

Politics and the Future: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez As Rhetorical Educator

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The year prior to a presidential election is marked with public conjecture regarding which political figures will launch their presidential campaigns. This article focuses on one of those figures who has been the subject of periodic speculation: Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Given the young representative's vagueness regarding a presidential run and her emphatic conclusion that she will not run for Senate in 2024, Ocasio-Cortez's future plans have yet to be defined. In this commentary piece, I argue that Ocasio-Cortez's rhetorical choices suggest that she is not seeking the presidency in 2024. Rather, I believe that her communicative choices online and offline reflect that she is establishing herself in the House of Representatives as a communicative expert and educator. By revisiting memorable moments in Ocasio-Cortez's public communication, I underscore why I conclude that she does not plan to run in the 2024 presidential race.

Keywords: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, presidential candidates, presidential elections, political campaigns, political communication, rhetoric

The time has arrived. The 2024 U.S. presidential race is upon us, and as prospective leaders declare their candidacies, current contexts and historical exigencies craft spectator perceptions of who will make it, and who will fold under pressure. In the early months of 2023, several questions permeated public speculation: Who is actually going to run? Is a Biden-Trump rematch inevitable? Prior to President Joe Biden announcing his pursuit of a second term, a third question was also present: If not Biden, then who? Admittedly, the latter question is now inconsequential in the 2024 race, but it remains pertinent as we think forward to 2028 and beyond. As a scholar-spectator of American political communication, I find myself reflecting upon the future of a candidate whose name emerged in early potential candidate lists: Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Given her public vagueness regarding a presidential run and her refusal to run for Senate in 2024, Ocasio-Cortez's future plans remain unclear. So, to answer those audience questions directly, let me not bury the lead. I maintain the argument I posed at SSCA in April 2023. Namely, I believe with 85-90% certainty that Ocasio-Cortez is not seeking the presidency in 2024. When I assess her recent rhetorical choices, I see a different plan unfolding. Namely, I believe that through her social media strategies, public appearances, and interrogative techniques, she is centering herself in Congress as a communicative expert and educator.

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In this discussion piece, I explain why I do not think she is running in 2024 by underlining the rhetorical events in Ocasio-Cortez's public communication that diverge from choices made by prospective candidates. However, I need to first offer a disclaimer. Political campaigns are subject to change, and my thoughts in this article are a reflection of what I knew in April 2023 and what I know now in October 2023. Contexts may change. Candidates may emerge and fade. Forces of nature outside of our control may void our campaign expectations. I can address the past but merely postulate about the future. So, thank you for offering your understanding when I inevitably make a claim that may be laughable in six months' time.

Without further ado, let us explore why I conclude that, based on recent events, Ocasio-Cortez is not running in the 2024 presidential race. Specifically, I will first summarize Ocasio-Cortez's career to familiarize ourselves with her public identity and relevant historical exigencies. Second, I will describe how her communicative choices in addressing issues and enemies deviate from a traditional presidential trajectory. Finally, I will contemplate Ocasio-Cortez's plans as a public servant and posit some implications regarding the patriarchal norms that currently govern the recipe for future presidents and gatekeep opportunities from diverse candidates.

Ocasio-Cortez's Career

A quick review of Ocasio-Cortez's representative webpage¹ and campaign website² reveals her backstory highlights. Currently, Ocasio-Cortez is a U.S. representative for New York's 14th congressional district and a member of the Democratic Party. At the start of her first term in 2019, Ocasio-Cortez held notoriety as both the youngest Latina woman and the youngest member of Congress.³ Moreover, her grassroots campaign completely disrupted expectations when it defeated long-time incumbent, Joe Crowley, who had served the district since 1999.⁴ Although serving in Congress was Ocasio-Cortez's first experience serving in office, Ocasio-Cortez was not a stranger to activism and political campaigning. Before running for Congress, she worked as the educational director with the National Hispanic Institute and a volunteer organizer for the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign.⁵ Once she launched her own campaign, she declared that she would not accept financial support from corporations, a commitment that she claims to have maintained.⁶

In terms of issues, Ocasio-Cortez supports universal healthcare, accessible housing initiatives, immigration reform, improved public education, and relief support for U.S. territory, Puerto Rico, in the wake of catastrophic natural disasters.⁷ As her personal platform website underscores, she sponsored the Green New Deal and collaborated with congressional colleagues to pursue progress for women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, justice for working Americans and aging Americans, and efforts toward an economy of diplomacy rather than an economy of war.⁸ A critic of corporate

¹ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, representative website, accessed October 10, 2023, <https://ocasio-cortez.house.gov/>.

² Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, campaign website, accessed October 10, 2023, <https://www.ociasiocortez.com/>.

³ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, "About," representative website, January 3, 2021, <https://ocasio-cortez.house.gov/about>.

⁴ Ocasio-Cortez, "About," representative website.

⁵ Ocasio-Cortez, "About," representative website.

⁶ Ocasio-Cortez, "About," representative website.

⁷ Ocasio-Cortez, "AOC's Platform," campaign website, accessed June 7, 2023, <https://www.ociasiocortez.com/issues#solidarity-with-puerto-rico>.

⁸ Ocasio-Cortez, "AOC's Platform," campaign website, accessed October 10, 2023, <https://www.ociasiocortez.com/issues>.

corruption, Ocasio-Cortez has spoken on the House floor about the pharmaceutical industry⁹ and the U.S. campaign finance system.¹⁰

I would argue that one moment that foreshadowed Ocasio-Cortez's political persona was captured in the Netflix documentary, *Knock Down the House*.¹¹ Shortly before discovering that she unseated Crowley, Ocasio-Cortez peered through the windows of a building to see a crowd of people celebrating with unbridled joy. Running into the building, she was quickly pulled into the crowd by a reporter. As she searched the television screens above for answers, Ocasio-Cortez's face was flooded with realization and shock when she discovered that she would be the new representative for New York's 14th congressional district. When the reporter asked, "How are you feeling? Can you put it into words?", Ocasio-Cortez's response was direct and succinct: "Nope. I cannot put this into words." And yet, that might be the last time that she has not had the words. Today, she is known for her pointed questions, impassioned speeches, and savvy use of social media to critique injustice and normalize her identity as an everyday citizen-turned-politician.

Communicative Deviations from Presidential Candidate Expectations

Because of her personable and passionate personality, it is not surprising that some political pundits and publications have questioned whether she would consider pursuing the presidency.¹² Despite this early press, I would be shocked if Ocasio-Cortez launched a presidential bid in the 2024 election cycle. Realistically, it would run counter to partisan norms of supporting incumbent presidents who seek re-election. Since Joe Biden is pursuing a second term, it is highly unlikely that many Democrats will run as challengers.¹³ However, even if we took Biden out of the equation and treated this as a race without a Democratic incumbent, I still do not believe that Ocasio-Cortez would seek the presidency in 2024 because her communicative choices strongly deviate from choices typically made by presidential hopefuls.¹⁴ To explore this claim further, let us visit (1)

⁹ John Haltiwanger, "'People Are Dying for No Reason': Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Confronts Drug Company CEO over HIV Medication Costing Almost \$2,000 a Month in the US and Only \$8 in Australia," *Business Insider*, May 16, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-confronts-gilead-ceo-over-high-cost-of-hiv-drug-truvada-prep-2019-5>; Affordable Insulin Now Act, H.R. 1488, 118th Cong. (2023), <http://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/1488>; Tim Fitzsimons, "Ocasio-Cortez Slams Gilead over HIV Drug Prices: 'People Are Dying for No Reason,'" *NBC News*, May 17, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/ocasio-cortez-slams-gilead-over-hiv-drug-prices-people-are-n1006646>.

¹⁰ C-SPAN, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Dissects America's 'fundamentally Broken' Campaign Finance Laws - Video," *The Guardian*, February 7, 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/global/video/2019/feb/08/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-brutal-take-down-of-us-political-finance-laws-video>.

¹¹ Rachel Lears, *Knock Down the House* (2019; Brooklyn, NY: Netflix), Netflix.

¹² Stephen Colbert and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, "Would Rep. Ocasio-Cortez Run For President In 2024? She Will Meet The Age Requirement!," *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, June 29, 2022, video, 1:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UFc1CFOWas>; Caroline Vakil, "Ocasio-Cortez Avoids Question on Possible 2024 Presidential Bid," *The Hill*, June 29, 2022, <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/3541704-ocasio-cortez-avoids-question-on-possible-2024-presidential-bid/>; Aaron Blake, "Top 10 Democratic 2024 Presidential Candidates (besides Biden), Ranked," *Washington Post*, April 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/04/25/top-10-democrats-president-rankings-biden/>.

¹³ It is worth noting that as of June 6, 2023, two candidates—Marianne Williamson and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.—had filed the paperwork necessary to challenge President Biden in the Democratic Primary. On October 9, 2023, Kennedy announced he would run as an independent.

¹⁴ Robert E. Denton, Jr., Judith S. Trent, and Robert V. Friedenberg, *Political Campaign Communication: Principles & Practices* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

Ocasio-Cortez's general communication style, (2) her explicit denial that she is seeking the presidency now, and (3) more subtle communicative choices suggesting an alternative path.

General Communication Style

First, I believe that understanding Ocasio-Cortez's communication style helps us establish her baseline "normal" talk, which in turn helps us notice variations suggesting presidential foreshadowing (or lack thereof). If I truncated her communicative style into one phrase, I would say that she is rhetorically adaptive. She is highly attuned to the context in which she is speaking and modifies her rhetoric accordingly. Behind a podium, she is a bold, confident rhetorician. Yet, on social media and other computer-mediated channels, she presents herself conversationally. For example, on Twitch and Instagram livestreams, she hosts casual conversations with followers to talk through situations occurring in Congress.¹⁵ She also consistently uploads short videos of community visits where she answers questions and explains legislative efforts. From environmental justice through the Green New Deal¹⁶ to congressional delegation trips,¹⁷ Ocasio-Cortez outlines what legislation means and how government works. Frankly, I find that she takes on the persona of a teacher-mentor-friend, not just stating "x is happening" but explaining what she believes x means. Indeed, she communicates about issues through traditional persuasive frameworks and appeals, framing her arguments coherently and explicitly to underscore her point. Still, she does so in an accessible manner.

Paired with her clear argumentation and informative discourse online is Ocasio-Cortez's appropriate delivery in response to contexts. From her get-out-the-vote efforts through both recorded community speeches¹⁸ and cinematic video productions¹⁹ to livestreams of her playing video games like *Among Us*²⁰ and *Animal Crossing*,²¹ she understands that different situations and different audiences call for different rhetorical appeals. I hear far more from Ocasio-Cortez through social media than I do through formal press conferences and media appearances, which aligns with her campaign's sentiment that the people hold the power.

¹⁵ Allegra Frank, "AOC Met More than 400,000 Young Potential Voters on Twitch," *Vox*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/10/22/21526625/aoc-twitch-stream-among-us-most-popular-twitch-streams-ever>; David Smith, "AOC's Cooking Live Streams Perfect the Recipe for Making Politics Palatable," *The Guardian*, December 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/dec/13/aoc-cooking-live-streams-politics>.

¹⁶ Alicia De-Lara, María-Carmen Erviti, and Bienvenido León, "Communication Strategies in the Climate Change Debate on Facebook. Discourse on the Madrid Climate Summit (COP 25)," *El Profesional de La Información* 31, no. 2 (2022): 1–16, accessed June 6, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2022.mar.02>; Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (@aoc), "The Disaster in Texas Is Quite Literally What Happens When You *don't* Pass a Green New Deal," Instagram, February 23, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLpnlU2nyp3/?hl=en>.

¹⁷ Ocasio-Cortez (@aoc), "Hello from Tokyo," Instagram Live, February 20, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Co4hsojI9Kn/?hl=en>.

¹⁸ TeamAOC (@teamaoc), "We talk a lot about the importance of knocking on doors, making calls, and getting out to meet our community where they are. But why?" Instagram, October 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cjn3TQpAZtH/?hl=en>

¹⁹ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, "The Courage to Change | Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez," YouTube, May 30, 2018, video, 2:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rq3QXIVR0bs>.

²⁰ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), "AOC," Twitch, October 20, 2020, video, 3:31:00, <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/776770697>.

²¹ Gita Jackson, "Animal Crossing Players Blessed By A Visit By Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez," *Vice* (blog), May 8, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/8894yp/animal-crossing-players-blessed-by-a-visit-by-alexandria-ocasio-cortez>.

Denial of 2024 Presidential Run

In the comments sections of her social media posts, I often notice supporters calling her “future madam president.” However, just because some of her supporters want her to run does not mean that Ocasio-Cortez intends or even wants to seek the office. Despite numerous sources asking questions like, “Will AOC run? Is AOC the only competition for Trump?”²², Ocasio-Cortez has consistently responded vaguely. To *GQ* in 2022, she shared that she felt conflicted about running for president, stating, “My experience here has given me a front-row seat to how deeply and unconsciously, as well as consciously, so many people in this country hate women. And they hate women of color.”²³ In addition to the racism, sexism, and legitimate personal safety concerns that Ocasio-Cortez faces, she recognizes that as a vocal critic of Wall Street, campaign fundraising would be challenging. Admittedly, given that no 30-something-year-old has ever been elected president, precedent is not in her favor either. Still, as recently as mid-April of 2023, some news organizations continued to list Ocasio-Cortez as a potential candidate in the 2024 race, given that she will technically be eligible to run. Yet, as she told *Politico* on April 2, 2023, “There’s a world where I’m here for a long time in his seat, in this position. There’s a world where I’m not an elected official anymore. There’s a world where . . . I may be in higher office.”²⁴ Since April, Biden announced his intention to seek a second term and Ocasio-Cortez endorsed him in July.²⁵ Although this endorsement strongly implies that she is not running in 2024, her statement to *Politico* provides just enough ambiguity for skeptics to question and supporters to hope.

Divergence from Expectations: Examples

With that context in mind, let us examine some examples of Ocasio-Cortez deviating from the communicative expectations of presidential hopefuls. During the surfacing phase of political campaigns, candidates engage in what Judith Trent described as a “series of predictable and specifically timed rhetorical transactions which serve consummatory and instrumental functions during the pre-primary phase of the campaign.”²⁶ Already, we have witnessed Donald Trump super PACs

²² Niall Stange, “No, Really — What If Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Runs for President?” *The Hill* (blog), July 29, 2022, <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/3578887-the-memo-no-really-what-if-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-runs-for-president/>; Michael Starr Hopkins, “AOC Is the Democrats’ Best Shot against Trump in 2024,” *The Hill* (blog), August 2, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/3583238-aoc-is-the-democrats-best-shot-against-trump-in-2024/>.

²³ Wesley Lowery, “AOC’s Fight for the Future,” *GQ Magazine*, September 7, 2022, <https://www.gq.com/story/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-october-cover-profile>.

²⁴ Nicholas Wu and Jordain Carney, “From Agitator to Insider: The Evolution of AOC.”

²⁵ Michelle L. Price, “Ocasio-Cortez endorses Biden’s reelection campaign, sending a strong signal of Democratic unity,” *AP News*, July 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/aoc-endorses-biden-2024-president-democrats-3c722f5ac1bc2c568b6d962d4fe4e2b7>.

²⁶ Judith S. Trent, “Presidential Surfacing: The Ritualistic and Crucial First Act,” *Communication Monographs* 45 (1978): 282, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637757809375974>.

criticizing fellow candidates,²⁷ Nikki Haley traveling to key battleground states,²⁸ and Ron DeSantis seeking financial support²⁹ and appearing on social media and conservative news shows.³⁰ As of early October 2023, 11 Republicans and two Democrats had officially declared their candidacy.³¹ Two individuals have declared that they are running as Independents.³² The actions of all 15 candidates align with our expectations of political candidates. They are heightening their public personas, fundraising, and crafting their core issues through online and in-person discourse. Now, Ocasio-Cortez is underscoring her platform and performing a key element of the challenger candidate: Pointing out flaws in her critics' claims.³³ From Mitch McConnell and Donald Trump to Marjorie Taylor Greene and former congressman Ted Yoho,³⁴ Ocasio-Cortez does not hesitate to denounce behaviors, like Yoho calling her a "fucking bitch,"³⁵ and invite colleagues to experience the discomfort that their words and actions elicit. For example, in the wake of Yoho's remark, Ocasio-Cortez both responded in a House Floor speech, noting, "I've never had that kind of abrupt, disgusting kind of disrespect levied at me," and pointedly called out his actions on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, quipping, "I never spoke to Rep. Yoho before he decided to accost me on the steps of the nation's Capitol yesterday. Believe it or not, I usually get along fine w/ my GOP colleagues. We know how to check our legislative sparring at the committee door. But hey, 'b*itches' get stuff done."³⁶ Yet, as noted in this example, she is not focusing her critiques on candidates, and similarities to campaign trail rhetoric evaporate when we examine more of her communicative choices.

Take, for example, her 2021 Met Gala debut, during which she wore a white mermaid gown by Aurora James with the phrase, "Tax the Rich" splashed in sprawling red font across the back.³⁷ Unsurprisingly, the dress gained considerable attention. Most recently, that attention has stemmed from a House Ethics Committee investigation regarding concerns that by wearing the borrowed

²⁷ Ben Kamisar, "Trump, DeSantis Super PAC about Even on Airwaves so Far," *NBC News*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/trump-desantis-super-pac-even-airwaves-far-rcna84491>.

²⁸ Neil Vigdor, "Nikki Haley Hits the Campaign Trail," *New York Times*, February 27, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/02/27/us/politics/nikki-haley-campaign-trail.html>.

²⁹ Brian Schwartz, "Ron DeSantis Lines up Business Leaders to Raise Money for 2024 Presidential Run," *CNBC*, May 23, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/23/desantis-bundlers-presidential-campaign.html>.

³⁰ Shane Goldmacher et al., "DeSantis Set to Announce 2024 Run on Twitter With Elon Musk," *New York Times*, May 23, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/23/us/politics/desantis-elon-musk-twitter.html>; Ryan Mac and Tiffany Hsu, "DeSantis's Twitter Event Falls Short of the Reach of Past Livestreams," *New York Times*, May 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/25/technology/ron-desantis-twitter-spaces-live-stream.html>.

³¹ Meg Kinnard, "Who's running for president? See a rundown of the 2024 candidates," *AP News*, October 9, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/election-2024-presidential-candidates-191593679f2f6ea2debf521df4453a9c>.

³² Kinnard, "Who's running for president?"

³³ Robert E. Denton, Jr., Judith S. Trent, and Robert V. Friedenberg, *Political Campaign Communication: Principles & Practices* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

³⁴ Luke Broadwater, "Ocasio-Cortez Embraces a Republican's Insult," *New York Times*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/21/us/politics/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-ted-yoho.html>.

³⁵ Mike Lillis, "Ocasio-Cortez Accosted by GOP Lawmaker over Remarks: 'That Kind of Confrontation Hasn't Ever Happened to Me,'" *The Hill* (blog), July 21, 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/508259-ocasio-cortez-accosted-by-gop-lawmaker-over-remarks-that-kind-of/>.

³⁶ Lillis, "Ocasio-Cortez Accosted by GOP Lawmaker over Remarks."

³⁷ Christi Carras, "AOC Defends Polarizing 'Tax the Rich' Met Gala Dress: 'The Medium Is the Message,'" *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-09-14/met-gala-2021-aoc-tax-the-rich-dress>.

dress, Ocasio-Cortez may have accepted an impermissible gift.³⁸ However, the attention that I invite us to focus on is the dress's message. Namely, I do not believe that the dress's critique aligns with the intentions of someone seeking the presidency. A pivotal indicator of a campaign's potential success is its ability to substantially fundraise. While the appropriateness of money's centrality in campaigns is up for debate, what isn't is the reality that campaigns are profoundly expensive. Ocasio-Cortez certainly has a history of securing political positions through grassroots organizing—and continues to decline corporate funding—so it could be argued that her dress was “on-brand.” However, I would counter that while Ocasio-Cortez does not like corporate funding, she knows its importance in campaigning. That is why she spoke on February 7, 2019 about the broken nature of the U.S. campaign finance system.³⁹ Although two years have passed since her Met Gala appearance, I would anticipate that if Ocasio-Cortez was planning a presidential run in 2024, she would have started her grassroots fundraising far earlier than 2021 to compensate for the corporate fallout over her criticism (including, but not limited to the dress's visual rhetoric). After all, her legislative initiatives could substantially impact corporate America (i.e., credit card interest rate cap, Green New Deal, finance reform, etc.). While some might suggest that the House Ethics Committee investigation should preclude her from running, given the indictments and investigations into other declared candidates, I think the dress investigation is hardly a speed bump in her non-existent campaign. I argue that the real speed bump is more practical: she hasn't fundraised for a presidential run yet.

The dress, however, is not the only communication choice indicating that Ocasio-Cortez does not plan to run in 2024. Her reported involvement in Congress suggests that she is focused on her work as a representative and not as a presidential hopeful. I see this theme emerge in both her mentorship and her current projects. In her second term, Ocasio-Cortez seems to be prioritizing the cultivation of the next generation of politicians through mentorship. Now youngest-member, Representative Maxwell Frost, has noted that Ocasio-Cortez has informally taken him under her wing. In his words, “There is a solidarity just being young people in Congress. So, she gives me a lot of advice — not even political, but practical advice, just coming here as a working-class person.”⁴⁰ Moreover, her fellow representatives have indicated that she is actively advising colleagues on asking questions during committee hearings, a skill in which she is highly proficient.⁴¹ Already, she has played a pivotal role in high-profile hearings, including those of Trump lawyer Michael Cohen⁴² and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg.⁴³ Rather than gatekeeping her skill, Ocasio-Cortez is reportedly sharing her approaches with peers to improve the quality of congressional hearings.

In addition to her mentorship, Ocasio-Cortez is serving on numerous committees and pursuing meaningful projects for her constituents. Currently, she is the Vice Ranking Member on the Committee of Oversight and Reform, which oversees investigations in the House. Additionally, she is serving on the Committee on Natural Resources and as Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on

³⁸ *BBC News*, “AOC under Investigation for Met Gala Dress Reading ‘Tax The Rich,’” March 3, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-64837119>.

³⁹ C-SPAN, “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Dissects America’s ‘fundamentally Broken’ Campaign Finance Laws.”

⁴⁰ Wu and Carney, “From Agitator to Insider: The Evolution of AOC.”

⁴¹ Wu and Carney, “From Agitator to Insider.”

⁴² Caroline Fredrickson, “Opinion | How Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Won the Cohen Hearing,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/opinion/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-cohen-hearing.html>.

⁴³ Kari Paul, “Ocasio-Cortez Stumps Zuckerberg with Questions on Far Right and Cambridge Analytica,” *The Guardian*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/oct/23/mark-zuckerberg-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-facebook-cambridge-analytica>.

Energy and Mineral Resources. She is also a member of numerous Caucuses, including the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, Congressional Progressive Caucus, Pro-Choice Caucus, Democratic Women's Caucus, LGBT Equality Caucus, Quiet Skies Caucus, and Congressional Bangladesh Caucus.⁴⁴

Alongside her committee and caucus membership, Ocasio-Cortez has been productive in supporting local projects through her community project funds. In her first term, she secured funding for 15 projects that benefit NY-14, including revitalizing a school library and literary services for immigrant New Yorkers, creating mental health programming for teenagers and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, supporting families of students with special needs, improving access to housing counseling, and strengthening transportation infrastructure safety.⁴⁵ In the 2024 fiscal year, she has requested funding for 15 new community projects. These projects include building a violence prevention community center, two youth centers, a food distribution center for local farmers, and playgrounds, as well as improving ADA compliance in building infrastructure, and initiating river restoration.⁴⁶ In short, she is staying busy, and I do not believe her actions reflect attention-splitting between Congress and campaign. Rather, her actions suggest that she is centering mentorship, relationship-building, policy-crafting, and community development as career priorities.

The Future of Ocasio-Cortez (and Presidential Rhetoric)

Based on Ocasio-Cortez's responses to questions regarding the presidency, I think she may eventually run. However, I also think it is improbable that she runs anytime soon, not because she is not capable, but because she is strategic. Ocasio-Cortez has stated before that people need to "focus on keeping a democracy for anybody to be president,"⁴⁷ and I think she sees herself as one of the frontline workers protecting that democracy. Although she is likely sketching out possible career directions, I think she is centering herself in addressing the now, developing relationships in both the Democratic Party and GOP, and taking on a teacher-like persona to improve the communication emerging within Congress. My perception of Ocasio-Cortez aligns with that of Representative and former law professor, Jamie Raskin (D-Maryland), who stated, "People don't see the academic nerd side of her, but I totally do, as a professor."⁴⁸ Frankly, like Raskin, I think Ocasio-Cortez is slowly becoming Congress's Professor of Communication.

Given her rhetorical prowess, I do not think Ocasio-Cortez will run for the presidency unless she witnesses a critical exigence. Running will be a call to service rather than a career gold star. Further, as previously mentioned, I do not think she is tailoring her communication with the presidency in mind. If I think back to Judith Trent's work on political surfacing,⁴⁹ Robert E. Denton

⁴⁴ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, "Committees and Caucuses," representative website, August 27, 2021, <https://ocasio-cortez.house.gov/legislation/committees-and-caucuses>.

⁴⁵ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, "FY23 Community Project Funds," representative website, March 30, 2022, <https://ocasio-cortez.house.gov/congress/fy23-community-project-funds>.

⁴⁶ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, "FY24 Community Project Funding Requests," March 2, 2023, <https://ocasio-cortez.house.gov/congress/fy24-community-project-funding-requests>.

⁴⁷ Colbert and Ocasio-Cortez, "Would Rep. Ocasio-Cortez Run For President In 2024?"

⁴⁸ Wu and Carney, "From Agitator to Insider."

⁴⁹ Judith S. Trent, "Presidential Surfacing: The Ritualistic and Crucial First Act," *Communication Monographs* 45 (November 1978): 281-292, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637757809375974>.

and colleagues' description of campaign stages,⁵⁰ and expected communicative patterns of those who win the presidency as outlined by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson in *Presidents Creating the Presidency*,⁵¹ I do not see Ocasio-Cortez following established expectations of (pre)presidential rhetoric. I think she is doing the good work, regardless of political consequences and popularity implications. Rather than following a 10-year plan, I see her acknowledging a multitude of 10-year plans before her, but instead of picking one, she is choosing to serve in the present and see where it takes her.

If and when she decides to run in the future, I anticipate that the communication studies discipline will face a serious conversation regarding the norms of presidential rhetoric. In the wake of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, a major question remains: What even is presidential anymore? Should Ocasio-Cortez run, I would not be surprised if her campaign deviated from the campaign checklist that we have come to anticipate. As numerous scholars have already acknowledged, post-Trump campaigning looks and sounds different.⁵² Indeed, that could perhaps be seen as a substantial flaw in my entire commentary today, the underlying assumption that campaigning differently inherently equates to inevitable failure. Do communicative choices that stray from expectations really dictate a candidate's success anymore? And for that matter, can our established norms really be used as predictable measures of campaign success? Does our established genre of presidential rhetoric, such as that outlined by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson,⁵³ still exist? Or has the Trump era illustrated that presidential rhetoric of the past is dead?

Existential quips aside, as I reflect upon my reasons for doubting a 2024 Ocasio-Cortez run, I find myself landing on one question. Is her path not presidential, or is her path simply not WASP presidential? Let's be honest. Apart from Barack Obama's contributions, the presidential rhetorical norms that we have crafted for our political leaders are grounded in the communication of white, cisgender men.⁵⁴ Although treated as generalizable standards to be applied to any political candidate, these norms are built on a subset of the U.S. population rather than the whole. Consequently, any candidate who is not a white man is immediately operating outside of the mold, making our analytical conclusions complicated, to say the least. Moreover, all other candidates are faced with the task of either communicatively accommodating to align with expectations that were never designed for them or challenging norms and risking backlash for not playing by the rules. For diverse candidates, to run for the presidency is to enter deeply complex waters. And as scholars of rhetoric, we face the challenge of assessing candidates with tools that are far from universally applicable.

⁵⁰ Robert E. Denton, Jr., Judith S. Trent, and Robert V. Friedenberg, *Political Campaign Communication: Principles & Practices* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 16-51.

⁵¹ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁵² Ryan Neville-Shepard, "Generic Fragmentation in Modern Campaign Rhetoric: A Study of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Announcements," *American Behavioral Scientist* 66, no. 1 (2022): 28-42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764220978466>; Meredith Neville-Shepard, "Masks and Emasculation: Populist Crisis Rhetoric and the 2020 Presidential Election," *American Behavioral Scientist*, preprint (2023), 1-15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211011223>; Shaheed Nick Mohammed and Robert C. Trumbour, "Polls and Elections: 'The Carnavalesque in the 2016 US Presidential Campaign,'" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2021): 884-903, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12658>; Stephanie A. Martin, "Division, Discord, and Democracy: A Forum on the 2020 U.S. Presidential Campaign," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 107, no. 4 (2021): 418-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2021.1984432>.

⁵³ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁵⁴ Mary E. Stuckey, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Presidency and Presidential Rhetoric," *Review of Communication* 10, no. 1 (2010): 38-52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358590903248744>.

The whiteness of our discipline is not a novel observation,⁵⁵ nor is the reality that the U.S. has never elected a woman to be president. Still, as women, men, and non-binary people of color continue to enter political offices in the U.S.,⁵⁶ our task of self-reflexively deconstructing presidential rhetorical norms only heightens in urgency.

So, is Ocasio-Cortez not being presidential? Or is Ocasio-Cortez not being presidential in the way that the U.S.'s patriarchal society would like her to be? As political leadership becomes more diverse, I expect that we, as rhetoricians, must prioritize complicating and evolving presidential rhetoric to align with our ever-emerging reality. However, having explored Ocasio-Cortez's communicative style, communicative deviations from (pre)campaign expectations, and possible future as a presidential candidate, and having noted broader implications for political rhetoricians, I stand by my assertion that Ocasio-Cortez has no intention of running for the presidency in 2024. As a young member of Congress whose political career skyrocketed, Ocasio-Cortez does not seem to be rushing her professional timeline. Although she may critique current candidates, her endgame is not the White House. Perhaps that will change in the future, but today is not that day.

⁵⁵ Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (1995): 291–309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639509384117>; Gordon Alley-Young, "Articulating Identity: Refining Postcolonial and Whiteness Perspectives on Race within Communication Studies," *Review of Communication* 8, no. 3 (2008): 307–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358590701845311>; Lisa B. Y. Calvente, Bernadette Marie Calafell, and Karma R. Chávez, "Here Is Something You Can't Understand: The Suffocating Whiteness of Communication Studies," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2020): 202–9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1770823>.

⁵⁶ Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics, "Women Officeholders by Race and Ethnicity," accessed June 7, 2023, <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/women-officeholders-race-and-ethnicity>.