



## Justice Democrats' Alexandra Rojas Wants to Rewrite Politics

There's no denying Latinas are making serious moves across the political map. But the real power players are not always in the spotlight. Alexandra Rojas is one Latina working to change the face of politics thanks to her role as executive director of Justice Democrats, which helped elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other history-making women to Congress. Rojas talks about her political awakening, how she stays centered amid the chaos, and why she believes the future of the country depends on electing a new wave of leaders.

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*Clip (Alexandra Rojas): In a country of 330 million people, there are young women, like myself, there are working class people that deserve to be in the halls of power.*

**Alicia Menendez:** In 2018, a young Latina named Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez pulled off one of the most stunning upsets in modern political history, beating a 10-term incumbent from the same political party. A group called Justice Democrats helped engineer her victory and others. Now, they're hoping to replicate that success by running candidates against democratic incumbents they believe are not progressive enough. At the helm of Justice Democrats is another young Latina, Alexandra Rojas.

Alex, thanks so much for being here.

**Alexandra Rojas:** Thanks so much for having me.

**Menendez:** Take me back to the moment in 2015 when you decided to drop everything and join the Bernie Sanders campaign.

**Rojas:** Yeah, it feels like a lifetime ago. It hasn't even been four years yet, so let's set the stage a little bit. Early 2015, I think, Bernie Sanders announces his bid for presidency. I don't know about it at the time. I'm currently going to school full time. Shout out to Orange Coast College, an amazing community college out in Costa Mesa, California. I was also working about three jobs at the time, having to, obviously, support myself and my partner. As I was doing homework one day someone sent me Bernie Sanders announcement video where he stands in front of Lake Champlain and talks about his vision of what an America could be if we actually addressed head on, in very clear and simple terms, what are the major problems that we're facing? Here are solutions to those problems. Here are some

of the people that are holding us back from them, but I'm not a silver bullet. I need millions of people to step up and get involved if we're gonna have a chance to transform this country.

*Clip (Bernie Sanders): So, all over this country, I've been talking to people and they say, "How does it happen? I'm producing more, but I'm working longer hours for low wages. My kid can't afford to go to college. I'm having a hard time affording healthcare. How does that happen?" While at exactly the same time, 99% of all new income generated in this country is going to the top 1%. How does it happen? So, that's the major issue.*

Rojas: I was like totally hooked after that. I couldn't stop organizing and for the rest of the year I would organize with friends of mine on different college campuses until I just bugged the shit out of a staffer that ended up coming down, and I ended up working on the campaign and driving out to Burlington by December of 2015.

Menendez: You were part of what the campaign called the distributed organizing team, which was responsible for organizing volunteers beyond the early primary states. What did you do exactly and what did you learn from that experience?

Rojas: Our job was basically to mobilize all of the volunteers and supporters that were in states that didn't have staff or even if they had staff, they didn't have the capacity to deal with the influx of thousands of people that wanted to be engaged in some way. So, what that explicitly looked like was, I remember one of the first things I did was work with a few people that ended up taking the program way farther than we ever thought could be. It was called the Techs for Bernie Program and there were tools like Hustle. Now, some of the people that I worked with on that team went and started RelayTxt, which is another big progressive tech tool that campaigns have been able to utilize since, and basically scale up peer-to-peer contact via messaging. Our key demographic, right between 18 to 35, are all on their cell phone, so it was a pretty revolutionary way, I think, to organize and a very easy way for people to be able to help out the campaign. Everybody can take out their phone or their laptop and be able to help us send text messages.

Menendez: What was the moment when you realized that Bernie was going to lose?

Rojas: I think a lot of people that worked on the team that I worked on knew that Bernie was an incredible long shot from the beginning. I think, for me, at least it became pretty clear after Super Tuesday, but I think that despite all of that, we needed to keep pushing forward for the sort of sustainability of the movement and make sure that we finished strong.

Menendez: Talk to me about that. How did your thinking shift from this is about Bernie to this is about the movement?

Rojas: I think it was always about the movement. I think the number one thing that I would hear from at least ... And the reason why I fell in love with the people on that 26 person team was because we all knew it was so much more than just him and just the presidency. That this was a moment in time where we had the ability to connect with thousands and millions of people about these really big ideas that had been typically taboo. So, single-payer healthcare, free college, making sure that we run campaigns that are free of corporate PAC and corporate lobbyist

money, this sort of mass investment into our infrastructure and workforce. We hadn't seen that in a really long time, or at least I didn't in my lifetime. I'm 24 years old, so I don't wanna speak for people that have been in this much longer than I have, but just this recognition that if we were able to come out of the woodworks, someone like me and other people that I worked with who had not been in politics before, but were so excited, right, there had to be more of those people.

Menendez: Yep.

Rojas: A lot of what came out of that for us personally was Justice Democrats and Brand New Congress as a continuation of that.

Menendez: You'd left college in order to go join the campaign. Was there any part of you that, once the campaign over, was like, okay, that was fun, learned a lot, time to go finish my degree?

Rojas: No. Not even a little bit. I'm personally not interested into going into any sort of debt and I feel like I'm more useful where I am now or in the movement than I would be in the classroom, sort of just kind of waiting for a future that seems so unclear to me.

Menendez: How did you come to Justice Democrats?

Rojas: So, I've known the founders of Brand New Congress and Justice Democrats, and I wouldn't consider myself a founder. I would consider myself a founding member, 'cause I was one of the first staff on ... At the time it was Brand New Congress. Justice Democrats didn't exist. And we all just felt like the thing that we kept hearing was, it's gonna be great if Bernie gets elected, but he can't get anything done with a do-nothing congress, and right now we're being completely stagnant on passing any sort of legislation or being even in lock step with where the American people are. So, I was really attracted to this idea of replacing every member of Congress with people that actually looked like their community. And that actually had sort of a similar analysis to where we are and wanted to do what Bernie did, which was bring these big solutions to the forefront.

Menendez: So, what is the mission of Justice Democrats?

Rojas: The mission is to elect a multiracial, progressive cohort of lawmakers who are actually going to institute a Green New Deal, Medicare-For-All, free college, ending mass incarceration and deportation, and doing it all with taking no corporate PAC or corporate lobbyist money into reality.

Menendez: So, very personally, why did that click for you?

Rojas: Because Bernie's really great and I love the duties, like my [inaudible 00:07:51]. He doesn't look like me and he doesn't sound like me, and I have to believe that in a country of 330 million people, there are young women, like myself, there are working class people that deserve to be in the halls of power at our highest levels, that are completely boxed out right now with the way that our system is. So, we need to create a completely alternative infrastructure to be able to power working people to get to the highest levels of power.

Menendez: I've also heard you, in other interviews, talk about how your family was very impacted by the economic downturn and I wonder how that plays into your worldview.

Rojas: Yeah, I feel like sometimes they play that up. I don't wanna ever say that my family has been impoverished, right? My family is not like others out there that have experienced real trauma and struggle to put food on the table. I've always been given everything. I come from an immigrant family and they worked so hard for so long to be able ... My mom came over to this country when she was nine, from Colombia. My dad was born here, but both of my grandparents from Peru were like the children in their family that was sent to the United States to make something. So, we've always been really rich in love and sort of just the values of hard work and grit, but we have gone through tough times before and I think that's very common for American people, especially when thinking about college and thinking about my dad, who's a single dad supporting three, at the time four kids, trying to go to college. Having one income is not enough to be able, especially in this time, to put four kids, when you think anywhere from 50 to \$60,000 each a year is that's going to cost, you don't really feel middle class at that point.

Ad: *My mom tells the best stories, even if I sometimes tease her that they don't all have a beginning, a middle and an end. So, this Mother's Day, I'm gifting her a subscription to StoryWorth. StoryWorth makes it easy and fun for your loved ones to share their stories. Here's how it works. Purchase a subscription for someone you love and each week StoryWorth sends them an email with a question about their life. Then they reply to the email with their story. All stories are private and only shared with family that you choose. After a year, their stories will be bound into a beautiful keepsake book. How cool is that? Listen, we're all busy and while we love these stories, sometimes it's hard to know how to preserve them. StoryWorth makes it easy. And if like me, you're a procrastinator, it's a great last minute gift. For \$20 off, visit [storyworth.com/Latina](http://storyworth.com/Latina) and start capturing your family's memories today.*

Menendez: I think a lot of Latinos, and especially Latinas, are raised to believe that we need to be polite, work hard and wait our turn. Was there any part of you that had to get over that in order to do the work that you do?

Rojas: Yeah, I think a bit, but the way I got there was a lot different. I'm kind of crazy in that when I was in high school I worked 30, 35 hour weeks at McDonald's, starting at 16 and then I went to work in restaurants. So, I just always loved to work. I could just power through it. I'm one of those people, but the thing that happens when you work in retail, I experienced a lot of really bad workplaces that were toxic with management. I just encountered managers that really put me down and I had just been used to working through it, like I said.

Keep your head down. I don't know if I was nice, but I always kept my head down, like I need to get my paycheck. I just ... This is a job. I need to keep going. And I felt like I learned to stick up for myself year after year after getting my commission taken away from me because someone didn't like that I did well. I was the new person that did well or I had a male supervisor that saw me more as a threat, stuff like that, but I've felt like I've always also been a pretty resilient person and if it ever gets to a point where I need to flex, I sort of will.

Menendez: What lessons from 2018 are you taking into 2020?

Rojas: So, I started off with talking about Brand New Congress. Justice Democrats sort of came out of Brand New Congress after Trump won, because Brand New Congress was very post partisan. We wanted to replace 400 members of Congress in all parties, and then when Donald Trump lost, it was very clear to make the case for a progressive Republican just didn't make any sense. Even if they agreed with us on policy, selling that to people was really difficult and we were already inching towards specifically going ... Transforming the Democratic Party and running Democrats, because of races like Ocasio is with ... Going up against Joe Crowley, and that being the way that I think we sent shock waves a little bit more than just the sort of red to blues. And one of the things that I think carried over from Brand New Congress was this idea of quantity, right? Replacing hundreds of people all at once at the same time. And I'm still really attracted to that idea if we were to ever get a presidential size campaign to run hundreds of candidates at once, but I'm less convinced that you need hundreds of candidates to be able to create change. I think that one of the biggest things that I was not expecting was that one race could change everything overnight.

Menendez: And by that do you mean AOC's?

Rojas: And by that I mean Alexandria's. A lot of people ask were you surprised when she won or are ... Have you been surprised by the reaction? And we've been working three years to make it happen, but the night that it happened, I was just dumbfounded. I feel like on the left, whatever that means, we're not used to governing, 'cause we're in the struggle and when it felt like we broke through, just clicked for me. It was just like, no, it just ... We can get one person and send that shockwave, and that just opened up the door for potentially 20 more. That personally was the biggest lesson to me, of just, we need to win, even if it's just one or two more.

Obviously I want hundreds at some point, but even over the next five to 10 years, if we build a caucus of 10 to 20 people, that's going to speak volumes more than just kind of waiting for our moment to do a lot of people at once like we originally tried to do.

Menendez: Because Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez identifies as a democratic socialist and there's so much momentum behind her, I feel like there's also just a lot of freaking out about socialism in general. Is that a part of your political ideology?

Rojas: I think now that I understand what the term means and what democratic socialists means, yeah. I'm comfortable identifying that way, but is that the way that I view the world, as who's a socialist and who's not? Who's a capitalist and who's not? I just reject that way of thinking and I think that a lot of American people do. I know that unless someone didn't take the time to really point me to the right literature or books or articles or podcasts to listen to, I wouldn't have known what the right-lefty lingo is, at least you know in the movement space that I'm now in. My family, for example, doesn't see themselves as those labels or even Democrat or Republican. We just focus on sort of how we love one another and how we care for one another and how hard we work to be able to afford the life that we do, and

I think we're just attracted to more common sense solutions than anything else. And I think that's where most people are at.

Menendez: There were so many women elected to Congress this year that I feel like we do a lot of talking about how women can run for office, which is excellent, but I'm also interested in how women, especially fellow Latinas, can get more involved behind the scenes. Where do you start?

Rojas: I think the first place actually is a project that we recently started called Movement School. So, it's separate from Justice Democrats. It's sort of our sister organization, but one of the things that I noticed, another lesson sort of learned, was that there's not a deficit in enthusiasm. There are plenty of young women and people of color that want to get involved in campaigns behind the scenes. We just don't have a mechanism right now that exists through an ideological frame to train people on how we run campaigns, from campaign management to communications to digital, to fundraising, you name it. So, we feel like a piece of infrastructure that's needed for the overall movement is to create a training program that has this sort of more ideological framework baked into it about why we support the policies that we do and that kind of feeds into the larger reason as how we run campaigns.

That project's called Movement School. So, anyone listening can go right now to [movementschool.US](http://movementschool.US) and sign up to become a campaign fellowship. So, that's one literal concrete step for anyone in this moment that wants to get involved. We will make sure that we support you. The second piece is just showing up to your first meeting.

Menendez: Totally.

Rojas: One of the reasons why I was out of politics before Bernie was because I went to a Black Lives Matters meeting. I went to a People's Climate March meeting. I just tried, and I think I went to a DSA meeting. I tried to get involved in the movement space by just going to my first meeting, and at that first meeting there were so many white Bros in there that had an entirely different vocabulary than me and didn't sound or look like me at all. I was the one young woman in a sea of white dudes, which is totally fine. That's great. That's politics, but going into that space at, I think at the time I was like 16 and it's really intimidating and you feel really dumb. I felt really dumb. Oh my God, I don't know what neoliberalism is. I don't know what socialism is. God dammit.

And I felt really stupid and it kept me out of politics for years. But the reality is is that if we don't take over those spaces or feel like we should be in there, it's not gonna change.

Menendez: What is it like being a Latina in this space in 2019?

Rojas: I think it's really hard. I think it's just really hard for me lately to be a young Latina in a leadership position where I manage people 20 to 30 years older than I am, and I have to balance leading with patience and empathy and grace while also holding my ground and being firm and flexing when I need to, particularly with men much older than I am. And I never realized how much that scared me, 'cause I just tend to not think and just do sometimes, but it can be really emotionally

draining feeling like you have to cater to so many people's feelings and I'm so used to pushing off my own that I feel a little bit like a robot sometimes.

Menendez: I hear you on that. Do you wanna run for office one day?

Rojas: No.

Menendez: Because?

Rojas: 'Cause I wanna elect a lot of people to do it for me so I don't have to do that to myself.

Menendez: So, I wanna ask you about Ocasio-Cortez, do you get to check in on her?

Rojas: Not really, no. I just get to check in with her team, not her personally.

Menendez: Someone tried to put her down by pointing out that she is, "Doing that Latina thing." Did you see that?

Rojas: Yeah, I did. I got a lot of feelings there.

Menendez: Tell me about your feelings.

Rojas: Yeah, I mean what the fuck does that mean? Sorry, am I allowed to swear?

Menendez: Yeah.

Rojas: I'm sorry. I mean I ... What the hell does that mean? It just, it literally is just a dog whistle to acting like saying Rojas or Ocasio-Cortez in the proper way is wrong. I mean, it's just bringing to light that these things people say are just so nor ... Like, it was second nature for that dude to be like the Latina thing or Laura Ingram to be the Latina ... Like, they don't ever get checked. They don't see that that is wrong. So, I'm triggered right now by it, but it's also not surprising. It's just that it's very clear, like, that is where they're starting at. And so we do need to be extra loud and to take up more space, because that is their starting place.

Menendez: When you look at the 2020 field, especially as a former Bernie person, are you excited that Bernie's running again?

Rojas: Yes. Very excited.

Menendez: Will you vote for him?

Rojas: I don't know. We haven't endorsed at Justice Democrats. I think I'm personally excited by the sort of historic moment that we're in, where it's not just Bernie, but it's a majority of the Democratic field feels the need to speak to, directly to our grassroots base now. They feel the need to have to run on a ton of progressive policy positions, whereas even two years ago they would've been called crazy if they did. So, we've opened up the space for them to actually be bold and put forward a plan, right, on how to govern, should we be able to take power in 2020.

The thing that isn't as exciting and is sort of the co-opting of that message by people, for me, like people like Beto O'Rourke, for example, who ran on single-payer healthcare, specifically ran ads saying single-payer healthcare is the goal that we're getting off too.

I am supporting and running on a Medicare-For-All program. And did that during his senate campaign to now feel like he's born to run for president after losing said campaign and says that single-payer health care is no longer the end goal and I think it's scary, because that sort of mentality of embracing that he's an empty vessel and that voters can sort of project whatever they wanna believe on him is exactly the mentality that got us into the mess that we're in right now.

Menendez: When you value ... Two things, because you both, my understanding is value demographic shift or sort of the demography of the country being reflected in Congress and at the same time their ideological values that have to do with policy itself. Not that those two things don't intertwine. Of course they do, but to me they seem like two pillars. Then when you talk about 2020, how do you weigh where someone is ideologically against the racial ethnic diversity that they bring to the ticket? Right, because both Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders are white.

Rojas: Yeah. I think personally for me policy is paramount, because at the end of the day if we don't have a plan on how to govern, that scares me. I think it's a really valid point. I think representation is just as important and I think that's clear by my particular leadership style and also the women that we were able to help elect into congress. I'm very dedicated to not getting distracted by the presidency and actually building a congress that look like America, right? Like, this is the most diverse congress in our nation's history, but we got a long way to go for it to actually be representative.

I think that for president of the United States, we have to balance those two things. I don't ... I think it's a more nuanced conversation than, am I going to support the black woman or am I going to support the white dude? I think it's who has the best vision and the best policy and is actually listening, for me, is listening to the direction of where the Democratic Party is going versus who is worried about which constituency do they have to cater to? But that doesn't mean that that's the only thing that I or people in this country care about. They do care a lot about identity and representation. Your identity shapes the way that you view the world and how you view policy and how you are going to implement it. I'm personally, think that having a woman in charge is naturally going to, regardless of ideology, are going to govern more compassionately and more empathetically. There's plenty of empirical evidence that shows that women in leadership positions end up doing that regardless of the field that they get into. So, I think it's more complicated than just saying, yes. Would it be great to have a black or brown president or a Latina president? Absolutely. But if there's someone in the field that matches that, I'm gonna go for them, and right now, I just don't feel like that's the case.

Menendez: Alexandra, thank you so much.

Rojas: Thank you.



Menendez: Thanks for joining us today. Latina to Latina was originally co-created with Bustle. Now, the podcast is owned and executive produced by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams, and me, Maria Menendez, was the sound designer on this episode. We wanna hear from you. Tell us who you wanna hear from and how you're making the show a part of your life. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com). Remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Spotify, Apple Podcast, or wherever you're listening.

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