

WILL ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ INSPIRE Latino candidates across America? That's a burning question ahead of the 2020 US elections. Since upsetting a long-term incumbent to win a seat in Congress in 2018, the 29-year-old New York City progressive—popularly known as AOC—has become one of America's most visible politicians.

Determined to make the most of her triumph is Latino Victory, a national organization that identifies potential Latino candidates, encourages them to seek office and supports their candidacies. The interim president of Latino Victory is Melissa Mark-Viverito, a Puerto Rico native who made history in 2014 when she was the first Latina elected to serve as Speaker of the New York City Council.

Ms. Mark-Viverito, who left the New York City Council after reaching her term limit, visited Brunswick's New York offices recently to talk about her efforts in New York and across the nation to increase diversity among elected officials.

What is the "21 in '21 Initiative?"

Before I left the New York City Council, I founded that initiative with two of my female colleagues in the council. Our goal is to raise awareness of the drop in women in the city council. We have a city that is led by men. We have a city council where we've seen the number of women drop to 11 women out of 51 members. When I came into the council, it was 18 out of 51. You can't make policies and pass budgets in a fair and equitable way if you're missing the point of view and perspective of a large percentage of the population.

To get that number to 21 in 2021, we created this initiative, which is basically a networking opportunity, to encourage women to "step up to the plate" and run for public office. We create networking sessions where they can get training on what it is to run a campaign, as well as help them to understand New York City's campaign finance law, which can be complicated—and make sure that they're prepared with the proper training.

Like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, for example?

It's a similar concept, but she was recruited. A lot of times people say that women have to be asked to run for office. I want us to get to a point where that's not the case, where any woman can just step up and say, "This is a possibility. I want to make sure government is being responsive to the needs that I have as a woman and that my community has."

As interim president of Latino Victory, what are your hopes?

The goal of Latino Victory is to build Latino political power. And the concept that government needs to be reflective of those it serves. We must see ourselves reflected in government. The idea is that we need to encourage and create a pipeline to encourage Latinos to run and to help raise money and support for those candidacies to be viable.

In Texas right now there's a push to have a Latino Democrat run to challenge the Republican Senator Cornyn. Texas is tough. But our idea is that in a state with such a large Latino population, there should be a qualified Latino candidate. Latino Victory did this

LATINO CAMPAIGN

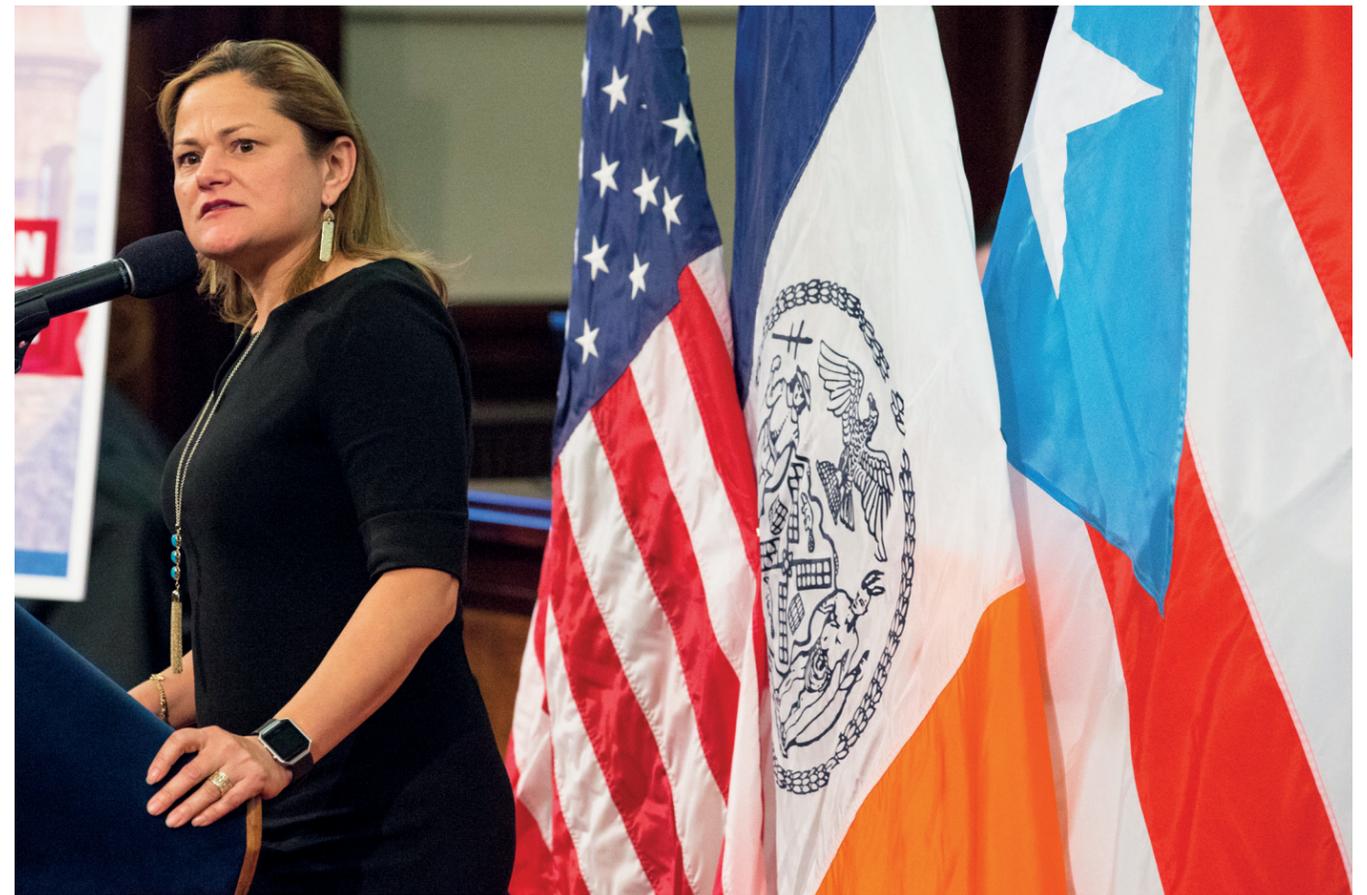
whole digital recruitment for Congressman Joaquin Castro to run for senator against Cornyn. It's called "Run, Joaquin, Run." We did something similar with New Mexico, where the senator there, Tom Udall, has just announced he's not going to run in 2020, creating an open spot. Even though New Mexico is the state with the largest percentage of Latinos, they haven't had a Latino elected statewide there in over 40 years so Latino Victory did a recruitment campaign for Congressman Ben Ray Lujan to run for Senate.

When there are viable Latino candidates, it's a great opportunity to energize the Latino base and to encourage people to register to vote. Because now they're seeing someone that looks like them and that understands their issues. We want to make sure that our community, the Latino community, is relevant in that race and in deciding the future of this country.

Is there any pushback among Democrats?

There is a wave of millennials—particularly the Bernie Sanders crowd—that shun what they call identity politics. And I really reject that idea. I am a Latina. I was born and raised in Puerto Rico. I am bilingual. I am bicultural. And my experience, having grown up

Former Speaker of the New York City Council **MELISSA MARK-VIVERITO** tells Brunswick's **GABRIELLE OUAKNINE** about her work to create a new generation of Latino politicians.



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in Puerto Rico, is unique. And that perspective is important to have at a decision-making table. It's very hard for someone who has not lived that experience to really be empathetic about it. They don't feel it or understand it in the same way. If you're in Congress and you're making decisions that affect Puerto Rico and you don't have the voice of people that understand that reality and the nuances, then you're likely to make ineffective policies that are out of touch. That's why I think lived experiences of whomever, whether it is the LGBTQ community, immigrants, those who are foreign-born, Puerto Ricans, all these experiences matter.

We live in a country and a society that's built on racism. And if you don't understand that reality, then you're not going to be able to change it.

Is Latino Victory advocating on behalf of recovery funds for Puerto Rico?

Latino Victory recently wrote an open letter to all the 2020 presidential candidates about Puerto Rico. We don't want to hear any more platitudes. We want to know what is going to be each candidate's platform, as President of the United States, with regards to Puerto Rico. We want the candidates to genuinely



Latina candidates, such as the now first-year Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, above, need an environment that gives them the opportunity and resources to run, says Melissa Mark-Viverito, shown at top speaking at New York's City Hall in 2017.

understand that the recovery in Puerto Rico is still ongoing. What is your action plan for Puerto Rico? We want to hear concretely what you're going to do.

How do you withstand the name-calling in politics, especially in the age of social media?

My politics have consistently been progressive. I was always considered ultra-lefty or a communist. Now with this new wave of liberals, I'm not progressive enough. You can't let that criticism distract you. You have to keep moving forward when they are trying to silence you. You must build coalitions because you can't do any work alone. You must figure out how to bring others who are like-minded into the fold, and just continue to keep pushing ahead.

I'm a very goal-oriented person. For me it has always been about trying to build a more just and equitable society. I want to build a better world than the one that I came into. Any position I've held, whether in office or out of office, has always been about fighting against injustice and being very vocal. You can't be silent when you see oppression and injustice. ♦

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