate claimed the top spot. This raised a lot of conflicting issues, however, as people began to consider the impacts of both racism and sexism in the world of politics. Historically speaking, black men were given the right to vote before any women (Traister, 2010, p. 107). On the other hand, we do not live in a post-racial world, and people of color continue to be discriminated against on a daily basis.

Jennifer Fang of *Radicalicious* wrote, "How can one compare racism to sexism— and if one tries, where do those of us who are disadvantaged by our race and gender fit in?" (Traister, 2010, p. 111). The issues of racism and sexism overlap in an inseparable way. This overlap is often referred to as intersectionality. Developed by Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality is a concept used to "denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's . . . experiences" (p. 1244). Crenshaw (1991) further explains that the ways that racism and sexism intersect and factor into the lives of women of color "cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (p. 1244). For the purposes of this paper, however, I will not address race. Shirley Chisholm, a 1972 presidential candidate said, "Of my two 'handicaps' being female put more obstacles in my path than being black" (Belt, 2013, p. 206). Thus, the focus of this paper is on the rhetoric of stereotypes applied to female politicians regardless of their race or ethnicity. I understand that women of color face additional stereotypes that should absolutely be researched and addressed, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Chapter Two

Stereotypes as Rhetoric

2.1 Stereotypes as Rhetorical Constructs

A stereotype is a generalized idea about a concept, person, etc. Stereotypes are

developed over time as a means to simplify "the complexities of our culture" (Robson,

1999, p. 207). Robson (1999) say that these generalizations allow us to "sort and

categorize data and stimuli with little conscious thought (p. 207). Theoretically, this is an

efficient means of communication because it allows us to quickly sift through data and

make decisions. In practice, however, stereotypes can cause problems. Any attempt to

generalize a population, person, or culture may prove damaging to perceptions of that

group.

We apply stereotypes most readily to groups and people we are not directly in

contact with. Robson (1999) explains, "[S]tereotypes operate most powerfully during

initial interactions with strangers" (p. 207). As ongoing relationships are built

stereotypes begin to diminish. With public figures such as politicians, stereotypes take

longer to diminish or may never diminish because our relationships are often not personal.

In many cases, especially in the case of presidential elections, the general public does not have the opportunity to collect first-hand knowledge about a candidate (Eberl, 2017, p. 112). They therefore rely on the media to help them learn and select a candidate who most aligns with their ideas. Americans take what they learn from watching the news and reading the paper and use that information to make decisions that influence their own "attitudes or actions" and determine who they think is best fit to serve in office (Budak, 2016, p. 19). Eberl (2017) says that voters form and update their "assessments of candidates' competence and assertiveness" based on how the candidate is portrayed in the media (p. 124).

The media play a large role in "strengthening the stability and pervasiveness of stereotypes" (Robson, 1999, p. 207). The media for the purposes of this paper includes broadcast news, print journalism, online journalism, and social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These sources use stereotypes as rhetorical constructs, sometimes consciously but also without knowing. Braden (1996) argues that stereotypes "drift through the modern media like smoke" and that journalists have become so "accustomed to these myths" that they are hardly aware of their existence or use" (p. 10). When stereotypes are applied to a group, they create expectations about how that group is meant to act, appear, and think. By applying a broad generalization to a group, one can effectively reinforce a preconceived image of a group, person, etc.

2.2 The Femininity/Competency Double Bind

Because perpetuated stereotypes create expectations, they also create rhetorical constructs known as double binds. Robson (1999) explains that double binds "offer individuals two alternatives, one or both of which involves penalty" (p. 208). This means that a person facing a double bind has two options for how they will be perceived, and either of these perceptions could be damaging.

Stereotypes for a job or position are "largely determined by individuals routinely seen in those professions" (Robson, 1999, p. 206). In the realm of politics, this means that the acceptable stereotypes for the profession have been primarily determined by men. We are therefore left with what Robson (1999) refers to as the femininity/competency double bind. According to Robson (1999), this double bind "expects a woman to be feminine, then offers her a concept of femininity that ensures" that as a feminine person she cannot be competent as a politician (p. 210).

2.3 Stereotypes Applied to Female Politicians

As established in the above section, the desired stereotypes associated with successful and competent politicians have been largely determined by the men who have traditionally filled these positions. These stereotypes, therefore, are primarily masculine in nature. Most of the masculine stereotypes tied to political competency have to do with control and functionality in the public sphere (Robson, 1999, p. 207). These desirable stereotypical traits include, but are not limited to, aggression, ambition,

loud speech, dominance, unemotional and logical decision making, worldly knowledge, strength, and leadership (Burns. et al., 2013, p. 687) (Robson, 1999, p. 207). These stereotypical traits form the rhetorical construct of a competent politician; however, in the femininity/competency double bind, women are also expected to adhere to feminine stereotypes which are often contradictory to these masculine competencies. Burns, Eberhardt & Merolla (2013) explain, "While female candidates can sometimes benefit from these [feminine] stereotypes, they are generally perceived as having fewer of the characteristics and competencies" associated with political positions (p. 687).

The prevailing feminine stereotypes that contradict the rhetorical construct of political competency are that women are gentle and quiet, women are overemotional and unstable, and that women are not tough enough to handle difficult situations. Typically, feminine stereotypes relate to traits developed in the private sphere such as compassion, nurturing, availability, and orientation towards family. While some of these traits may be beneficial in some ways, feminine stereotypes usually place women at a disadvantage. Additionally, "appearance is a more frequent source of media comment for female than for male candidates" (Belt, 2013, p. 207). As a result, media coverage of female candidates tends to fixate on "personal information, physical appearance," and adherence to feminine stereotypes, whereas coverage of male candidates "largely focuses on experience, accomplishments, and issue positions" (Belt 2013, p. 207).

When Margaret Chase Smith announced her presidential candidacy in 1964, it was "shrugged off as being something frivolous and feminine" (Braden, 1996, p. 185). Smith, a serious Republican who had served as a government official for thirty-two years

was a supremely qualified candidate. She had been the first woman to both the House

and Senate and had proven herself a competent politician repeatedly. She was

adamant, however, that she was not running as a "woman candidate" (Braden, 1996, p.

186). As Smith told Braden (1996):

> I was not a woman campaigner; I was not a woman candidate. I was someone
>
> who was running for office—just like you would be . . . I did everything a man
>
> did; served on the same committees, was chairman of several subcommittees. It
>
> never occurred to me that I should act any differently if I were a man. (p. 57).

Regardless, Smith's campaign was treated as a novelty. According to Braden (1996), the

media, including political cartoons focused on her femininity, depicting her as "New

Betsy" mending the flag, a maternal figure scolding the GOP elephant, and "of Smith's

hat being thrown into the ring—a flowered bonnet on a tray with fedoras and Derby

hats" (p. 186). Coverage that focused on Smith's achievements often did so in a way

that "implied or explicitly stated that what she was doing was a rarity for a woman"

(Braden, 1996, p. 55).

When another female presidential candidate, Pat Schroeder, announced in 1987

that she would not continue her campaign, the audience was audibly disappointed.

Schroeder explained, "When I heard the audience groan, I began to cry." In the

following days, her announcement and her tears "were reported as equally significant in

many newspapers" (Braden, 1996, p. 192). Several newspapers ran articles criticizing

her emotional state, even going as far as to say "they wouldn't want someone who cries

to have her finger on the nuclear 'button'" (Braden, 1996`, pp. 192-193). A large issue

for Schroeder's candidacy was her femininity. She explained, "My laugh, my signature [she draws a smiley face beside her name], my mannerisms, were seen as too feminine. I was told that in politics boyish charm is fine but girlish charm is out of place" (Braden, 1996, p. 194). As Belt (2013) stated, "there does not seem to be a middle ground" for a female politician between being too masculine or too feminine (p. 221).

Physical appearance was also a pervasive topic of discussion in Schroeder's campaign. According to Braden (1996), she was frequently compared to Geraldine Ferraro, a woman who had been a vice presidential candidate just three years prior. Maureen Dowd of the New York Times wrote: "If Ms. Ferraro was very careful about her attire, Mrs. Schroeder is freewheeling." Dowd then proceeded to describe an outfit Schroeder had worn one day on the campaign trail in Iowa (p. 192).

More recently, in 2008, the focus of the media on appearances was again made apparent. During this election Sarah Palin, Alaska governor and former beauty pageant winner, ran as a vice presidential nominee (Belt, 2013, p.211). According to Belt (2013) "The Republican National Committee spent $150,000 on wardrobe for Palin and her family" (p. 207). This combination of factors "put Palin's appearance center stage in the campaign, whether she liked it or not" (Belt, 2013, p. 211).

In addition to being unable to separate their campaigns from their own identity as women, female politicians also face the difficulty of separating their own successes, failures, and ideas from those of their husbands and children. According to Belt (2013), during her 2000 campaign, 61.9 percent of the coverage of Elizabeth Dole focused on "personal information, specifically her husband" (p. 207). Similarly, Hillary Clinton has

struggled significantly in her career from an inability to separate her accomplishments from those of her husband President Bill Clinton. As Fulton (2012) explained of Clinton's 2008 campaign, "Even her agency over her career accomplishments was cast into doubt—often being attributed to her husband" (p. 303). Additionally, women are unable to distance themselves from their roles as mothers. When Palin was announced as John McCain's running mate in 2008, the *New York Times* introduced her as "a social conservative, former union member and mother of five who has been governor for two years" (Cooper and Bumiller, 2008). No male candidate has ever been introduced by the number of children they have.

2.4 Containment Rhetoric

Containment rhetoric is a rhetorical strategy that works to contain a person, idea, or group that is seen as a threat to the norm (Anderson, 1999, p. 599). The purpose of this rhetorical strategy is to discredit the source of the threat and render it unreliable, unlikable, or unable to topple the status quo. Containment rhetoric takes the power away from the threat and places it in the hands of stereotypes and public opinion. Below I will discuss three types of containment rhetoric used again female politicians including name-calling, sexualization of authority, and restriction of policies.

2.4.1 Name-Calling. If you visit any elementary school playground, you will likely encounter children calling each other names. Though they do not yet know, they are practicing containment rhetoric. For example, if child A on the playground says

something child B does not like, then child B may call child A something with negative connotations such as "crazy." Once child A has been labeled "crazy" anything else he or she has to say has become discredited because he or she has been determined to be "crazy." This same strategy stays with us long after we leave the playground.

President Donald Trump is well known for his name-calling. He has come up with and used a variety of names as a means of discrediting and disrespecting his political adversaries since the beginning of his 2016 campaign including names like "Lying Ted," "Pocahontas," and "Crooked Hillary" (Lee & Quealy, 2019). When he calls his opponents these names, he attempts to delegitimize their statements. His rhetorical message implies things such as "'Lying Ted' is lying because it is in his name"; "'Pocahontas' is lying because she lied about the other things and that's why we call her this name"; and "'Crooked Hillary' cannot be trusted because clearly she is crooked."

This kind of rhetorical containment strategy can be used against any type of adversary or threat, but when it is paired with woman-specific language and perpetuated stereotypes, it creates a more pointed problem specifically for female politicians. When a female politician is acting in a way that in incompatible with perceived stereotypes, containment rhetoric can be used to disqualify her policies, statements, and actions.

In her 1999 article "'Rhymes with Rich': 'Bitch' as a Tool of Containment in Contemporary American Politics," Anderson specifically discusses the use of the word "bitch" as containment rhetoric. "Bitch" is an insult unique to women. At its roots, "bitch" has been used to refer to a female dog, particularly one that has become

threatening or uncontrollably aggressive (p. 602). When animal metaphors such as this one are applied to human women, Anderson explains, they "dehumanize women" and communicate implications about their subordinance in relation to men (p. 602).

Women are often referred to as "bitches" when they act in a way that is deemed aggressive or threatening. For women, this is an easily achievable qualifier. Any level of assertiveness, power, or disagreement can incite the label. To highlight this point, Anderson (1999) quotes CNN panelist Margaret Carlson, who said of her male co-anchor:

> He can shout me down, insisting I don't know what I'm talking about and be deluged with fan mail. If I go so far as to say, 'let me finish,' letters arrive about how strident and shrill I am—and yes, what a bitch." (p. 602)

Once a woman is labeled a "bitch" she becomes discredited. She is mean-spirited and overreactive and not to be taken seriously. A woman politician who has been labeled a "bitch" can easily be written off. She can be mocked, and her policies and opinions can be ignored (p. 615). Bitch is impressive as containment rhetoric "because of how effectively it closes down space for women" in politics (p. 615).

In her analysis, Anderson (1999) looks specifically at the case of Hillary Clinton. Because this article was published in 1999, it analyzes Clinton in her role as First Lady of the United States. Clinton was a politically active First Lady. Shortly after her husband was sworn into office, she was placed as the head of his task force on health-care reform. Because she was placed in this position of power and because of her assertive personality, she became a threat. Rhetoric began to emerge about a bossy First Lady

trying to "take over" her husband's administration (p. 607). She was labeled a "bitch."

Anderson explains, "Once the 'bitch' narrative took hold, Clinton's positive

characteristics were transmuted into negative ones, her political identity was

caricatured and over-simplified, and her substantive rhetoric was dismissed, ignored, or

forgotten" (p. 605).

From that point on, any move that Clinton made was perceived as aggressive

and unpleasant. Additionally, because Clinton had distanced herself from feminine

stereotypes and been labeled a "bitch," any attempts to incorporate softer, more

feminine or friendlier characteristics into her persona were seen as inauthentic and only

helped to intensify the "bitch" label.

2.4.2 Sexualization of Authority. Another method of containment rhetoric

specifically geared toward degrading women in power is the sexualization of authority.

Anderson (1999) explains that this strategy "suggests that the origins of women's

political power lie not in their talents or professional qualifications, but rather in the

ability to capitalize upon a sexual contract" (p. 608). This containment rhetoric may take

different forms. Most commonly, it is seen in the implication that a woman in power has

"slept her way to the top." Other times, a rhetorical message is constructed to create

the image of a manipulative woman and her "whipped" male partner. Anderson (1999)

explains that the rhetorical strategy of sexualizing women's authority effectively

renders it "illegitimate" in two ways: "Either sexual power is viewed as a weak

substitute for political power, a desperate grasp for influence, or it is characterized as an unnatural deviation from a woman's proper role" (p. 609).

    Slept her way to the top. Recently, this type of rhetorical strategy has been used in content regarding Senator Kamala Harris, a 2020 Democratic presidential candidate. Harris announced her candidacy on Jan. 21 of this year. In the following days, information began to spread regarding her short relationship with Willie Brown, a former two-term mayor of San Francisco and fifteen-year Speaker for the California State Assembly (Zhou, 2019). Brown, feeling "compelled" by the slurry of questions directed at him, released an op-ed in the San Francisco Chronical confirming the relationship. In this statement, Brown also confirmed that he "may have influenced her career by appointing her to two state commissions," and that he "certainly helped her with her first race for district attorney in San Francisco." Brown went on to say that he had also been influential in the careers of several other California politicians including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Governor Gavin Newsom, and Senator Diane Feinstein (Brown, 2019). Though he may not have intended to, he reaffirmed the rhetorical message that Kamala Harris had benefited politically from their sexual relationship, or, as many conservative websites quickly reported, that she had "slept her way to the top" (Zhou, 2019).

    This containment rhetoric is effective in two ways. First, it works in a way very similar to name-calling. Sexualization of female authority discredits a threat by taking away its power. This rhetoric created the implication that Harris is not worthy of the position that she holds because she never earned it. She is labeled sexually promiscuous

and manipulative as well as undeserving. She can therefore be written off as a non-threat. In another sense, this containment rhetoric works by ascribing her political success to the man who "gave" it to her. By claiming that he was responsible for Harris's success, Brown has explained away her power. She did not come into this success on her own, but instead relied upon her relationship with a man to achieve it. This renders Harris ineffectual because she is no longer an independent force.

Doing her bidding (whipped). The second way this strategy is used to imply that a female politician is using her sexuality to influence or control her male peers. This strategy of containment creates a rhetorical construct in which a female politician is domineering and manipulative and a male partner is "doing her bidding" because of their sexual interactions. In popular terms, this is referred to as being "whipped."

Anderson (1999) illustrates this strategy by again analyzing Hillary Clinton. While in office, President Clinton faced several accusations of adultery. During this time, Hillary Clinton stood by him and supported him. When she was appointed to the health care reform task force, the assumption was quickly made that this was President Clinton's "payback" (p. 608). This rhetoric was widely adopted, even appearing on the cover of a 1993 issue of *Spy* magazine "where Rodham Clinton was pictured as a dominatrix in studded black leather and fishnet stockings, wielding a riding crop" (p. 608). The rhetorical message that President Clinton was somehow being controlled by his wife because of a debt he owed in their sexual relationship served as a means to negate, and therefore contain, Hillary's professional qualifications and actual political power.

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2.4.3 Women on Women's Issues. The idea that women can only address so-called "women's issues" is a combination of general feminine stereotyping and containment rhetoric. Though women have been active members of the public and political spheres for more than a century, they are still stereotyped as nurturing, family-oriented, compassionate, delicate, and unable to handle serious topics. They are therefore expected to address issues that relate to these private sector stereotypes such as women's health, education, children's issues, healthcare, social justice, the arts, and environmental issues. (Burns, 2013, p. 688). Female candidates are also frequently portrayed as more liberal because many of these women's issues align with primarily liberal platforms (p. 688). In many cases, women who speak on issues considered masculine are treated as ill-informed or uneducated. Men, on the other hand, are equipped to speak about women's issues as well as defense, foreign affairs, national security, and the economy (Belt, 2013, p. 208).

Robson (1999) argued that if a female politician wishes to address an issue that is not stereotypically feminine, "they must linguistically tie issues of public policy to their experience in the domestic realm or risk violating audience expectations" (p. 208). In her 1999 evaluation of Barbra Mikulski, Robson found that Mikulski was able to rhetorically extend stereotypically masculine issues into the private realm, therefore creating a version of the issue that men and the media were comfortable to see her discuss. "Women were once deemed at a disadvantage legislating issues like crime and war," Robson explained, "but what issues have a greater impact on the family than these two" (p. 218)? In this way, Mikulski and the other women serving alongside her in

Congress were able to take part in the discussion of the Crime Bill "by discussing crime

in the context of their own lives and those of their constituents—on shattered families

not just statistics from law enforcement agencies" (Robson, 1999, p. 218).

Chapter Three

Rhetorical Negotiation Strategies

When all of these aforementioned stereotypes are laid out ahead, the path to

political office may seem difficult if not insurmountable for female politicians. If we treat

these stereotypes as rhetorical constructs, though, we can then identify ways female

politicians can work to negotiate them through their own rhetorical strategies. In this

section, I define four major ways in which female politicians rhetorically negotiate

stereotypes: redefinition, defiance, embrace, and exposure.

3.1 Redefinition

In the first strategy, redefinition, female politicians take a stereotype and

redefine it to suit their own rhetorical message. In her 2000 analysis of former Senator

Barbara Mikulski, Robson highlights a similar concept which she calls recasting.

Recasting, she explains, allows female politicians to manipulate stereotypes "by

reclaiming the power to name and define" (p. 208). In this way, they are changing the

connotation of the stereotype to align with their political persona. The strategy of

redefinition used in this analysis differs from Robson's recasting in that it emphasizes the larger implications of this strategy. Female politicians using redefinition are not simply changing the name or definition of a stereotype; this strategy works because it allows politicians to fulfill the stereotypes and expectations assigned to them in a way that is outside of the restrictive nature of stereotypes. It also allows them to create their own rhetorical narrative within the existing rhetorical construct rather than building an entirely new construct.

Robson (2000) presents an example in her analysis of Mikulski. Mikulski served as a U.S. Senator representing Maryland for thirty years. Over the course of her career, the media often speculated as to why she was an older woman without a husband or children. Mikulski was faced with the stereotype and expectation that women, including those in politics, should have an "orientation towards family" (p. 211). Her inability to conform to this stereotype was seen as a negative aspect of her candidacy and served as a distraction from her political agenda. In order to counter this rhetoric, Mikulski used redefinition. Through her rhetorical negotiation, Mikulski was able to construct "an almost familial relationship between herself and her constituents" (p. 211). Mikulski said:

> We have literally devoted our lives to public service, and we look upon the people we represent as part of our extended family. We feel about them personally. That's why we listen to their concerns and their issues as we would people within our own family. (Robson, 1999, p. 212)

In doing so, she extended the idea of family and presented herself as part of the constituency or as part of a collective "us" as one thinks of their own family. In this way, she redefined the idea of what constitutes a family to positively impacted her audience's perception of her. She was able to fulfill the expectation of being family-oriented while also emphasizing to her constituents how important they were to her.

3.2 Defiance

The second major rhetorical strategy female politicians may use to address stereotypes is defiance. This strategy is straight forward; women who defy stereotypes do the opposite of what would be stereotypically expected. This strategy may be helpful to female politicians, but it can also be detrimental. As discussed in section two, female politicians who chose to defy stereotypes and act outside of expectations may be labeled as "unlikable," "nasty," "insincere" or "bitch." These identifiers can hurt female politicians because they discredit their attempts to defy stereotypes as a ploy or label them as someone with whom constituents should not align.

Defiance can present itself in two different ways: the politician can either reject a feminine stereotype altogether, or she can reject a stereotype and instead adopt a masculine stereotype for her own use. The latter we will refer to as defiance through androgyny. This strategy of defiance presents an "alternative to the feminine/masculine dichotomy" (Robson, 2000, p. 210).

For an example of the use of defiance, consider Margaret Heckler, a

Congresswoman from Massachusetts who served in the late 1960s. Heckler found that

the attention the media paid to her appearance was a distraction from her policies on

her campaign trail. To combat this and defy the stereotype, Heckler began wearing a

"gray flannel suit" for all of her campaign appearances. Heckler found that this allowed

her to "neutralize the public response to her gender," and to "blend into the gray

Massachusetts sky and the gray male political arena (Braden, 1996 p. 5). More recently,

Hillary Clinton adopted a similar tactic by wearing only "a banal 'uniform' of pantsuits"

for her public appearances (Belt, 2013, p. 207). This defiance of the media's focus on

appearance allowed Heckler and Clinton to shift the focus away from their clothing and

back to the issues they wanted to address.

Robson (2000) gives us an example of Mikulski using defiance through androgyny

in her analysis. Mikulski, a woman who is short in stature, rejected the stereotypes that

women are frail and passive and instead rhetorically presented herself as a fighter, a

role she described as "a 'high-energy' approach to advocacy 'for the people'" (p. 216). In

1974, she ran her campaign on this defiance by using the slogan, "Barbara Mikulski is

not afraid of the big boys" (p. 216). By presenting herself as an aggressor, she was

effectively rejecting the feminine stereotypes assigned to her because of her gender and

stature and by adopting this aggressive, masculine rhetoric, she was creating a

rhetorical construct of androgyny for herself.

3.3 Embrace

Female politicians who use the strategy of embrace chose to conform to or emphasize the feminine stereotypes applied to them in a way that is beneficial to their own rhetorical message. Female politicians who chose to embrace stereotypes, however, face the issue of the femininity/competency double bind addressed in section two. Essentially, most feminine stereotypes are not compatible with the perception of a powerful public figure such as a politician. Women who chose to use the embrace strategy must carefully select the stereotypes that will serve to enhance their candidacy rather than negatively impact it.

For an example of embrace, we look again to Robson's (2000) analysis of Barbara Mikulski. Robson explains in her analysis that women are stereotypically framed as "friendly, concerned for listeners, nurturing, and responsive to human needs" (p. 214). When they enter the public sphere and particularly the world of politics, these stereotypes translate into an expectation of significant availability. Mikulski chose to embrace and fulfill this expectation through "two communication practices" (p. 214). Firstly, she made herself literally available to her constituents. She accepted direct phone calls from her constituents and planned many in-person, small-group appearances. In this way, she was providing direct access to herself and allowing her constituents to feel as though she was available. Her second practice was her rhetorical construction of her constituency as family (p. 215). I discussed this earlier as a method of redefinition, but it also allowed her to embrace the stereotype of availability. By

increasing her availability and embracing the feminine stereotype, Mikulski earned the trust of her constituents.

The strategy of embrace as a rhetorical negotiation can also be used in a tongue-in-cheek way. Women politicians can embrace a stereotype or word used as an insult in a way that enhances their own rhetoric message. For example, we look at Hillary Clinton, the "nasty woman."

As the third debate was coming to a close, Donald Trump interrupted Clinton while she answered a question about social security. He mumbled under his breath but into his microphone, "such a nasty woman" (Gray, 2016). To many watching, this insult stood as a debate-appropriate stand in for other woman-specific insults such as "bitch." It meant to imply that Clinton was being aggressive or unfriendly, traits that are stereotypically not feminine.

As discussed in section two, this sort of containment rhetoric had been damaging to Clinton in the past. Rather than being insulted or allowing this rhetoric to take hold, women all over the country began to embrace the "nasty woman" label. Soon #nastywoman began to trend on Twitter and users began to apply the term to themselves. "Nasty woman" was no longer an insult; it was a "badge of honor" and a reminder that assertive women make things happen (Gray, 2016). The web domain nastywomengetshitdone.com was created and redirected traffic to Clinton's official website. Before the end of the night, "nasty woman" t-shirts were made and sold "with proceeds benefiting Planned Parenthood" (Gray, 2016). This movement to embrace

"nasty woman" as a positive label effectively removed its power as containment

rhetoric.

3.4 Exposure

The final rhetorical negotiation strategy is exposure. When a female politician

employs this strategy, she hopes to counter a rhetorical construct by acknowledging it

and therefore taking away its power. In theory, if you point out how ridiculous or

restrictive the construct is, then you bring attention to the issue and make some of your

listeners consider the implications of these restrictions.

For an example, we look once again to Mikulski. Robson (1999) explains that

Mikulski's personal life was often a source of coverage because she was an older,

unmarried woman with no children. Many in the media speculated she may be a

lesbian. She negotiated this rhetoric in several ways, but she was quoted on many

occasions employing the exposure strategy by countering this rhetoric and explaining,

"for female politicians marital status was a no-win proposition" (Robson, 1999, p. 212).

On the subject of husbands and marriage, Mikulski said, "If you're married, you're

neglecting him; if you're single, you couldn't get him; if you're divorced, you couldn't

keep him; and if you're widowed, you killed him!" (Robson, 1999, p. 213). In this way,

Mikulski exposed the rhetorical construct to the criticism or consideration of the public

and effectively worked to take away its power.

Chapter Four

Case Study of Alexandria Ocasio Cortez

4.1 Context/Biographical Information

Twenty-nine-year-old Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) was

elected to represent NY-14 in the midterm elections of 2018. Her election garnered a

huge amount of media attention, because she unseated Joe Crowley, a prominent

Democrat who had held the office for 10 terms (Ocasio2018). This in combination with

her young age and her Democratic Socialist beliefs has kept her firmly planted in the

spotlight.

AOC's father was native to the Bronx and her mother was born and raised in

Puerto Rico. She studied economics and international relations at Boston University and

graduated Cum Laude. During her time in Boston, AOC worked for Senator Ted Kennedy

as an intern in foreign affairs and immigration casework. After she completed her

degree, she returned to the Bronx to work in education with a focus on childhood

literacy and skill-set development. Following her father's death, her family was thrown

into financial crisis. AOC took on additional jobs waitressing and bartending to help her

mother make ends meet (Ocasio2018). When she began her 2018 campaign, she

"operated out of a paper grocery bag hidden behind that bar" (Cadigan, 2018). Despite

her humble start AOC defeated Crowley in the primary by almost 15 points and, in the

general election easily defeated Republican nominee Anthony Pappas (Colbert, 2018).

This section, a case study, will discuss some of the stereotype-based rhetorical

constructs that AOC has faced and if and how she has managed to negotiate them

through her own rhetorical strategies. It will also specifically discuss her use of social

media and how this platform has been an aid to her rhetorical negotiation in her career

thus far.

4.2 Methodology

AOC made headlines during the midterm elections for many reasons including

her age, her position as a prominent Latina in her community, her democratic socialist

beliefs, and her primary win, which unseated a ten-term prominent Democrat, Joe

Crowley. Though more than 100 women were elected in the 2018 midterms, none have

garnered as much media attention as AOC. This is why I chose her to serve as a case

study in this research.

Additionally, because AOC is young and new to the political arena, limiting the

scope of my case study has been simple. In order to conduct my case study, I have

created a corpus of media, news articles, campaign materials, and speeches by and

about AOC from the start of her campaign, February 2018, through the present day,

March 2019. Because so much of our media consumption now occurs online, I chose to

conduct all my corpus research through social media and search engines. This was the

best method to understand and obtain the same kinds of information that the general

public does. I selected the most popular videos, social media posts, and online articles

relating to AOC as well as her own content on Twitter, YouTube, and her campaign

website. I defined popular content as content that has gone viral or been discussed

widely by many individuals or news outlets. In total, this corpus included around 58

individual items including 8 videos, 19 tweets, and 32 articles. Because AOC is current

political figure and much of her coverage has been ongoing, determining when to stop

collecting media was challenging. Therefore, the corpus content for this thesis was

collected up until March 2019.

Once my corpus was established, I reviewed all of the materials applying the

concepts discussed in the first portion of this paper. This review allowed me to

determine which stereotypes and rhetorical constructs are most frequently applied to

AOC including containment rhetoric and the femininity-competency double bind. It also

allowed me to analyze how AOC attempts to negotiate through the four rhetorical

negotiation strategies listed in the previous section: redefinition, defiance, embrace,

and exposure.

4.3 Discussion

4.3.1 Focus on Appearance. Because AOC is a woman, and particularly because

she is a conventionally attractive young woman, her appearance has often been the

focus of some media discussion. As soon as she was catapulted into the spotlight by her

primary victory, stories started to crop up about her clothing, her appearance, and even her skin-care routine. Below, I will discuss the two most prominent stories.

In September of 2018 Interview magazine published a profile of AOC. Accompanying the article were several photos of the congresswoman sporting "a fitted blazer with wide lapels and green piping, a slim, matching set of trousers, and an elegant pair of black stilettos from Manolo Blahnik" (Bellafante, 2018). In total, this outfit was valued "somewhere around $3500" (Bellafante, 2018). Many on the right took issue with this outfit, arguing that the exorbitant cost was "discordant messaging" and that "someone who pretends to be a champion of the people" should not be wearing such outrageously expensive clothing (Bellafante, 2018). In response to this outrage, AOC "shot back at her critics" explaining that the outfit was lent to the magazine for the purpose of taking the photos and that she had not paid for it (Bellafante, 2018).

The second incident I will discuss took place in November of 2018. On her second day at the Capitol, a reporter for the Washington Examiner named Eddie Scarry tweeted a picture of AOC's back which was taken "seemingly without her knowledge" (Garber, 2018). Scarry captioned the photo, "Hill staffer sent me this pic of Ocasio-Cortez they took just now. I'll tell you something: that jacket and coat do not look like a girl who struggles" (Hayes, 2018). In the photo, AOC is carrying a navy-blue coat and wearing a plain black tailored jacket and a skirt, exactly what one would expect a member of Congress to wear. When confronted by many on social media about the absurdity of his tweet, Scarry buckled down by insisting, "I know what it's like to be a poor intern in D.C.

and I can tell you—and I'm male obviously—but you tend to not look like that. She looks
very well put together, looks very nice" (Garber, 2018).
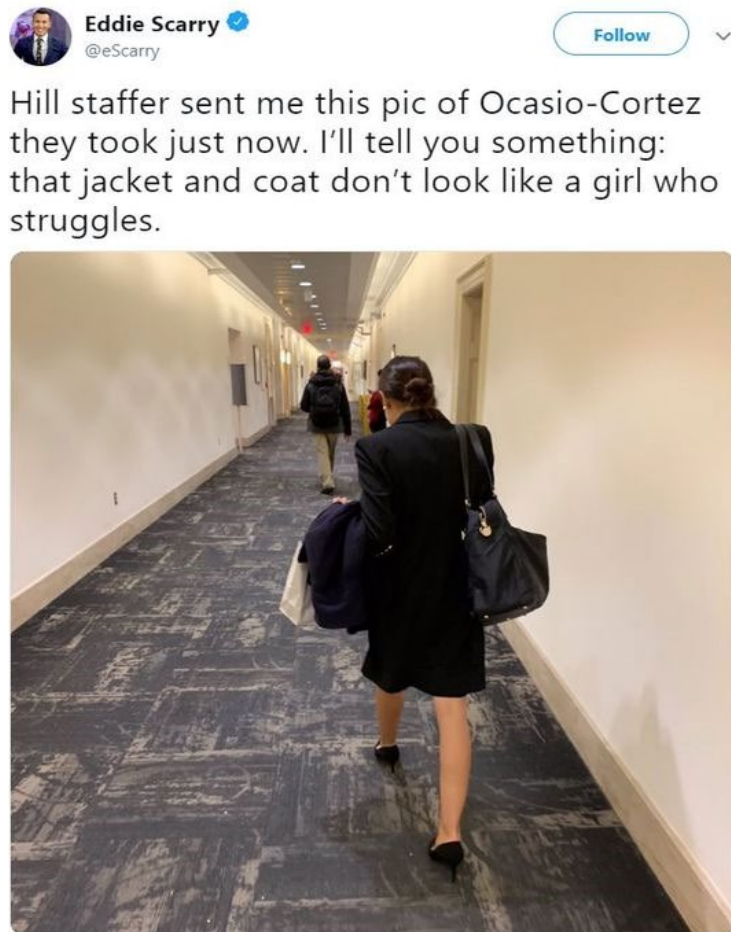
Figure 1 Eddie Scarry's tweet featuring a photo of AOC's backside (Hayes, 2018)

Between these two messages, Scarry attempted to hide a criticism within a
compliment. He was criticizing her outfit because she looked too "well put together" to
be as poor as she claimed to be. As Garber (2018) explains, "the fact that Ocasio-
Cortez's outfit fits in … [is] treated as its own evidence of her difference. Dressing the
part presented as proof of her ultimate unfitness for the part." What this means is that
because AOC is such an outlier in so many ways, her dressing in a way that is in line with

other traditional congresswomen is outstanding to this reporter and anyone else who picked up the story.

AOC responded with a tweet of her own, writing, "If I walked into Congress wearing a sack, they would laugh & take a picture of my backside. If I walk in with my best sale-rack clothes, they laugh & take a picture of my backside" (AOC, 2018, Nov. 15). Through this tweet, AOC is once again employing the exposure strategy of rhetorical negotiation. Like Barbara Mikulski, AOC is speaking out about the no-win rhetorical construct inside which she is trapped. She either dresses as a professional congresswoman and is mocked, or she could dress in a "sack" and be mocked. Garber (2018) argues "it is never really about the clothes." Instead, she says, "It is about belonging. It is about power. It is about who is assumed to look like a congressperson, and who is not" (Garber, 2018). In pointing out that her outfit makes no difference to her critics, AOC is helping to make this assertion as well.

4.3.2 Fixation on Personal Details. As discussed in section 2.3, female politicians often have difficulty separating their political career from their personal lives. When compared to coverage of male politicians, significantly more coverage of female politicians focuses on their biographical information, their personal lives, and information regarding their families, spouses and children. AOC is no exception to this rule.

Since her primary win, many social media users and members of the media have been fixated on her biographical background. They have made claims about where she grew up and insisted that she lied about being a native of the Bronx. Michael Knowles, a

journalist for The Daily Wire, was among many who made assertions that AOC, "grew up in a small, homogenous, affluent suburb, where she attended excellent schools before pretending she grew up in the Bronx" (michaeljknowles, 2018, Dec. 28). Reports have also repeatedly questioned her current living situation both in the Bronx and in Washington D.C.
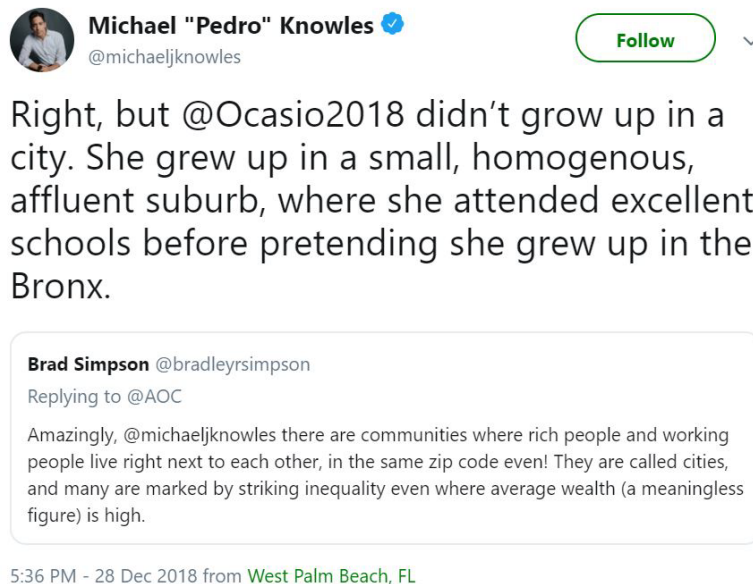
Figure 2 Tweet from Michael Knowles claiming AOC grew up affluent (michaeljknowles, 2019, Dec. 2)

In addition to this fixation on her biographical background and current residence, a significant amount of attention has been paid to her personal relationships including her boyfriend, Riley Roberts, and her mother, Blanca Ocasio Cortez. Neither is active on social media, and both have managed to remain relatively private despite AOC's quick stardom. Regardless, the media have continued to peruse the story of her personal life.

On January 15, shortly after the congresswoman took office, Marie Claire magazine published an article titled "Who Is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Boyfriend Riley

Roberts?" The introduction to this article acknowledges that AOC is "pretty tight-lipped about her private life," but chooses to explore what little information they have about Roberts regardless (Igoe, 2019). Information included his career, as found on his Linkedin profile, two short quotes about him from a Vogue profile of AOC, and a list of several pictures he has appeared in. This article seemed like an attempt to grasp at the straws of her personal relationship despite her desire to keep it behind the scenes.

In similar fashion, The Daily Mail recently published an article in which they interviewed AOC's mother, Blanca Ocasio-Cortez. This article, which featured several personal photos of AOC, her family, and her boyfriend, had very little to do with her political career. The article held some interesting and inspiring stories about AOC's past and aspirations; however, this was not the focus of the piece. Instead, it focused entirely on her personal life including her childhood, her upbringing, her mother's financial woes, and her relationship with Riley Roberts. The headline selected by The Daily Mail, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's mother tells how she hopes her daughter marries her longtime boyfriend," drew on a short quote at the end of the piece in which AOC's mother stated, "I hope they get married soon. Although they haven't told me anything about their plans" (Lambiet, 2018).

Though these two articles do not seem to be published with any sort of malice towards AOC, they still pose an interesting question about the patterns of media coverage focusing on female politicians and their male counterparts. If AOC was a man, would the media be focusing so heavily on her personal relationships? Would we have any idea about her partner or mother if she was a 29-year-old congressman?

AOC herself has done little to negotiate the rhetoric surrounding her personal life. Because a significant portion of her campaign was built on her identity as a working-class woman from the Bronx, she has been relatively open about her biographical information. She has countered speculation about her residences by correcting the record or restating facts.

In a January 9 tweet, AOC called out this pursuit of her private information by writing about a Daily Mail reporter who had been visiting her boyfriend's family members "offering them cash for 'stories.'" She concluded, "Women in leadership face more scrutiny. Period" (AOC, 2019, Jan. 9). She was non-responsive to the topic for some time following this, but tweeted about the issue once again in March following her mother's interview. This time she wrote, "You know, when I got to DC I was told that it's considered 'off-limits' to report on a member's family, love life, etc. Unsure why that consideration is suspended for me" (AOC, 2019, Mar. 5).

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez ✔ @AOC · Mar 5

You know, when I got to DC I was told that it's considered "off-limits" to report on a member's family, love life, etc.

Unsure why that consideration is suspended for me.

(Also for those who ask how I learned to handle pressure, try being the only daughter in a Latino household)

The Hill ✔ @thehill
Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's mom hopes she gets married soon hill.cm/yOQOYBF

💬 13K   🔁 15K   ♡ 113K

Figure 3 AOC's Mar. 5 Tweet regarding her mother's interview (AOC, 2019, Mar. 5)

Though she has not been especially consistent in her defense on this topic, AOC

has, through these two tweets, employed what is described in section 3.4 as exposure.

This strategy of rhetorical negotiation involves pointing out the rhetorical construct in

which the politician has been placed as a means of removing its power or at least

drawing attention to the reality of the situation. AOC frequently employs this strategy in

her rhetorical messaging. In this particular case, she is pointing out the fact that she is

the only congressional freshman who has faced this type of speculation and that it is, at

least in part, due to the fact that she is a woman.

4.3.3 Congresswomen Dance Too. Shortly before AOC and her fellow freshmen

congresspeople were sworn into office, a video was shared on Twitter by a user named

"AnonymousQ1776." The video, which quickly went viral, depicted AOC as a college

student dancing and imitating scenes from The Breakfast Club. The tweet included

AnonymousQ1776's caption, "Here is America's favorite commie know-it-all acting like

the clueless nitwit she is" (Karimi, 2019). This "attempt to mock" the congresswoman

was shared by "multiple media users on the right" criticizing her for being everything

from frivolous to promiscuous (MSNBC, 2019).

As discussed in section 2.2 of this paper, women in politics are expected to

conform to the femininity/competency double bind which establishes femininity as

incompatible with success as a competent politician. In sharing and spreading this video

along with the comment that AOC was acting like a "clueless nitwit," AnonymousQ1776

and his cohorts were trying to discredit her competence by highlighting her femininity

through her dancing. In this example, dancing has been presented as vapid and girlish

and has been presented in direct contrast to the rhetorical construct of a competent

politician

Many in the media were quick to defend AOC, calling this criticism into question.

The most effective rhetorical rebuttal, however, came from AOC herself. She took to

Twitter to negotiate this stereotype-based rhetoric through what I have defined in

section 3.3 as the strategy of embrace. She decided that dancing was fun and did not

negate being competent, so rather than fighting the criticism, she shifted the

conversation.

Figure 4 Olivia Beaver's tweet regarding AOC's dancing video (Olivia_Beavers, 2019, Jan. 4)

In an interview with The Hill's Olivia Beavers, AOC explained, "It is not normal for

elected officials to have a reputation for dancing well and I am happy to be one." She

continued, "It is unsurprising to me that Republicans would think having fun should be disqualifying or illegal" (Olivia_Beavers, 2019, Jan. 4). With this, AOC had turned the tables on the criticism, making it appear to be an act of jealousy rather than a legitimate attack. She also directly addressed and dismissed the idea that this dancing video, and by extent her femininity, should be "disqualifying" of her as a serious politician. Instead, she used this opportunity to create a rhetorical space in which politicians are allowed to have fun. She said, "I think it is really part of the larger question about who should run [for office] and how we should run, and I think it is great. You can be young and run for office. You can have joy in life and run for office" (Olivia_Beavers, 2019, Jan. 4).

Figure 5 Tweet featuring AOC's second dancing video (AOC, 2019, Jan. 4)

In a further attempt to embrace the newly established rhetorical construction of feminine dancing as an acceptable behavior for a politician, AOC posted a new video to Twitter. In this video, which quickly became even more viral than the first, she danced outside her congressional office. In this tweet, she wrote, "I hear the GOP thinks women dancing are scandalous. Wait till they find out Congresswomen dance too!" (AOC, 2019, Jan. 4). By tweeting this video, AOC embraced the assigned rhetorical construct of a feminine, dancing woman, and combined it both visually and in text with the image of an elected official dancing in a prominent location. In doing so, she dismissed the premise that feminine dancing stood in opposition to political competency.

4.3.4 An Uninformed Fraud. Though I cannot be sure where it originated, there is a pervasive belief that AOC is ignorant, untruthful, and fraudulent. Every post about AOC has comments from those who believe she is unqualified and does not belong in Congress. Videos have comments criticizing her use of filler words such as "like" and "uh," even though she does not use them anywhere in the video. After a live video in which AOC "flubbed distinguishing the three branches of government," she was derided by the media (Samuels, 2019). Despite her BA in economics and international relations, some in the media continue to insist that her economic policies are uninformed and "outrageous" (Trugman, 2019). Jonathon Trugman (2019), a columnist for the *New York Post*, went so far as to write, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez really needs to learn the ABC's of Economics 101." According to Hiltzik (2019), "Republicans and conservatives have

been trying to smear her as a know-nothing socialist ditz unfit to sit in the House chamber."

This insistence that AOC is uninformed is containment rhetoric. As discussed in section 2.4.3, women who form policy on issues outside of what could be considered "women's issues" are often portrayed as ill-informed or unqualified. So far in her career, AOC's most prominent policy is to establish a Democratic Socialist economy. The economy is stereotypically a masculine issue, and therefore she is seen as someone who is not able to address the topic. She is portrayed as ill-informed despite her background in economics.

The media are not alone in their attacks on AOC's intelligence. President Trump and the White House have joined in as well. When AOC called Trump a racist in an interview with Anderson Cooper, the official response from the White House was a personal attack on the congresswoman. The statement read that AOC's "sheer ignorance on the matter can't cover the fact that President Trump supported and passed historic criminal justice reform" (Scott, 2019). This assertion by the White House that AOC is ignorant to the matter of racism was blatantly incorrect. According to Scott (2019), a February 2018 Associated Press poll discovered that "nearly 6 in 10 Americans agree" that the president is racist. Furthermore, it is outlandish for the Trump administration, "an administration known for its lack of diversity" to claim a young Latina woman is ignorant about racism.

This was not the only time Trump's White House personally attacked AOC's intelligence. In mid-February, shortly after the release of AOC's New Green Deal, Trump

spoke at a rally in El Paso, Texas. To the crowd, Trump referred to her climate change

plan as "a high school term paper that got a low mark" (Schultz, 2019). The plan, Trump

claimed, "would mean taking away cars, tearing down buildings and shutting down air

travel" (Schultz, 2019). AOC responded directly to this insult, tweeting, "Ah yes, a man

who can't even read briefings written in full sentences is providing literary criticism of a

House Resolution" (Schultz, 2019). This petty exchange of insults did nothing to address

either politician's rhetorical messages. AOC has responded more successfully in the past,

once again using the rhetorical negotiation strategy of exposure.

Figure 6 AOC tweet accusing Republicans of "drooling over" her (AOC, 2018, Nov. 18)

Using Twitter, her preferred method of communication, AOC has worked to

expose the rhetorical message that she is unintelligent several times. In this first

instance, she was more indirect. She wrote, "Maybe instead of Republicans drooling over every minute of footage of me in slo-mo waiting to chop up word slips that I correct in real-time, they actually step up enough to make the argument they want to make: that they don't believe people deserve a right to healthcare" (AOC, 2018, Nov. 18). In this statement, she draws attention to the idea that Republicans are scrutinizing her every word. The word slip she is referring to is the mistake she made regarding the branches of government. In this tweet, she is pointing out how absurd it is for the Republicans to harp on her words and redirecting her followers to focus instead on policy difference.

The following month, AOC once again addresses the issue of her intelligence, this time by directly bringing to the forefront what she refers to as a double standard:

Double standards are Paul Ryan being elected at 28 and immediately being given the benefit of his ill-considered policies considered genius; and me winning a primary at 28 to immediately be treated with suspicion & scrutinized, down to my clothing, of being a fraud. (AOC, 2018 Dec. 10)

With this tweet, AOC is arguing that she is held to a different standard than Paul Ryan, who was elected at the same age. This double standard she refers to is another form of the femininity/competency double bind in that being young and inexperienced is acceptable for a masculine politician, but for a woman, these traits are seen as a marker for incompetency. AOC once again brings this rhetorical construct to the attention of her followers, allowing them to consider the impact this type of rhetoric has on her and her fellow congresswomen.

4.3.5 Containment Rhetoric and Woman-Specific Language. Section 2.4.1 above

discusses the concept of name-calling as stereotype-based containment rhetoric. This is

a weapon that has become very popular in politics and has specifically been deployed

against AOC countless times. We have already discussed how the media and other

politicians use containment rhetoric as a means to depict AOC as unintelligent;

however, that is just the tip of the language ice-berg. Other rhetoric implies that she is

infantile, she is all show, or that she is wild and needs to be reined in. Ultimately, these

types of language are used as a means to belittle AOC in an attempt to neutralize her

power. I will discuss each of these with specific examples below.

Because of her young age, AOC is subject to a significant amount of critique

which implies that she is infantile or childish. In a segment on Fox News, Brit Hume said

of AOC, "she's kinda adorable, sort of, in the way a 5-year-old child can be adorable"

(Mazza, 2019). In another Fox segment, Ed Rollins referred to her as "the little girl"

(ndrew_lawerence, 2019, Jan 4). These are both condescending statements from men

who believe that because of her age, AOC can be talked down to and treated as a child.

In communicating this to their viewers, they are also communicating that AOC has

nothing productive to say and is simply a kid who cannot effect any change.

Similarly, in a tweet that ties both a focus on appearance with damaging

containment rhetoric, Wall Street Journal columnist Peggy Noonan wrote, AOC "had a

rare bad night, looking not spirited, warm and original as usual but sullen, teenaged and

at a loss" (May, 2019). This tweet, which refers to AOC's appearance during this year's

State of the Union address, both unnecessarily discusses her physical appearance,

infantilizes her by referring to her as "teenaged," and applies feminine stereotypes of "warm" and "spirited" as traits to describe how she expected to see congresswoman watching an important speech.

AOC responded to this tweet in her usual fashion, tweeting in return "Why should I be 'spirited and warm' for this embarrassment of a #SOTU? Tonight was an unsettling night for our country" (May, 2019). With this tweet, AOC once again employed the rhetorical negotiation strategy of exposure, calling attention to the fact that she was expected to conform to these feminine stereotypes despite the "unsettling" speech she was witnessing. She again redirected the conversation away from her appearance and to the issue at hand, the State of the Union.

Figure 7 City councilman Scott Dunn's tweet calling AOC a bimbo (Papenfuss, 2019)

AOC's response was not without discussion, however. It was seen as a direct insult to President Trump, and many reacted in his defense. One defender was Scott Dunn, a city councilman from Texas. Dunn posted a tweet in response, writing "The embarrassment is to have bimbos like you with nothing between your ear[s]"

(Papenfuss, 2019). AOC did not respond to this tweet, but many of her supporters on

social media spoke out about its repugnance. The tweet was quickly deleted, and an

apology was issued. Regardless, this type of women-specific containment rhetoric, if not

checked, can be damaging to female politicians.

Figure 8 AOC's response of McCaskill's implication that she is a "shiny object" (AOC, 2018, Dec. 29)

The implication has been made that AOC is all surface. She is the hip new

politician, but there is no substance to her beneath all that stardom. She is nothing but a

"Twitter star" (Shaw, 2019). This type of rhetoric came to a head in a CNN exit interview

with former Missouri Senator Claire McCaskill. McCaskill told CNN that Democrats

"should be cautious about the rise of politicians like the 29-year-old Ocasio-Cortez"

(Raju, 2019). She elaborated, "I'm a little confused why she's the thing. But it's a good example of what I'm talking about, a bright shiny new object, came out of nowhere and surprised people when she beat a very experienced congressman" (Raju, 2019). Though it did not make the headline of the CNN article, this statement was replayed by several media outlets throughout the week. McCaskill had called AOC a "bright shiny new object."

This form of containment rhetoric is just as reductive as the infantilization in that it reduces a sitting congresswoman, the youngest ever elected, to the status of a new object with no substance that distracts people for a while until the next thing comes along. In a tweeted response, AOC referred to the former senator's statement as "disappointing" (AOC, 2018, Dec. 29). Then, as she has on several other occasions, AOC redirected the conversation to her own work in Missouri, adding, "I actually went to Missouri after my primary. I met w Ferguson activists + progressive organizers" (AOC, 2018, Dec. 29). In this way, she was denying McCaskill's rhetorical construction of her as a shallow "thing" by showing that she actively participates and does things that matter to McCaskill's former constituents.

4.3.6 The Rhetorical Construction of "Us." Much of the success of AOC's campaign boils down to the rhetorical construct she created in which she is one of us. This concept of "us" varies depending on her audience, but regardless of the audience she is always sure to connect on a familial level. This strategy is reminiscent of Senator Barbara Mikulski's rhetorical negation in which she countered the expectation that she

be family oriented by redefining the concept of family to include her constituents. AOC

is young, and she portrays herself as family-oriented not in that she has a husband and

children, but rather that she is close with her relatives and helps to care for her mother.

In this same way, she has negotiated the rhetorical construct just like Mikulski, and she

treats her constituents as part of the family she cares for.

At the heart of her campaign is the rhetorical message that she is a working-class

woman of color from the Bronx. In her hard-won primary bid, she established herself as

one of her own constituents. She wanted to serve as a representative of NY-14 because

she IS NY-14. This rhetorical message is communicated flawlessly in her two-minute

campaign video. In this video, she repeatedly uses the words "our," "us," and "we,"

creating a direct connection to and conversation with her constituents. Regarding her

opponent, Joe Crowley, she says, "[H]e doesn't live here, doesn't send his kid to our

schools, doesn't drink our water, doesn't breathe our air" (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez,

2018). She creates an us vs. them rhetoric in which she is part of the "us" and Crowley is

one of "them." Several shots in the video show her in her tiny apartment, on a subway

platform, in a local bodega, and speaking to residents of the neighborhoods. In an

interview, one of her constituents, Alejandro Osorio, said she sounded like she was from

"the real New York, not the one you see on TV where it's just white people. She created

a buzz around here because it felt like she knew our story" (Samuels, 2019).

In addition to being "Alex from the Bronx," as per her Dec. 27 tweet, AOC has

extended her familial "us" rhetorical construct to include a national audience in a couple

ways. First, she sets herself firmly among the "us" of the Millennial generation. In an

interview on the Daily Show with Trevor Noah, AOC said of her generation, "[A]s Millennials we grew up in a time—911 happened in middle school, the financial crisis happened in college. We have never really known or grown up in a time of true economic prosperity in the United States" (Noah, 2018). With this statement and many like it, AOC aligns herself with the Millennial generation, a generation that has become disenfranchised with the existing government and is pulling together to support change, particularly change in the form of younger, more representative politicians like AOC.

Figure 9 AOC tweet in which she replaces "Jenny from the Block" with "Alex from the Bronx" (AOC, 2018, Dec. 27)

4.3.7 The Image of a Courageous Radical. As discussed in section 3.2, defiance through androgyny is sometimes an effective rhetorical negotiation strategy for female

politicians. AOC employs this strategy by positioning herself as a courageous radical who does not back down from fight. These three masculine stereotypes—courageous, radical, and aggressive—are all atypical for a stereotypical female candidate, but she has effectively applied them to herself in a way that has proven to be beneficial so far in her career.

In her campaign speeches and materials, AOC presents the idea of herself as someone with great courage: "the courage to fight for these things," "the courage to say we deserve these things," "the courage to say that these things are possible" (_waheedshahid, 2018, Dec. 19). This rhetorical message is meant to convince her constituents that she has the courage to accomplish what she is promising and that she will follow through and represent them effectively.

This image of AOC as courageous ties in to her rhetorical message about fighting for the people of her district and for what is right. In her campaign materials and in many of her tweets, she establishes herself in a manner that, again, is similar to Senator Barbara Mikulski: as a fighter who will defend her people from and to the big boys of government. AOC presents herself as a scrappy girl with a Bronx attitude who is not afraid to stand up for what she believes in or to those who threaten those beliefs. In an interview on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, Colbert asked AOC if she was going to "be nicer to the president" than her predecessor (Colbert, 2018). AOC maintained this scrappy, fighter persona and replied, "Well, you know, the president is from Queens. With all due respect—half my district is from Queens—I don't think he knows how to deal with a girl from the Bronx" (Colbert, 2018). With this, AOC established herself as a

fighting force in opposition to the president and the president as a man who is not prepared for the fight. Similarly, in a Jan. 16 tweet, AOC took on the entirety of the "far right" by writing:

> I could've sat there quietly as the far right tore me to shreds (they were guaranteed to do so the moment a woman like me won the primary), or I could fight back + not let them. I chose to define myself instead of allowing them to take that away from me (AOC, 2019, Jan. 16).
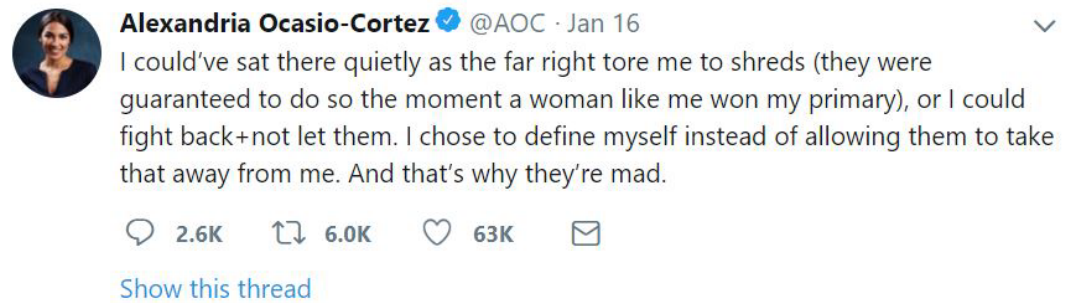
Figure 10 AOC's tweet establishing the rhetorical message that she is a fighter (AOC, 2019, Jan. 16)

In this tweet, AOC portrayed herself as someone who has already begun to fight and has won some battles as well. She has won the right to define herself, and so she has defined herself as this courageous fighter, able to take on the far right and the president himself.

Lastly, AOC has established a rhetoric message in which she aligns herself with radicals. She began this rhetoric in her campaign by describing herself as a democratic socialist, a term that, for many, is synonymous with radical ideas about the government and economy. Then, she continued to support this rhetoric by verbally aligning herself with other politicians she deemed radicals. In a "60 Minutes" interview with CNN's

Anderson Cooper, she explained, "Only radicals changed the country. Abraham Lincoln made the radical decision to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. Franklin Delano Roosevelt made the radical decision to embark on establishing programs like social security" (Cooper, 2019). When Cooper asked if she would call herself a radical, she responded, "If that's what radical means, call me a radical" (Cooper, 2019). In this way, she has also employed the rhetorical negotiation strategy of embrace.

4.3.8 Twitter as a Prominent Platform. Part of what sets AOC apart from her fellow congressional freshmen is her mastery of Twitter as a communication tool. With 3.44 million followers as of March, her tweets connect her with a massive audience from around the globe. In an article published in January, Rothschild and Allen (2019) present data that shows AOC "generating more interactions—retweets plus likes—than the six most prolific news organizations combined over the last 30 days." From Dec. 17 through Jan. 17, they calculated that AOC had generated 14.3 million interactions: less than Trump's 41.8 million, but more than Kamala Harris at 4.7 million, CNN at 3.3 million, and Speaker Nancy Pelosi at 2.5 million (Rothschild and Allen, 2019). This data essentially suggests that AOC's Twitter presence is an impactful tool for her rhetorical negotiation.

Section 2.1 established that stereotypes hold the most power in initial interactions with strangers. This section also established that most American voters do not get the opportunity to interact with politicians operating on a national level. In the case of AOC, many of her constituents know her and she has made herself available to

them throughout her campaign, but since she has garnered so much attention on a

national scale, many people are forming opinions of her based on these first impression

stereotypes. AOC's use of Twitter is, in some ways, effectively combatting this issue.

Because she speaks so personally in her tweets and interacts so heavily with many of

her followers, some of the barriers have begun to break down. Additionally, because she

uses her Twitter as a platform to speak directly to her audience, she has removed the

mainstream media as a middle man. Instead of being portrayed according to stereotype-

based rhetoric, she has created an environment in which she has control of her own

rhetorical messaging and portrayal.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

AOC and her colleagues are good examples of the most up-to-date version of our political climate. She is new on the scene, she is finding her footing, and she is rhetorically negotiating stereotypes and other rhetoric that is being thrown at her. As I stated in the introduction, we study these theories because we must understand the effects they have on the progress of female politicians. This research allows us to better evaluate the ways that the media portray female politicians and how those women work to rhetorically negotiate. The case study of AOC in particular serves as an update to previous research and an indication that this is an ongoing, current issue that needs to be addressed.

As established earlier, this research does have shortcomings. Further research should be conducted with consideration for race, gender, and sexuality. In addition to being women, many of the new members of congress represent minority groups that have not been represented in the past such as Native American, Muslim, and LGBTQ+. Herman (2019) wrote, "[M]ore women holding elected office is significant not only in

that it brings Congress closer to looking like the American population. It also expands

the collective imagination about what power can and should look like." As we begin to

change the image of power by electing officials such as AOC and her colleagues, and

continue to conduct research evaluating rhetorical negotiations, we can begin to create

a more level playing field and a more gender-inclusive version of politics. In her 1992

keynote speech to the DNC, Barbara Jordon said, "That horizon of gender equality is

limitless" (Braden, 1996, p. 194). Though we have vastly expanded the horizon that

Jordon saw almost 30 years ago, we still have a long road ahead.

Appendix A: Media Corpus

Author	Title	Context	Political Leaning
Annonymous Q1776	Re: Dancing Video	Twitter	Far Right
Bardella, Kurt	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's response to the Trump wall speech revealed why she threatens both Democrats and Republicans	NBC Opinion	Left
Beavers, Olivia	Re: Dancing Video	Twitter	Center
Bellafante, Ginia	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the Politics of a $3,000 Suit	New York Times	Left
Benwell, Max	How Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez beat everyone at Twitter in nine tweets	The Guardian	Left
Boot, Max	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Shouldn't Approach her Facts the Way Trump Does	Washington Post	Left
Cadigan, Hilary	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Learned Her Most Important Lessons from Restaurants	Bon Appetit	Center
Caruso, Justin	James Woods Rips 'Arrogant Idiot' Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: 'You Work for Us'	Breitibart	Far Right
Colbert, Stephen	Alexandria Ocasio Cortez: Trump Isn't Ready For A Girl From The Bronx	Youtube	Left
Cooper, Anderson	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: The Rookie Congresswoman Challenging the Democratic Establishment	60 Minutes	Left
C-SPAN	Re: First House Floor Speech from AOC	Twitter	Center
Firing Line	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Interview	PBS	Center
Gajanan, Mahita	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's First House Speech Broke a C-SPAN Record. Here's What She Said	Time Magazine	Left
Garber, Megan	How Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Plain Black Jacket Became a Controversy	The Atlantic	Left
Goldmacher, Shane	Ocasio-Cortez Pushes Democrats to the Left, Whether They Like It or Not	New York Times	Left
Goodkind, Nicole	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Asks: Is it still OK to have Kids in Face of Climate Change?	Newsweek	Left
Hayes, Christal	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's first days in Congress: Treated as intern, clothing criticized	USA Today	Center

Hiltzik, Michael	Memo to Conservatives: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Understands Taxes Better Than You Do	Los Angeles Times	Left
Igoe, Katherine	Who Is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Boyfriend Riley Roberts?	Marie Claire	Left
Karimi, Faith	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez responds to dance video critics with more dancing	CNN	Left
Kazan, Zoe	Re: Shaming AOC	Twitter	Left
Krugman, Paul	Re: Attention AOC is Getting	Twitter	Left
Kuperstein, Adam	'My Grandfather Died': Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Slams Trump's Hurricane Maria Death Toll Denial	NBC New York	Left
Lam, Katherine	Roseanne Barr calls Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez a 'Farrakhan Loving…Bug-Eyed B---h'	Fox News	Right
Lambiet, Jose	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's mother tells how she hopes her daughter marries her longtime boyfriend	Daily Mail	Far Right
Lawrence, Andrew	Re: Lou Dobbs	Twitter	Left
Maddow, Rachel	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Delivers Impassioned Response to President Trump's address	MSNBC/Twitter	Far Left
May, Ashley	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez responds to tweet: Why should I be 'spirited and warm' at State of the Union?	USA Today	Center
Mazza, Ed	Brit Hume Belittles 'Adorable' Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: She's Like 'A 5-Year-Old Child'	Huffington Post	Far Left
McCammond, Alexi	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has as much social media clout as her fellow freshman Democrats, combined	Axios	Center
Mikelionis, Lukas	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Faces Questions After her Boyfriend gets Congressional Email Account	Fox News	Right
MSNBC	Right Attempts To Discredit AOC With Dancing Video	Morning Joe	Youtube	Far Left
Noah, Trevor	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez - Bringing Moral Courage to American Politics	Youtube	Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Choosing to Define Herself	Twitter	Far Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Republican Boos	Twitter	Far Left

Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Being Mistake for Intern/Spouse	Twitter	Far Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Being Mistake for Intern/Spouse pt. 2	Twitter	Far Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Daily Mail Reporter	Twitter	Far Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Fake Nude Photo	Twitter	Far Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Fake Nude Photo pt. 2	Twitter	Far Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Sen. McCaskill	Twitter	Far Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Knowles Mansplaining	Twitter	Far Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Clothing	Twitter	Far Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Paul Ryan	Twitter	Far Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	Re: Mom's Interview	Twitter	Far Left
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria	The Courage to Change	Youtube	Far Left
Papenfuss, Mary	Texas City Councilman Calls Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez A 'Bimbo' After She Criticizes Trump	Huffington Post	Far Left
Pilkington, Ed	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez hits out at 'disgusting' media publishing fake nude image	The Guardian	Left
Raju, Manu	McCaskill Warns Dems About 'Cheap' Rhetoric; says GOP Senators Privately Believe Trump is 'Nuts'	CNN	Left
Remnick, David	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Historic Win and the Future of the Democratic Party	The New Yorker	Far Left
Rothschild, Neal & Allen, Mike	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has More Twitter Power than Media, Establishment	Axios	Center

Samuels, Robert	A Cautious Hope Emerges Among Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Constituents	Washington Post	Left
Schultz, Marisa	Trump: Ocasio-Cortez's 'Green New Deal' Sounds like a 'High School Term Paper'	New York Post	Far Right
Scott, Eugene	Ocasio-Cortez called Trump a Racist. The White House Response May Have Proved her Point	Washington Post	Left
Shahid, Waleed	Re: AOC Campaign	Twitter	Far Left
Shaw, Adam	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tells Colbert she gives 'zero' f---s about Dem pushback	Fox News	Right
Traister, Rebecca	The Imagined Threat of a Woman Who Governs Like a Man	New York Magazine	Far Left
Trugman, Jonathon	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Needs a Lesson in Economics	New York Post	Far Right

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