The Struggle Beyond the Ballot: Understanding Zohran Mamdani’s Campaign

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The ascent of Zohran Mamdani in New York City politics has been more than just a local tale; it has shown how the American left has evolved over the past twenty years. His campaign promised free public transportation, fair rent, and daycare for everyone. The prospect of his victory has led us to reflect on whether socialist politics is simply rhetoric or can actually work in a community. For a city long identified as the center of American capitalism, Mamdani’s greatest triumph was momentous. It demonstrated that class politics was becoming a more common topic of debate in significant US cities. It showed a conflict between the entrenched power of real estate, finance, and government and the desire for a city that works for the people who live

there.

For the left, Mamdani's story transcends the archetype of the victory of a personality; it embodies the struggle for systemic improvement, combining it with electoral work. His campaign has revealed both the hopeful and doubtful aspects of channeling a movement's energy into institutional power. Regardless of the outcome of the mayoral race, his candidacy holds greater significance as it compels the left to confront challenging questions: can a radical agenda effectively operate within the framework of local government? Is it feasible for democratic socialism to evolve from mere protest into a governing system without sacrificing its foundational principles? Most crucially, can the left develop enduring class organizations instead of depending on individual charisma or the performative nature of "progressive" representation? Earlier, we witnessed experiments in participatory budgeting and the challenge of sustaining transformative change in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where an attempt was made to redistribute city resources to vulnerable groups through participatory democracy. However, the initiative ultimately proved to be very short-lived.

The American Left, much like its counterparts around the globe, feels a mix of excitement and fear regarding his candidacy. Since the Bernie Sanders campaigns, socialist politics have garnered renewed attention. This resurgence has breathed new life into the movement, but it has also revealed significant fractures in strategy. Discussions among the left in American cities have often shifted from organizing individuals by class to focusing on symbols and cultural issues. In contrast, Mamdani's campaign drew its strength from authentic communities, including renters' unions, immigrant groups, and worker networks. His campaign served as a reminder that socialism should

work not merely as a façade but as a genuine means of building power from the grassroots level.

This campaign has highlighted the challenges of enacting change through elections. Mamdani's innovative and engaging program must overcome the complex realities of municipal budgets, government involvement, and business resistance. He aims to create a fairer tax system, housing system, and transit system. However, a power structure beyond the influence of a single mayor entrenches all of these. This dynamic characterizes the left today; it must collaborate with the system it wishes to change without becoming overwhelmed. Thus, the key takeaway is not to abandon politics but to recognize its limitations and view elections as a means to engage people rather than as a substitute for grassroots movements.

If Mamdani loses the election, the left should not be disappointed; they should learn from it. Every campaign that addresses class concerns leaves behind a network of canvassers, local alliances, and politically motivated young people who can do more than just gather votes. The challenging part is maintaining that energy and using it to build a long-lasting organization for the working class. This includes revitalizing tenants' unions, encouraging workers to adopt a more militant stance, and integrating socialist politics into the lives of care workers, delivery drivers, and renters who keep the city functioning. The real danger lies not in losing City Hall, but in losing perspective. It's akin to believing that losing an election signifies the end of history or reverting to the comfortable moralism of "woke" politics that is disconnected from class power.

The left must recognize that elections are not the sole critical component of

politics. Regardless of the outcome, Mamdani's campaign has already shifted what many people in New York believe is possible. It has reintroduced concepts of public ownership, solidarity, and redistribution to a city long dominated by market ideologies. However, the next step is challenging: transitioning from slogans to structures and from initial excitement to sustained effort. For the socialist movement to thrive, it must transform campaigns into organizing schools and failures into opportunities for experiential learning. Thus, Zohran Mamdani's candidacy represents not the conclusion of a movement, but the beginning of one. The true test for the left will be its ability to sustain this momentum, strengthen the class struggle, and cultivate a form of power that cannot be diminished by any election cycle.

To know more on Zoran Mamdani Campaign – Zoran Mamdani's win : can it catalyse a new wave of struggles?

Mamdani has several things to take care of before people vote

Zohran Mamdani's aspirations to become the mayor of New York City in 2025 will test his political skills and the strength of the city's left movement. While he enjoys considerable support within the Democratic primary, his lack of administrative experience remains a significant barrier. Many appreciate his progressive ideas, but there are doubts about his ability to manage a large, complex government like New York City's. His ambitious promises of free public transportation, rent freezes, and universal daycare may be unattainable due to the city's financial dependence on state approval and collaboration with Governor Hochul's administration. These institutional limitations could hinder his ability to implement his transformative vision unless he forges beneficial connections while remaining true to his beliefs. In

a recent ABC News article, Merritt Turetsky cautioned Mamdani about the challenges he may face after winning: “His biggest risk is with some of his most loyal and hyped-up supporters. If he can’t deliver major changes in short order, they might be questioning his commitment to his promises.”

Young, socialist, and immigrant voters constitute the majority of his base. However, to win citywide, he must also gain the support of Black, Latino, and working-class moderates who are skeptical of his socialist views. The right-wing media and establishment have targeted Mamdani, arguing that his ideas are too extreme to be practical. Police unions, the real estate lobby, and business elites are already collaborating to oppose him, fearing that his success could lead to “disaster” for stability. This backlash, combined with relentless media scrutiny, may compel him to make compromises that alienate his core supporters. Despite these pressures, he holds exceptionally high expectations. If he is perceived as failing to deliver on his commitments or taking too long to produce results, public confidence in him and the broader leftist agenda may wane. Ultimately, the most challenging aspect of transitioning from campaigning to governing is the shift from slogans to actual institutional competence. Mamdani must build teams of administrators capable of navigating bureaucratic obstacles, ensuring transparency and collaboration, and implementing meaningful changes. Only by blending radical ideas with practical governance, expanding his coalition beyond ideological boundaries, and managing both external criticism and internal dissent can he achieve success.

He has recently garnered significant attention for his strong position on Palestine. However, it remains uncertain how he will address the fight against the illegal ICE raid on the protesters and how the American left will respond to

that situation. The left needs to proceed with caution as they consider their future actions ”When ICE raids resume or Palestinian solidarity protests erupt (or any radical movement) in defiance of federal decree, will Mamdani’s NYPD protect protestors—or kettle and criminalise them? The question is not merely theoretical; it is an unavoidable political trial. Without a foundation of independent, organised mass resistance that holds elected officials accountable—not to the party, but to the class—they will be forced to decide between order and justice. The left must prepare to fight—not only with Mamdani but sometimes against him.”

The election will reveal whether the left in New York can transform their moral fervor into political influence or if the establishment will once again be successful in hindering the introduction of new ideas.

What we can do if Zoram Mamdani wins

Making socialism in politics credible again for the people

An eventual victory of Zohran Mamdani in the 2025 New York City Democratic primary will represent more than just a personal or political achievement; it brings socialist politics closer to mainstream American life. For many years, socialism in the U.S. has been marginalized, often viewed as an intellectual curiosity, an activist identity, or a moral protest against the neoliberal consensus. However, Mamdani’s campaign defies this stereotype. His success demonstrates that socialist ideas can resonate with voters when addressing the real issues that people of working-class face daily, such as the rent crisis, high transit costs, stagnant wages, and the significant challenges posed by privatization.

This event underscores the ongoing relevance of socialist beliefs in politics. It indicates that socialism can engage with the contemporary urban experience in a meaningful way, rather than merely existing as an idea. A campaign centered on redistribution, public ownership, and universal services has triumphed in a city long governed by capitalist logic. This outcome may herald the forthcoming rise of the Left. Socialist politics could once again encompass more than just moral resistance; they may also focus on practical governance.

Broadening the Political Scope of Working-Class Concerns

Mamdani's campaign significantly impacted the political climate. People began to view disputes over jobs in housing, transportation, and climate change as struggles for class power and the common benefit, rather than mere disagreements about policy. Mamdani's approach transformed local concerns into political issues of ownership and justice by linking rent control to decommodification and framing free public transit as a social right.

These are crucial times for the Left. Movements can do more than simply fight against cuts and protect existing services; they can inspire everyone to pursue their desires. Neoliberal individualism has broken up the working class into smaller groups over the course of decades. Now, their shared material interests can serve as the foundation for a unifying agenda. Mamdani's victory offers the Left an opportunity to reframe municipal politics from merely managing scarcity to collaborating in sharing resources and creating new ones.

The Left can adopt this model to address everyday urban problems as a means to advocate for more socialist solutions. For instance, rising rent is not

just a financial burden; it represents private tyranny. Public transit is a necessity for everyone, not merely an expense. City budgets shouldn't be viewed as strategies for cost-saving; they should be considered opportunities to do what is right.

Reconnecting movements with the power of institutions

Mamdani's win has the potential to create significant structural change by reconnecting grassroots movements with institutional power. His campaign was not initiated by the political establishment or a tech consultancy firm; rather, it emerged from tenant groups, mutual aid networks, and local assemblies. Strategies like door-to-door visits, community policy lectures, and bilingual organizing were key to its operation. While socialists have long discussed these approaches, they have yet to effectively implement them.

The Left's challenge now is to transform that energy into a lasting power. Will the movement's momentum remain if it enters government? Can radical demands withstand bureaucratic inertia and the pressures of capital? These are not merely theoretical questions; they represent the core challenges that socialist politics must address in the 21st century.

If the Left succeeds, Mamdani's victory could usher in a new political paradigm that bridges policy and protest, grassroots and government, and belief and expertise. It will not simply be about selecting progressive candidates. Instead, the focus will be on centering social movements in the city's governance and ensuring a functional connection between public demand and public authority. Mamdani's campaign may serve as a test case for a larger initiative to actualize democratic socialism. The concept is that

movements exert pressure on the state from the outside while simultaneously transforming it from within.

Forming coalitions based on class in various communities

Some people believe that Mamdani's base represents his most crucial political idea. This victory was not achieved through the influence of wealthy individuals or by targeting a select few. Instead, it emerged from a coalition of working-class communities—South Asian, Black, Latinx, Arab, immigrant, and poor white—who all sought similar economic goals. The American Left has struggled to forge this type of coalition since the mid-20th century.

The coalition challenges the false dichotomy between class and identity. Mamdani's campaign highlighted the interconnectedness of the struggles for racial justice and economic equality. He unapologetically opposed Islamophobia and racism while also advocating for rent freezes and free public transportation. The blend of multiculturalism and class politics showcased here illustrates what internationalist, socialist politics could look like in a city with a substantial immigrant population. It avoids both liberal diversity tokenism and an overly simplistic economic reductionism.

The Left's responsibility is to strengthen this coalition so that it endures beyond a single election. It must transform electoral coalitions into enduring power structures, such as tenant unions, community councils, and labor alliances, which can persist beyond the election cycle. If they continue to organize, these coalitions can provide the social foundation for a sustainable leftist politics that transcends individual leaders.

Changing the way political debate works

Mamdani's win can alter the political landscape even before he assumes office. It will compel the centrist elite to confront socialist ideas on their own terms. Previously, concepts like free public transportation and rent control were considered radical. Now, the political arena is seriously discussing these issues. The center of political power has shifted.

One of the Left's most significant yet underappreciated achievements is redefining what is considered possible. The Overton window in New York politics used to accommodate only neoliberal pragmatism. Now, it encompasses conversations about public ownership, wealth redistribution, and social welfare. When socialism enters mainstream discourse, it transitions from an external critique to an influential force within the institutions of power.

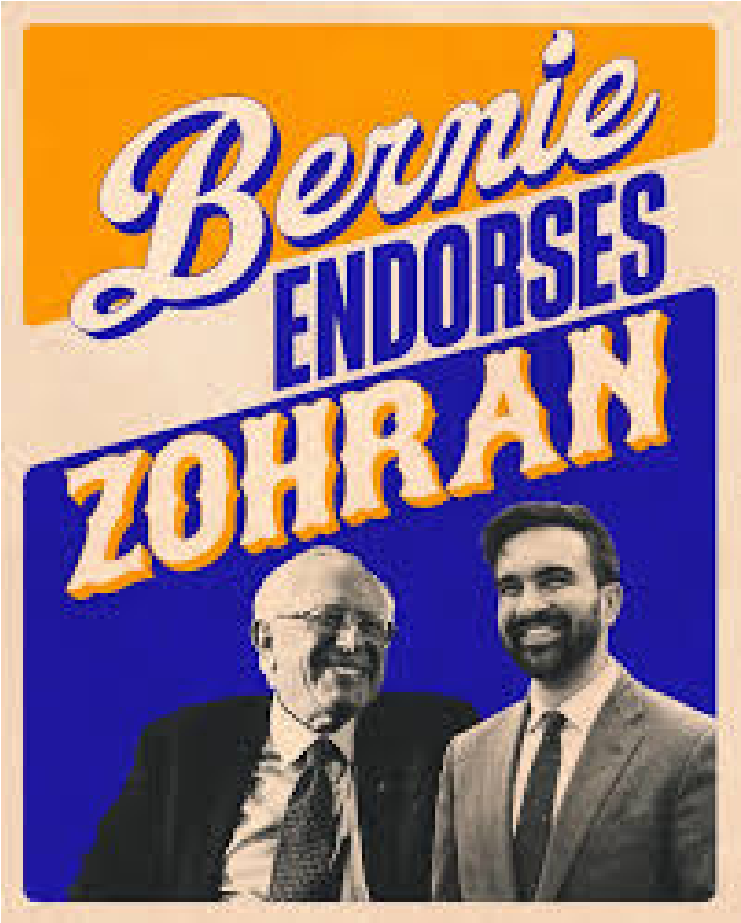
This phenomenon illustrates how Mamdani's campaign fulfills both political and cultural roles. It challenges the long-standing notion that a capitalist government is the only viable option. The Left can now leverage this shift in beliefs to argue that the pressing question is not whether socialist policies can succeed, but whether society can sustain capitalist ones.

Rebuilding Democratic Trust in Working Together

The Left's most vital asset has been conviction—the belief that people can effect change when they unite. However, many individuals have grown skeptical of their ability to make a difference after enduring years of losses, betrayals, and fatigue. Now, with Mamdani's victory, that hope has been

rekindled. His campaign did not lean on charisma or viral media; instead, it focused on the diligent, ongoing effort of grassroots organizing. This included door-to-door canvassing, forming coalitions, engaging with diverse communities in multiple languages, and cultivating networks of volunteers. This outcome illustrates that organized mass politics remains effective, even in an era when many are disillusioned with politicians.

This lesson carries serious implications. Every volunteer who witnessed a neighbor’s engagement and every tenant organizer who observed their community unite has experienced democracy at its finest. The Left could further this momentum by transforming these instances into enduring forms of participatory democracy, such as community assemblies and cooperative planning frameworks. Mamdani’s win transcends a simple electoral victory; it showcases the capacity of democracy to thrive from the grassroots. It reinforces the essential socialist principle that it is the collective actions of the people, rather than those of the elites, that shape history.



Creating a Policy Lab for Socialist Governance

If Mamdani wins, New York City could serve as a significant test of socialist municipalism in the U.S. for the first time in many years. For decades, the city has operated as a microcosm of global capitalism, with wealth concentrated at the top and service work relegated to the bottom. Additionally, there are vast disparities among different communities. While this reality is daunting, it also presents an opportunity to govern a city guided by socialist principles.

The Left would see the area as a live experiment for new policies. New York could implement free public transportation, socialized daycare, and enhanced

rent control, similar to the initiatives pursued by Barcelona en Comú in Spain, which included participatory budgeting and public housing. Even small victories could demonstrate that redistribution can be equitable, functional, and popular. If corporate technocrats were in charge, they would likely embrace socialism.

However, for the Left to be effective, it would need to maintain discipline. It must learn fiscal management, navigate government operations, and adhere to legal frameworks without compromising its ethical standards. People will not evaluate this experiment based on its perfection; rather, they will assess its success in fostering greater equality, democracy, and public control through socialism.

Getting people from different places and countries to work together more

The possibility of Mamdani's win has already had effects that extend well beyond New York City. People involved in the socialist movement around the globe—from London to Buenos Aires, from Kerala to Berlin—are taking note. A socialist candidate from Uganda and South Asia, who openly opposes imperialism, winning a primary in one of the world's largest capitalist cities sends a clear message.

Neoliberalism has sought to undermine internationalism, but this victory revitalizes it. Cities worldwide are facing issues of privatization, austerity, and inequality that cross geographical boundaries. Because capitalism operates on a global scale, these challenges impact everyone. The Left could seize this moment to facilitate collaboration among people in various cities by

establishing networks of municipal socialism and exchanging ideas on combating climate change, safeguarding workers' rights, and achieving housing justice.

In this context, Mamdani's success is advantageous for both American politics and the worldwide resurgence of socialism as a movement. It illustrates how connecting local victories to global struggles can highlight the potential outcomes when movements transcend national borders.

Helping the Left Grow Up in a Smart Way

We should celebrate if Mamdani wins, but we must also consider the implications of that outcome. There is a significant difference between running for office and effectively managing a government. Many movements have successfully won elections yet struggled to govern well. The Left currently faces a maturity challenge: can it transition from moral opposition to strategic leadership without compromising its core values?

Mamdani's approach has already assisted socialists in tackling real power issues, such as managing departments, creating budgets, and maintaining coalitions. To handle these responsibilities effectively, individuals need both knowledge and conviction. They must possess the ability to govern without becoming overwhelmed by the complexities of administration. The Left needs to improve while avoiding unnecessary complications. It also must learn to operate effectively without losing sight of its purpose. If Mamdani's group can successfully govern while remaining accountable to the people, it could set a precedent for a new form of socialist politics that is disciplined, principled, and effective. Even if it ultimately fails, the experience will still provide valuable

insights into the limits of radical change within capitalist frameworks. Regardless of the outcome, the Left must enhance both its strategy and its intellectual foundation.

A Moment to Reclaim the Meaning of “Public”, Mamdani’s program is founded on a radical re-examination of the term “public.” In a society where privatization has weakened the collective imagination, his proposals for free public transit, decommodified housing, and universal childcare transcend mere policy suggestions; they represent moral assertions. They communicate that society’s wealth belongs to the people, not to investors. The Left has long understood that socialism involves more than redistribution; it is also about reconnecting individuals in a world fractured by competition. Mamdani’s victory offers the Left an opportunity to discuss this concept in institutional terms, transforming the public sphere into a community where individuals care for one another and feel a sense of belonging. By reclaiming the city as a community rather than a profit-driven entity, the Left can reinvigorate socialism as a moral and civic goal. This perspective emphasizes that freedom cannot exist without equality, and equality cannot thrive without solidarity.

If Mamdani loses: A lesson for the left to organize the working class

If Zoram loses, it won’t be the end. It will serve as a lesson for the left to start uniting the working class. If Zohran Mamdani does not win the election for mayor of New York City, it will mark a setback for the progressive movement, but it should not be viewed as the end of the movement. Elections are not the end of the struggle. The primary responsibility of the left has always been to unite the working class around material, shared interests rather than fleeting moral outrage or social media symbols. Mamdani’s campaign has already

achieved something significant: it has reignited discussions about public goods, social ownership, and the right of ordinary New Yorkers to live with dignity in a city long dominated by developers, financiers, and technocrats. We should not lose hope if we face defeat. Instead, we should work to empower workers, neighborhoods, and unions rather than relying solely on elections. Many on the American left, particularly in urban areas, mistakenly equate “woke” symbols or symbolic diversity with genuine change. While representation is important, without a solid class foundation, the same neoliberal system that it professes to oppose can easily regain control.

Mamdani’s campaign illustrated both the positive and negative aspects of progressive politics in a city rife with inequality. Once the campaign concludes, the energy that united students, tenants, gig workers, and immigrant organizers should not devolve into conflicts over culture or identity. Instead, this network could serve as the foundation for a new class movement that unites renters against landlords, passengers against fee hikes, and workers against privatization. If the left aims to evolve beyond moral politics, it must begin addressing power and production once more. This entails connecting the excitement of the election to organizing within workplaces, tenant unions, and local battles over public services. The true success of a campaign like Mamdani’s, lies not only in securing a seat in City Hall but also in empowering individuals to feel a sense of agency within their communities long after the election has ended. A movement does not fail simply because it loses an election, provided it understands who it represents. A left that has faced defeat must also resist the temptation to revert to purely political maneuvers or extreme online behavior. The difficult task is transforming anger into order and frustration into self-discipline. In New York, the working class—comprising delivery drivers, nurses, cleaners, teachers, and subway

workers—can still wield power if they collaborate as a unified class rather than allowing divisions of race, gender, or lifestyle to fracture them. The current objective is to rebuild solidarity from the grassroots level, focusing on specific neighborhoods and workplaces. If Mamdani's campaign fosters stronger connections, it can be viewed as a success rather than a failure. The left should uphold his proposals for free public transportation, fair rent, and public care, but it must also acknowledge that these initiatives require more than just good intentions to be effective. The struggle between classes persists even after elections. If the movement remains resilient and channels failure into discipline, the next wave will strive for both political office and ownership. And when that moment arrives, the ability to succeed will be evident even in the absence of victory.

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