What's in a Slogan? An Analysis of AOC's Met Gala Dress

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It's not every day you see a politician walk the red carpet, but that is what Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez did at the 2021 Met Gala. To fit the theme of America: A Lexicon of Fashion, she wore a white dress by Brother Vellies and Aurora James emblazoned with the words "Tax The Rich" in red on the back ("Met Gala 2021"). The slogan summarizes what has long been one of Ocasio-Cortez's key planks: raise taxes on the wealthy to pay for social programs. Her argument is strong and especially necessary at the moment. Economic inequality in the United States is through the roof. For example, the top 1% of Americans hold about 16 times the wealth of the bottom 50%, as well as 89% of stocks and mutual funds (Leonhardt). The COVID-19 pandemic only made this problem worse. As of August 2021, the world's billionaires had gained $5.5 trillion during the pandemic. That is a gain of more than 68% (Collins). Compare that to the 500 million people globally who live in poverty (Picchi). This discrepancy is horrifying, and it is clear that something must be done. I am not the only person who has thoughts about

Ocasio-Cortez's argument. By the end of the night, she and her dress were already trending on Twitter (Suciu). But are this dress and this slogan the right way to make a change?

On the one hand, the slogan tries to present a concrete plan of action. More than just "We are going to fix economic inequality," it says, "We are going to fix economic inequality by taxing the rich." However, the slogan still does not communicate its message clearly enough. This confusion can be seen in Josefa Velasquez's article "Calls to Tax the Rich Abound. But What Exactly Does that Mean?" In this article Velasquez lists and explains three different methods for taxing the rich: high income taxes, taxing stocks and assets, and taxing luxury items. Although Velasquez does not say so directly, her article implies that most Americans do not actually have a good idea of what the hotly debated issue involves. She introduces the article with the central question "What exactly does the phrase ["tax the rich"] mean?" (Velasquez). Writing an article to answer this question implies that most of the audience does not know the answer. I agree with this implication. The phrase itself is vague, and there are many different taxation methods it could refer to. When a complex proposal is distilled down to just three words, much of the meaning and nuance is lost, leading to confusion.

However, being vague does not necessarily break a political slogan. After all, a full tax policy proposal would be a bit wordy and certainly would not fit on the back of a dress. For some examples of vague but successful slogans, we can look at a list of winning presidential slogans from 1948 to 2016. Some of them include Obama's "Change we can believe in," Clinton's "For a people, for a change," and Carter's "A leader for change" (qtd. in Porter). What do they all have in common? Change. Even slogans which do not include the word "change" express a dissatisfaction with the state of the nation, such as Kennedy's "A time for greatness" (qtd. in Porter). "Tax the rich" follows in the footsteps of these successful slogans. The implied problem is that the rich hoard all wealth. Of course, it does not hurt that the statistics back up the implication: the top 1% of Americans have about 16 times the wealth of the bottom 50% (Leonhardt). On the

other hand, none of these slogans present an outline of what candidates are going to do to create positive change. That is not the point of a slogan. They are only meant to give a general picture of the candidate's beliefs and the issues they consider most important. "Tax the rich" is equally vague and has the potential to be just as successful as these winning presidential slogans.

Why do such vague slogans work? According to University of Oregon professor Renee Irvin, it is because they create "micro-narratives." Politicians use a "catchy story" to simplify an issue and influence voters using only a few words (Irvin 433). I see this theory at play in "tax the rich." The catchy story it tells is reminiscent of Robin Hood: the rich are hoarding all the wealth, so we are going to take it from them through taxes and give it back to the poor and working class through social programs. This story is much more compelling than a long tax policy and breakdown of all its potential economic effects.

In Irvin's analysis of slogans, she highlights several techniques that make slogans effective. Those which "tax the rich" relies on most were ease of pronunciation and emotion. Three common, one-syllable words are hardly difficult to pronounce. The slogan also carries a certain anger in it. Ocasio-Cortez is furious at the wealthy for their hoarding and indignant that many Americans live in poverty. Both of these techniques support one of the most important qualities of a slogan: repetition (Irvin 437). As Irvin puts it, if a slogan remains an "accessible memory" it will be "repeated to others" (437). It makes sense that the more a phrase is repeated, the more power it holds. For example, my 7th grade English teacher once wanted to explain the influence of advertising to the class. She asked us "How much could Geico save you?" and the whole class chorused "15% or more." At that time, we were being inundated with Geico ads, so the phrase had wormed its way into all of our brains. Similarly, the slogan "tax the rich" has found its way into many people's consciousnesses. Specifically, it was extremely present on social media immediately following the Met Gala. I have seen many tweets discussing the dress, as well as images replacing "tax the rich" with humorous sayings, such as "Leave him on read" (@americanuchicks) or "Buy mor crystalz" (@buddysbaubles).

Of course, the dress has also generated plenty of controversy. This is unsurprising given that Ocasio-Cortez herself and many of her policy proposals are already controversial. Journalist Peter Suciu's article "Ocasio-Cortez's 'Tax The Rich Dress' – Ultimate Fashion Statement Or Display Of Hypocrisy?" provides ample evidence of this controversy. He has compiled a variety of tweets from supporters and critics alike. For example, journalist David Sirota tweets "I'm very glad @AOC told a gala of rich people that we must tax the rich" (qtd. in Suciu), while Donald Trump Jr. calls her a "fraud" (qtd. in Suciu). Some might say that having so many detractors would take away from the impact of the dress. But looking at the big picture, detractors continue to give Ocasio-Cortez more publicity. According to Suciu, "there were more than 100,000 tweets devoted to the congresswoman and her statement" just on the day of the Met Gala. This helped the phrase become known to a wide audience.

Does having a wide audience really make a difference? One thing to consider is the possibility that new voters will be introduced to the issue and choose to support Ocasio-Cortez. However, it is more likely that broadcasting the slogan to many people will keep name recognition high for Ocasio-Cortez and create greater recognition of the slogan. University of Vanderbilt professors Cindy D. Kam and Elizabeth J. Zeichmeister demonstrated the political power of name

recognition through laboratory studies. They found that subliminal exposure to candidate names made subjects significantly more likely to select that candidate, based on no other information (Kam and Zeichmeister 979). This scenario is not exactly the same as the situation with Ocasio-Cortez's dress; however, the findings are still applicable. When voters are constantly bombarded with articles, tweets, and images of the dress and slogan, they are being subconsciously primed, just as the subjects of Kam and Zeichmeister's studies were. When this information is not presented in an explicitly political way, such as in a funny tweet, voters can be "unaware of how they may be influenced by the information" (Kam and Zeichmeister 974). Therefore, by getting people talking about her dress, Ocasio-Cortez is also subtly increasing support for her movement.

The main criticism of Ocasio-Cortez has been that people find her hypocritical for attending an event full of rich people. For example, journalist Matthew Yglesias suggests an alternate slogan for her dress could be "This Event Is a Tax Loophole for the Rich." This is not an unfounded criticism. Met Gala tickets are $35,000 and are classified as "charitable donations," so they are tax deductible (Yglesias). This is not a typical venue for someone with a reputation for being a working-class hero like Ocasio-Cortez. That makes her presence there all the more important. Seeing someone who started off working-class, just like many Americans, make it to a prestigious event like the Met Gala can be very inspiring. Furthermore, the prominence of the event allowed her to reach a wide audience. As Kam and Zeichmeister established, the more people hear her message, the better. There is some irony in the fact that Ocasio-Cortez argued for taxing almost all of her fellow guests, but overall, it was a good strategic decision for her to attend the Met Gala because it gave her more publicity.

On the other hand, there are those who disagree with the message of the dress. For example, Tax Foundation economist Erica York claims a wealth tax would have a "negative impact on the economy" (qtd. in Picchi). But what has to be kept in mind is that economic growth does not help all Americans equally. Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell has stated that despite economic growth in 2021 benefitting many sectors, the sectors that were hardest hit by COVID-19 are still weak. Similarly, while "business investment is increasing at a solid pace," the labor market is only improving at an uneven pace (Powell). In other words, the richest segments of the population are bouncing back nicely from the pandemic, while the poor, who were "the hardest hit" according to Powell, are still struggling. Certainly, cutting taxes on the wealthy would help their economic conditions. But the rich are not the ones who need economic help. We should instead be trying to help the poor and working class, those who need help recovering from the pandemic and who also suffer the many disadvantages that come with being poor.

It's true that a snappy slogan on a dress is not going to fix economic inequality overnight. Slogans alone cannot make substantial change. In order to help the poorest Americans, new policies have to be implemented and new ideas considered. However, an important step in helping people is gaining support for your movement. If Ocasio-Cortez does not have the votes, she will be unable to make any change. This dress is intended to get her the support she needs so she can tax the rich. It is merely the first step in what must be done to help our fellow citizens.

Although it has its faults, Ocasio-Cortez's Met Gala dress was an effective political move. Despite her slogan being somewhat vague, it can succeed, like many vague slogans have before. The slogan uses a compelling, Robin Hood-esque micro-narrative, as well as easy pronunciation

and strong emotion, which improves its repeatability. The slogan has in fact been repeated many times across the internet and is a fixture in the public consciousness. While wearing the slogan to the Met Gala is a bit ironic, the event succeeded in bringing a great deal of attention to the message. At the end of the day, wasn't that the whole point?

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