Opinion

News



U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez participates in a conversation moderated by Briahna Gray, senior politics editor for The Intercept, March 9 at SXSW (South by Southwest) festival in Austin, Texas (Wikimedia Commons/Stale Grut)



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Everywhere you looked this week, there were signs that the Democratic Party might be in danger of forming a circular firing squad.

Wednesday, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi defended dismissive comments she directed at U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the other members of "the Squad," a term coined by four newly elected members of Congress — AOC (as Ocasio-Cortez is popularly called), Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib — to describe themselves. Pelosi had earlier observed, "While there are people who have a large number of Twitter followers, what's important is that we have large numbers of votes on the floor of the House." Nasty but mostly true.

Pelosi is wrong to be whining about these young members' ability to work social media. We old fogies should always be wary of criticizing the prowess of younger folk with new technologies. It sounds small, and it makes the older complainer look weak and out-of-touch. Besides, social media capabilities are not the real problem within the Democratic caucus. That said, some of the things the Squad and their staffers say on social media are really repugnant.

The real concern that animates Pelosi is that AOC and other newly elected Democrats who come from overwhelmingly Democratic, or blue, districts, do not realize how much their attempts to pull the party to the left endanger the Democratic majority, which exists because a significant number of moderate Democrats flipped districts that remain deeply purple. There are not enough heavily Democratic districts like New York's 14th to command a majority.

Sure enough, I got an email from the National Republican Congressional Committee, the title of which was "Will Sharice Davids cave to socialist Dems on funding our troops?" The "socialist" tag is one we can expect to hear frequently after a new Washington Post/ABCNews poll showed that President Donald Trump would win reelection against any Democrat perceived by the voters to be a socialist. Rep.

Davids represents Kansas' 3rd congressional district, and she won by defeating an incumbent Republican, Kevin Yoder. There is a world of difference between voters in Kansas-3 and New York-14, which Ocasio-Cortez represents. Kansas' 3rd District voters are exactly the kind of voters Democrats will continue to need if they are to win the Senate, hold the House and defeat Trump in 2020.

Ocasio-Cortez is, in some ways, more radical than Pelosi, but that is not the real problem. We need someone on the left to push the conversation further than it otherwise would go. Come the general election, Democrats in more moderate districts can distance themselves from AOC. An unintended consequence of the kerfuffle on the left is that Pelosi looks like the more moderate grown-up in the room, after years of being criticized as an out-of-touch "San Francisco Democrat."

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The real problem is that AOC, "the Squad" and the voters that vaulted her into a surprise defeat of incumbent Joe Crowley in the 2018 Democratic primary, all too often sound like they think they are better than everyone else, and their insistence on ideological purity only exacerbates that perception. What is worse, when challenged, AOC played the race card, complaining that Pelosi was targeting "women of color." Excuse me, but what does race have to do with any of this? Does AOC think that because of the color of her skin she cannot be criticized? When these four women of color call themselves "the Squad," it is hip, but when anybody else does, it is racist? Huh?

Pretending race is a part of the problem with Pelosi does a great disservice to the country, the party and to minorities. At a time when white nationalism really is back with a vengeance, to introduce race into a fight with Pelosi makes many people suspicious of all charges of racism, the real from the feigned.

It is important to remember that AOC did not defeat Crowley in the primary because the district had become more Latino. Crowley carried the more heavily Latino districts. AOC won the gentrifying districts. Which brings us to the real worry about AOC and her ilk: that the prejudices of the urban elite who run Democratic campaigns and staff congressional offices will only be reinforced for AOC when she heads back to the district and meets with the yuppies who voted her in. The worry is that the people to whom AOC answers and the people who staff her office and her campaign are the same people who nodded in agreement when Hillary Clinton spoke

about the "deplorables." These hyper-woke activists-turned-politicians are not too media-savvy or too radical: They are too self-absorbed and obnoxious.

The echo chamber of the cultural left could cripple the Democrats. The spokespeople for the young left, like AOC, often do not realize how out of touch they are, how canned and fake their politically correct way of speaking sounds to average people, how remote their concerns are from the ones that most voters bring with them into the voting booth. For all the cant about diversity on the left, there is actually very little diversity of thought tolerated in elite left political culture. Whether it's environmental activists who do not care about making sure their solar projects are done with union labor, pro-choice activists who view those of us concerned about the lack of legal protection for the unborn as troglodytes, or peddlers of identity politics telling us we are all a bunch of racists and sexists and bigots, well, you can understand how Republicans win.

Democrats also need to realize that on some issues, they can go pretty far to the left, and those issues are mostly economic. Way back in February I called attention to research by Lee Drutman that shows 28.9% of the electorate considers itself liberal on economic issues but more conservative on social issues. Conversely, only 3.8% consider themselves conservative on economic issues and liberal on social issues. But candidates are constantly tempted to move to the center on the economic front and stick with the extremes on the social issues. Again, you can understand how Republicans win elections.

I want to like AOC, but she makes it so hard to do so. Adept at the outsiders' game, she chose to run for Congress, which is an insiders' game, and she needs to figure out the difference. Her youthful energy often outstrips her intellectual heft. She plays nasty, and then when someone pushes back, she screams race. If she wants to be taken seriously, she has to do better than this, and if the Democrats want to defeat Trump, they need to start distancing themselves from AOC.

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