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Does Mamdani's victory show that 'radical' is the new normal?

Jan H. Wasserziehr argues that whilst Zohran Mamdani's victory in New York may have surprised the Democratic establishment, it tallies with an increasingly polarised US electorate who are deserting the 'centre' in search of real change and radical ideas.

On 4 November 2025, Zohran Mamdani was elected mayor of New York City. His victory is nothing short of astounding. A mere nine months earlier, Mamdani—then a little-known New York State Assemblyman—polled at a meagre 1 percent in a Democratic Primary Poll, **the lowest among ten possible candidates**. The standard wisdom of US politics says there are two keys to electoral success: money and name recognition. According to that wisdom, Mamdani should not be moving into the Mayor's Office in January 2026. His grassroots campaign—**much unlike that of his main rival**, former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo—largely lacked the support of big, billionaire donors. And whilst Cuomo was well-known among New Yorkers both as former Governor and son of Marco Cuomo (New York's Governor through the 1980s), Mamdani effectively entered the race as a nobody. Still, on election day, he seized over 50 percent of the vote in a three-way race, more than Cuomo and Curtis Sliwa—the Republican candidate—combined.

To place Mamdani's victory in the larger context of recent US politics, it is worth paying attention to a little side story that unfolded on 4 November. On that day, news broke that Chuck Schumer, Senator from New York and one of the most powerful Democrats in the country, had still failed to endorse Mamdani. In fact, when asked which candidate he had voted for, Schumer's answer—**"I voted, and I look forward to working with the next mayor"**—implied he may have voted against the Democrats' own candidate. While Mamdani's victory constituted the Democrats' first serious sign of life since Donald Trump's return to the White House, Schumer's silence appeared as a stubborn denialism of America's new political reality, now for some years in the making—the triumph of programmatic radicalism.

To understand this notion, one must go back to 2016, the year in which Trump first won the Presidency. I remember attending a Sanders' rally in California during the Democratic primaries that year. Bernie Sanders, whose popularity had taken the Democrats by surprise, was proclaiming a simple enough political vision: an America that works for all Americans, 'not just the one per cent'. His base, quite like Mamdani's today, seemed to be fired up by the straightforward campaign promise that Sanders would tax the wealthy few ('the billionaire class') in order to improve the lives of the many. Despite the resonance of Sanders' primary campaign, many at the time considered Sanders as too radical. His leftist proposals would—so the worry of the Democratic establishment—alienate moderate voters and therefore fail to mobilise a broad-enough coalition to win the Presidency. The outcome is well-known: a moderate Hillary Clinton lost to a 'radical' Donald Trump.

In 2020, Joe Biden—by any means a Centrist candidate—clinched the Presidential election against Trump. Yet Biden's victory, from today's vantage point, presents an exception within a new reality, rather than a return to an elusive normalcy. Biden did not win because he was a strong candidate but because Trump, leaving the White House on a record-low average approval rating, was a weak one. Consequently, the Democrats lost the White House again in 2024, this time with Kamala Harris—another Centrist candidate—whose main political message was that she is not Donald Trump. Yet, after four years of Biden, Trump—and his radicalism—was exactly what the electorate wanted. This was not least due to Trump's ability to capitalise on the population's concern about inflation, a topic whose importance Democrats had failed to recognize in a campaign mostly focussed on fearmongering about Trump and the end of American democracy. This strategy had already failed in 2016, when Clinton repeatedly sought to mobilise the fear that Trump would push the nuclear button.



Many Americans are done with what they perceive as an unacceptable status quo



Schumer's silence on Mamdani is part of a broader battle over the fate of the Democratic party. The stakes have essentially remained unaltered since the 2016 stand-off between Sanders and Clinton. Will the party embrace a more ambitious—'radical'— path forward or stick to moderation? After Mamdani's win, various commentators have rushed to argue that Mamdani's 'radicalism'—free buses for all, universal childcare, and affordable rent—couldn't possibly resonate with voters beyond New York, a blue city in a blue state. Just as in Sanders' case, Mamdani's leftist proposals are predicted to alienate moderate Democrats and undecided voters in swing states.

This analysis fails to recognise that what Mamdani offers—a focus on affordability and defiance of the party line’s unabated support of Israel (Mamdani has called Israel’s war in Gaza a genocide and declared to arrest Netanyahu should he set foot on New York soil)—has not only led him to an unlikely victory in New York City, but gestures towards broader shifts in the American electorate at large. **Americans care about affordability** and they care about the plight of the Palestinians (a topic Harris refused to touch during her Presidential bid). Especially the latter issue increasingly divides Americans across the country, with a majority **(53%) now holding unfavourable views of Israel** and many **(33%) stating that the US is providing too much military support to Israel**. Mamdani’s victory, far from being **the Communist coup it’s sometimes made out to be**, merely reflects the rather mundane reality that many Americans are done with what they perceive as an unacceptable status quo.

Remarkably, while Democrats remain somewhat dumbfounded by Mamdani’s success, Trump has recognised the order of the day and, less than a week after Mamdani’s win in New York, announced **payouts of \$2,000 to every American—notably ‘not including high income people!’**—funded by tariffs . Equally JD Vance, on the day after the election, professed his care for all Americans **‘being able to afford a decent life’** .

What Mamdani shows—and what Trump has long demonstrated to hold for the other aisle of the political spectrum—is that the American voter isn’t afraid to break with programmatic conventions or technocratic political wisdom when offered an ambitious programme that speaks to their core concerns. The Republicans under Trump have embraced this insight since 2016. The Democrats, whose establishment still holds widely Centrist positions, is yet to recognize the potential of a more radical politics for the Left. As the US is turning more polarised than ever, there is not much of an electoral Centre left that could be swayed by pleas for moderation and incrementalism. In fact, ‘radical’ is the new normal—already in 2016, **polls indicated that Sanders would fare better in a general election against Trump** , as voters appeared to favour both Trump and Sanders over Clinton. Democrats would be well-advised to leave their wisdom of moderation behind and lean into America’s new radicalism—the country’s new centre may well be found at its fringes.

This article reflects the views and opinions of the author and does not represent the views or opinions of LSE Department of Government, nor the views and opinions of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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