

The American Conservative

If the Democrats Want Socialism, They Should Go Local

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June 28, 2018

Tuesday's primaries revealed that insurgency in the Democratic Party is alive and well, as the progressive Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez triumphed over the incumbent Congressman Joe Crowley in New York's 14th Congressional District. Despite being outspent by a margin of 18-to-1, Ocasio-Cortez, who previously worked on Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign, beat Crowley by a wide margin. *Vogue* has called Ocasio-Cortez the possible "future of the Democratic Party." As a self-avowed democratic socialist, her campaign platform echoed the Bernie revolution: Medicare for all, higher education for all, housing as a human right, a federal jobs guarantee, fighting climate change, and even the abolishment of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, to name a few.

But before Ocasio-Cortez's romantic notions of socialist utopia and economic justice run head-first into America's federalist power-sharing system, it's worth examining them through the lens of local politics and social capital.

Is running for Congress the right path to institute socialist policies for your constituents? Examining the democratic side of her democratic socialism first, Ocasio-Cortez's fatal flaw is well summarized in her campaign video introduction: "I was born in a place where your zip code determines your destiny." This system, she says, doesn't work. The rent keeps climbing, wages are low, access to health care is prohibitive, and families struggle. Yet it is also well known that democracy works best at the local level and decreases in effectiveness as the scale of the population increases. Hence the federalism that's built into America's constitutional system. The citizens of Boise, Idaho have a say over taxes in their city just as the citizens of the Bronx have a say over their education system.

What do the local politics in the zip code of New York's 14th reveal? That district, a small sliver of real estate encompassing the eastern Bronx and part of north-central Queens, is home to approximately 700,000 people. The borough presidents of both Queens and the Bronx are Democrats and have been since the 1960s. In fact, in Queens, well over 60 percent of the population identifies as Democratic voters. Climbing higher to the state level, the last Republican governor, George Pataki, left office in January 2007 to be replaced by Eliot Spitzer, who was followed by two more Democrats. The state legislature, minus Republican control of the senate attained in 2011, has remained solidly blue.

Speaking with *Vogue*, Ocasio-Cortez blamed luxury real estate developers and claimed that “in the last three years or so, the median price of a two-bedroom apartment in New York 14 has gone up 80 percent.” But how can New York inner-city real estate pricing be controlled by a “housing as a human right” policy enacted at the federal level? Congress represents hundreds of millions of Americans spread out across a vast country. If the Democratic majority politics of the tiny 14th can’t produce affordable housing in the 14th, how can one Democratic congresswoman in a legislature controlled by Republicans pull it off?

Shifting to her socialism specifically, when questioned about the appeal of her ideology, Ocasio-Cortez said that “to me what socialism means is to guarantee a basic level of dignity.” Yet there has already been a comparatively high level of dignity achieved. Reporting in 2015, the Cato Institute found that in New York a mother with two children under the age of five, after drawing from six welfare programs, would receive benefits equating to \$27,500 per year. Compare that to similar compensation in Germany (\$23,257) and Sweden (\$22,111); New Yorkers are only behind Denmark and the United Kingdom so far as welfare generosity goes. And that doesn’t include Medicaid, valued at \$10,460 per year.

In fact there’s a much deeper problem in New York’s 14th. In his groundbreaking book Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam correlates diversity with a marked decrease in social capital. Distinguishing between bridging and bonding capital, the former *between* two different groups and the latter *within* the same group, Putnam finds that ethnic diversity and multiculturalism cause a decrease in both types. Similarity increases trust and cooperation; diversity has the opposite effect, causing people to “hunker down” in the words of Putnam.

The breakdown of the 14th district is approximately 50 percent Hispanic, 19 percent white, 16 percent Asian, and 11 percent black. And while this eclectic ethnic diversity surely results in delicious culinary enrichment, basic human psychology has demonstrated that it lacks the building blocks for social capital. In a borough like Queens where 138 languages are spoken, eligible voter turnout for primary elections stands at 3 percent. The average American citizen knows the stereotype of a New Yorker well: unfriendly, cold, and rude.

The answer to “so what?” is that socialism as a guarantee of dignity and safety requires similarity to be voluntary—without that similarity, it becomes compulsory and coercive and therefore undemocratic. The welfare states of Northern Europe are smaller in population and share a similar culture, history, religion, land, and language. The average citizen of a country like Denmark doesn’t see resource reallocation as robbing Peter to pay Paul; he sees it as a form of fraternity and willingly votes for socialized medicine and a welfare safety net. The significant costs associated with such programs are acknowledged and accepted. (Nowhere in Ocasio-Cortez’s policy proposals are costs discussed or acknowledged. Right after right is listed, free of obligation or responsibility.)

Fortunately, Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign won’t make it that far in a sizable and dysfunctional Congress. If you want socialism, you have to start small and work big, and the fact that generous welfare policies in New York’s 14th still have Ocasio-Cortez asking for more truly says something. The question now is whether her campaign represents a continuation of the Bernie revolution or a splinter faction that splits the democratic socialist Bolsheviks from the Mensheviks (Bolshevik translated as more and Menshevik as less). After all, even old Uncle Bernie didn’t go so far as to demand that ICE be abolished.