

## House Democrats boil over

*Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) has seemed to suggest that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's recent comments might have had a racial component.*



(Alex Wong/Getty Images)

By Aaron Blake  
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When Democrats retook the House last year, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had to know it wouldn't be smooth sailing ahead — not with moderate members resisting her return to the speakership and a bareknuckle-brawler president by the name of Donald Trump to face off with.

But six months into her long-awaited return as speaker of the House, it's her relationship with liberals — and particularly women of color — that is threatening to tear her party apart and clearly, in Pelosi's mind, threatening to end her speakership.

And it's starting to get ugly.

[‘Demoralizing’ and ‘disrespectful’: Ocasio-Cortez and Pressley on Pelosi singling out women of color]

Pelosi has occasionally rebuked this contingent when she felt it to be stepping too far outside the political mainstream and/or doing things that could hurt the party. But her comments dismissing it have become increasingly frequent and increasingly pitched. She seems to either have become so frustrated that she's no longer holding back, or she feels like things have gone too far and now is the time to settle this, before it gets out of hand.

And she made it abundantly clear Wednesday that she fears it endangers her majority.

“A majority is a fragile thing,” she said behind closed doors, The Washington Post reports. Pelosi said members shouldn’t attack other members in tweets, as they did following the passage of an emergency border bill last month, and that they should show “some level of respect and sensitivity” to more moderate colleagues.

“You make me the target, but don’t make our [moderates] the target in all of this, because we have important fish to fry,” Pelosi said.

Pelosi’s comments — combined with what she recently told New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd — only seem to have inflamed some of the most outspoken young women of color in her party. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) even seemed to suggest Pelosi’s comments might have a racial component.

“When these comments first started, I kind of thought that she was keeping the progressive flank at more of an arm’s distance in order to protect more moderate members, which I understood,” Ocasio-Cortez told The Post. “But the persistent singling out . . . it got to a point where it was just outright disrespectful . . . the explicit singling out of newly elected women of color.”

Update: Ocasio-Cortez clarified Thursday that she doesn’t think Pelosi has racial animus or is racist. “No, no, absolutely not,” she said.

Manu Raju ✓

@mkraju

· Jul 11, 2019

Replying to @mkraju

...knowing the amount of death threats we get, knowing the amount of concentration of attention, I think it’s worth asking why.”

Manu Raju ✓

@mkraju

I asked AOC if she thinks Pelosi has racial animus or is racist, and she said: “No, no, absolutely not, absolutely not.”

Other women of color, all relatively new to the House, vented their own frustrations:

“I can’t tell the speaker to apologize, but I was taken aback by it. Because we’re all here to work together.” — Freshman Rep. Jahana Hayes (D), Connecticut’s first black female representative

“Whatever she’s saying is not going to impact my work. I’m going to continue to introduce legislation and policy.” — Freshman Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.)

“Thank God my mother gave me broad shoulders and a strong back. I can handle it. I’m not worried about me . . . I am worried about the signal that it sends to people I speak to and for, who sent me here with a mandate, and how it affects them.” — Freshman Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-Mass.), who also called Pelosi’s comments “demoralizing”

“In my experience with her, she’s very respectful. Hopefully, they are talking about this, because I don’t think that that was.” — Progressive Caucus co-chairwoman Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.) said, according to the Wall Street Journal

There is a tendency among the party’s more liberal contingents, especially on social media, to scoff at the idea that the party’s leftward shift is really going to cost it in 2020. That contingent has

also leaped to the defense of members such as Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) when they felt she was being singled out — including within her own party and by the likes of Pelosi — because of her race and gender.

They also must see how much Trump and the Republican Party have moved toward the extreme in recent years and wonder why their party can't do that and win elections too.

The problem is the math for Democrats is much tougher. They must rely on moderates more than Republicans, because of the way the districts are drawn, thanks to gerrymandering and natural population sorting. The median House district in the 2016 election favored Trump by more than three points, even though he lost the popular vote by two. The situation is similar in the Senate, where 60 senators represent states Trump won, even though he lost the popular vote. Republicans can win majorities without touching a district or state won by Hillary Clinton; Democrats don't have anything approaching such a luxury.

And if you're Pelosi, you waited eight long years to win back the speakership. You know you need a Democratic president elected in 2020 to have a shot at passing a Democratic agenda before you're set to retire after the 2022 election. You also need to preserve a House majority that is unquestionably "fragile."

It's become abundantly clear that she views the current battle as one she needs to have — and early signs suggest House Democrats are generally siding with her. But if members like Ocasio-Cortez start bringing racial politics into this, and the liberals start bucking even harder as it seems they are inclined to, the battle won't be fun for any of the Democrats involved.