

New York's Last Socialist Congressperson

Before Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, there was Vito Marcantonio: East Harlem's socialist congressperson, who fought for justice for Puerto Rico, sweeping civil rights, and a more radical New Deal.



Vito Marcantonio with children from his district in New York. Wisconsin Historical Society

When Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez [take office in January](#), they will become two of the first socialists to serve in Congress since 1950, the year that Vito Marcantonio finished his seventh and last term representing his New York City district. Although now largely forgotten, Marcantonio was a deeply popular politician whose feisty, theatrical campaign speeches regularly brought upwards of ten thousand supporters out into the streets of Manhattan.

A community organizer and labor lawyer, "Marc," as his constituents affectionately called him, rode to office in 1934 on the strength of social

movements demanding affordable housing and public jobs, and he stayed close to those and other struggles throughout his time in office. His efforts to legislate a radically redistributionist welfare state met with little success in Congress, but in other areas — above all civil rights — he advanced progressive policies farther than ever before.

Marcantonio, who was never a member of the Democratic Party, deftly exploited every ballot line while maintaining his independence with the backing of New York's large and powerful left. While today's socialists face a very different set of challenges and opportunities, they should take inspiration from his long (and long under-appreciated) career of pushing at the limits of the status quo.

From East Harlem to Congress

Vito Marcantonio was born in 1902 to an Italian-American family in East Harlem. The uptown neighborhood, a Socialist Party stronghold at the time, included some of the city's deepest poverty and its worst overcrowding as well as an impressive network of producers' cooperatives, social clubs, and community schools where Jewish, Italian, Puerto Rican, Irish, and German immigrants rubbed shoulders. Reared in this cosmopolitan working-class political culture, the young Marcantonio gained exposure to socialist ideas, and by seventeen, he was organizing pickets and rent strikes alongside his neighbors.

In 1921, Marcantonio's talents as a public speaker drew the attention of [Fiorello La Guardia](#), at the time East Harlem's representative in Congress. A colorful social democrat, La Guardia ran as a Republican rather than work within the Tammany-controlled Democratic Party, but his popular support in the district crossed party lines. (In 1924, he bucked the GOP and won reelection on the Socialist, Progressive, Single-Tax, and Farmer-Labor tickets.) When "the little flower" became the mayor a decade later, he was succeeded in the House by his more radical protégé, another nominal Republican whose politics were much to the left of either major party.

When he arrived for his first term in Congress in January 1935, Marcantonio had no legislative experience. But he banded together with a loose caucus of around thirty other progressives to expand and consolidate the farthest-reaching New Deal reforms. The sharp-tongued activist from New York soon became a nuisance to the Democratic House leadership, relentlessly criticizing the meagerness of unemployment relief, public works, and social programs, and raising objections to the military budget

at a time when basic social needs remained unmet (and while unemployment in East Harlem hovered around 50 percent).

The measures that he did support, including comprehensive social insurance and a universal basic income, gained little traction. He was, characteristically, the sole vote in favor of including agricultural workers under the terms of the National Labor Relations Act.

The seventy-fourth United States Congress was probably the most radical yet, but Marc found the institution “hopelessly reactionary.” For the time being, he made more progress as a movement activist. In February 1936, he was arrested while leading a demonstration of fifteen thousand unemployed workers against cuts to the Works Progress Administration. Two years later, in response to community demands, he pressured the La Guardia administration to build public housing on riverfront land that was then being considered for luxury apartments. Speaking over the radio, he declared:

We are opposed to the exploitation of this site by realty interests . . . We do not want in our community penthouses and silk hats alongside of tenements and people on relief budgets . . . The East River is our river. We were born on its banks. We learned to swim in that river. We have lived and suffered alongside its banks. We have had to smell it in the hot summer days. Now that the river has been cleaned, and now that the land alongside of it is available we want that river to ourselves . . . It is our river, and we do not intend to have anybody take it away from us.

Shortly thereafter, the [East River Houses](#) opened on the site. With recreation facilities, an infirmary, a kindergarten, and craft rooms where tenants taught each other construction and maintenance, the 1,100-unit, racially integrated complex reflected the cooperative values of the community that demanded its construction.

Although subsequent public housing developments in East Harlem would accelerate displacement and unsettle the neighborhood, local residents at the time celebrated the East River Houses as an innovative answer to the area’s chronic housing shortage. The complex was a concrete demonstration of the promise of guaranteed quality housing, a goal that Marcantonio never abandoned.

“A One-Man Political Machine With an All-Party Organization”

Marc’s Republican affiliation cost him his congressional seat in 1936, as

the Democratic Party swept national elections. It proved to be a temporary setback. Two years later, he exploited a New York election law that permitted candidates to “cross-file” on multiple ballot lines, and ran in the Republican, Democratic, and American Labor Party (ALP) primaries. After winning the GOP and ALP races, he trounced his Democratic opponent in the general election, 18,802 to 12,375. By delivering almost nine thousand of those votes, the ALP, a labor-backed party founded by socialist New Dealers, established itself as a force capable of tipping important elections. Within two years, Marc was the leader of its Manhattan branch and its sole representative in Congress.



Vito Marcantonio (right) with W.E.B Du Bois (center) and Paul Robeson (left). Vito Marcantonio Collection

By 1942, Marcantonio was winning *all three party primaries* handily, leading critics to charge that he was “a one-man political machine with an all-party organization.” In fact, he had no “machine” that dispensed patronage or political favors. Instead, his campaign relied on the voluntary commitment of a coalition of liberals, socialists, and communists — and on the support of organized labor.

Forty-nine unions backed him in 1938, and in 1940, the New York State CIO ranked him first among its seventy-one endorsements. In return, Marc

used his congressional seat to investigate, publicize, and punish labor abuses. Most notably, his leadership of a 1936 House probe prompted state and federal officials to take measures to lower the [incidence of silicosis](#) among Appalachian coal miners.

Throughout the silicosis hearings, and in his speeches on the House floor, Marcantonio deployed the scintillating and pugnacious oratory that he had mastered as a soapbox campaigner in East Harlem. While defending a proposed ban on the privatization of public-utility holding companies, he thundered:

If it be radicalism to believe that our natural resources should be used for the benefit of all of the American people and not for the purpose of enriching just a few . . . then, Ladies and Gentlemen of this House I accept the charge. I plead guilty to the charge; I am a radical and I am willing to fight it out . . . until hell freezes over.

If this 1935 speech made Marcantonio a cause célèbre on the left, his strenuous advocacy for the Puerto Rican people cemented his support in East Harlem. Over the course of his career, Marc authored five bills granting Puerto Rico independence. He repeatedly pushed to extend the mainland minimum wage, public works programs, and unemployment relief to the island. When the Nationalist Party leader [Pedro Albizu Campos](#) was jailed in 1936, Marcantonio lobbied President Roosevelt for a pardon. That same year, he visited Puerto Rico to draw attention to poor working conditions in its sugar and textile industries. Finally, he prevailed upon Roosevelt to fire Governor Blanton Winship, whose administration had brutally repressed the island's independence movement.

These actions were less motivated by opportunism than by principle, since many Puerto Ricans were barred from voting in New York due to an English literacy test requirement. Similarly, Marc's district was less than 3 percent African American, but in 1941 he launched the biggest fight of his career on behalf of another principle: racial justice.

Battling Against Jim Crow

During World War II, Marcantonio opened a legislative front in the battle against Jim Crow that [A. Philip Randolph](#) and other civil rights leaders were waging outside of government. In 1942, when a bill to abolish discriminatory state poll taxes was bottled up in committee, Marc gathered enough signatures to force it onto the House floor for a vote, defying nearly everyone's expectations in the process. The New York leftist's persistent pestering of his colleagues had paid off.

The *New Republic* remarked: “Once deemed an impossible task by the weak in spirit, abolition of the poll tax as a prerequisite to voting in a federal election now seems quite possible.” The House eventually passed the bill — a “stunning victory,” according to Marcantonio’s biographer, Alan Schaffer — only for it to die in the Senate, where the Democratic leadership buried it for the sake of party unity.

By championing civil rights, Marc jeopardized the Democratic Party’s unholy alliance of segregationists and northern liberals. House “Dixiecrats” inveighed against the rabble-rousing integrationist, accusing him of trying to “sabotage the white people of the South.” In 1943, he had to withdraw his nomination to the powerful House Judiciary Committee after they threatened a rebellion. For his part, Marc embraced his status as the *bête noire* of the Southern bloc, and enjoyed provoking “the doodlebugs on the reactionary side of this Congress.”

To strengthen the Fair Employment Practices Commission — another “impossible task” — he borrowed from their playbook, tacking appropriations for the controversial agency onto a series of unrelated bills. “For once, the agile Southern parliamentarians were beaten at their own game,” exulted the *Nation*, which called the successful ploy “a major political victory for the advocates of racial justice.”

If he was a savvy lawmaker who put key civil rights legislation in play for the first time, Marcantonio nonetheless remained sidelined on other issues during the war. His battles to expand Social Security to cover domestic workers, and to establish a federal jobs guarantee for youth, both went nowhere. As the Democratic majority in both chambers scaled back funding for public works and social programs, he condemned the supposedly progressive party and its most prominent member. Roosevelt, he quipped, “is the world’s greatest betrayer of his own New Deal.”

The Cold War Chills

As the country’s most successful third-party radical, Marcantonio attracted opposition from every direction. After he won the Democratic, Republican, and ALP primaries once again in 1944, the *Times* complained that he had made “a mockery of the political parties in his district,” and suggested that his victory called into question “the wisdom of allowing candidates to run in the primaries of more than one party.” That same year, his district was redrawn to include more reliably Democratic precincts. These pressures only intensified as tensions with the Soviet Union escalated after the end of the war.

By 1946, it was common for newspapers to denounce Marcantonio as “a mouthpiece for the Communist Party” or as “the Soviet Union’s favorite American congressman.” These assertions were overblown, but there is no question that Marc benefited from the support of New York’s Communist rank-and-file, whose “doorbell-ringing and stair-climbing,” writes Schaffer, amounted to “support of a kind many politicians could dream about but few could match.”

Unwilling to distance himself from these supporters, Marc took every step — no matter how out of step — to defend their civil liberties. In 1940, he was the only congressman to speak out against the Dies Committee (precursor to the [House Un-American Activities Committee](#)) and he was one of only four to vote against the Smith Act. After the war, he would go on to lead the opposition to Congress’s most draconian anticommunist proposals, often casting the lone dissenting vote.

Inconveniently for his opponents, Marc’s support from communists, and his defense of their legal rights, neither explained nor diminished his popularity in East Harlem. (After all, as Schaffer wryly comments, it was “an area where capitalism showed so few of its own virtues.”) Even those who painted him as “Moscow’s mouthpiece” conceded his “long and tireless record of personal service to the voters of his district.”

Indeed, throughout all seven of his terms in the House, Marcantonio’s district office handled welfare and workmen’s compensation cases to immigration, tenant, legal, and health matters. The Congressman and his staff provided these services for no fee and with no strings attached, thereby sustaining his popularity in East Harlem even as he grew increasingly isolated in government.

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

Marc’s 1948 reelection to the House vindicated his uncompromising radicalism and stunned his detractors. The media had pulled out all the stops urging his defeat, and both major parties in the state legislature collaborated to prohibit cross-filing just ahead of the primaries. (The law’s target was no secret; it became known as the “anti-Marcantonio Act.”) Limited to the ALP ballot line, Marc faced multiple opponents for the first time in years, but nonetheless managed to best them all, placing more than four thousand votes ahead of his closest rival.

Victory, however, was tinged with defeat. Marcantonio had enthusiastically supported [Henry Wallace’s](#) third-party bid for the presidency, only to see the former Roosevelt cabinet secretary flop with a

disappointing 2.4 percent of the vote. To many liberals and leftists, Wallace represented the promise of an independent challenge to the emerging bipartisan consensus on foreign policy and domestic anticommunism — a consensus that increasingly placed Marcantonio on the sidelines in Congress.

“I know I am just a voice crying in the wilderness here,” he lamented shortly after the war. The strikes that rocked the country in 1945–46 had not yielded anything like the radical political energies that buoyed him to office in the mid-1930s. Instead, to his consternation, legislative efforts to crush labor only intensified, and culminated in 1947 with the Taft-Hartley Act.

Of the thirty election precincts in the country that awarded Wallace a plurality of the vote, eight were in East Harlem, where he received an astonishing 45 percent. The redbaiting that sank Wallace’s candidacy nationally evidently failed to work on Marc’s home turf. But East Harlem was exceptional even within New York City, as his ill-fated 1949 mayoral campaign made clear.

Like Wallace, Marc was tainted for his unwillingness to disavow his Communist supporters, and organized labor backed the Democratic incumbent without hesitation. Meanwhile, the ALP, which was by then widely viewed as a vehicle for Communist electoral efforts in New York, lost nearly all of its union support. The outcome of the race underscored the paradox of Marc’s political career at the height of a nationwide Red Scare: a beloved figure in East Harlem, he was reviled almost everywhere else.



Vito Marcantonio participating in a Local 16 UOPWA-CIO picket line against Simplicity Pattern in 1946 in New York. The Center for Migration Studies of New York

The knives were out for “red Vito Marcantonio” during his last run for Congress in 1950. This time, the Democratic, Republican, and Liberal Parties all united to ensure his defeat. Every major newspaper (except the *Daily Worker*) accused the congressman of corruption, disloyalty, or worse. The right-wing *Daily Mirror* made the racist and patently false claim that Marcantonio’s power rested on “the hordes of Puerto Ricans” whom he had “enticed . . . from their home island, for the value of their votes.” In response, Marc ran his most aggressive campaign ever, in the end besting his previous totals with 40 percent of the vote. Summarizing the outcome, he told a reporter: “Line for line I beat every party, but I could not beat the gang-up.”

Marcantonio died suddenly in August 1954, at the age of fifty-one. He had just picked up a run of nominating petitions for yet another campaign to reclaim his former seat. Over twenty thousand supporters turned out for Marc’s funeral, where the great civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois eulogized him as “a politician in the finest sense of the mutilated word,” adding: “in this era of national cowardice, here were not many of his courage.”

Political Revolution Then and Now

In the decades since his death, Vito Marcantonio has faded from historical memory for the same reason that organized labor abandoned him: his close ties to the Communist Party. Because his dissenting views on civil liberties and foreign policy have aged much better than those of his colleagues on either side of the aisle, it is tempting to portray him as a moral witness who failed to arouse the conscience of the nation in his own day, only to be redeemed long after his death.

In fact, Marcantonio was an uncommonly effective politician. Much of the civil rights legislation that he championed eventually came to pass, and his views on racial justice, once marginal, have long been common sense (at least within the Democratic Party). And, in part because he remained embedded in social movements throughout his career, he successfully leveraged popular pressure to secure meaningful concessions from the state, including some of the first public housing in the United States. Still, in Congress Marcantonio found few allies who shared his vision of using the state to guarantee everyone housing, social insurance, and a job that pays a living wage — regardless of age or citizenship status. His quixotic efforts to legislate a radically redistributionist welfare state, and to stem the rightward flow of domestic and foreign policy after World War II, exposed the severe limitations of legislative office — limitations that socialists will continue to face in the absence of a broader “political revolution.”

It will require the perseverance of today’s left to rekindle anything like the mass political engagement and labor militancy that propelled Marcantonio’s career and kept him in power for so long. This alone can expand the ranks of socialist elected officials and keep them accountable once they take office. Tlaib and Ocasio-Cortez can only be effective in their pursuit of Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, and other key radical reforms if there are strong popular mobilizations behind them, something that no individual can summon with the wave of a hand.

But regardless of whether their terms in office coincide with a left-led resurgence of social struggle, today’s socialist politicians should aspire to Marcantonio’s example as a principled tribune of the multi-racial American working class.