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New York's new mayor is changing the game

The Democratic Party has a brand problem. But Mamdani brings back a spark of hope that there is still time until next year's midterms to message-test

Cheerful, young and new to the political stage — rookie Zohran Mamdani won the New York mayoral race with nearly double digits.

An immigrant and democratic socialist, Mamdani has found fertile ground for his agenda amid more frequent ICE raids and increasingly untenable living costs. Some centrist voices seem to fear that Mamdani embodies what, in 2024, was seen as the Democratic Party's death sentence: an overly radical, 'woke' political platform. Mamdani has been successfully reaching New Yorkers with his only (partially) implementable economic message in the time span of just eight months. Begging the question: will the Democrats regret supporting Mamdani, a 'left populist', in the upcoming 2026 midterms and the 2028 elections?

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The short answer is: No! Mamdani is not your average woke 'culture-war lib.' Yes, he is inexperienced — but that hasn't stopped anyone in the United States from succeeding in politics. Mamdani's leftist agenda is strongly centred around economic issues: a higher minimum wage, city-owned grocery stores, free public buses, affordable childcare and housing. And all that served with a populist 'tax the rich!' topping — and who doesn't love that?

Arguably, the many very rich New Yorkers who have been migrating to Florida due to the city's 'sky-high taxes.' Precisely the ones which have resulted in the city's top three per cent's income to grow four times faster than the wages of the bottom 20 per cent in just five years. Mamdani's plan to raise the corporate tax rate from 7.25 per cent to 11.5 per cent is unlikely to slow that trend down. With an affordability and housing crisis gripping the city, and most of the country, it is no wonder quick-fix

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What voters actually need right now

A few of Mamdani's promises, such as rent freezing, are in the long term neither politically nor economically feasible. Running on these promises and, due to the nature of the promises, not being able to deliver on them, carries a great risk of disenchanting voters with the Democratic Party further down the line. But perhaps, that's not the main lesson to be learned from Mamdani's victory at all. In fact, it shows us what voters actually need right now. Someone who looks and sounds like them. Someone who is an authentic fighter and embodies their city's promise of opportunity.

Living in America at this moment in time, for most progressives, feels demoralising on most days of the week. The Trump administration is inundating the media with *the biggest* and *most beautiful* headlines; the National Guard has become a normal part of city life in many American cities. The superlatives from atop keep coming, while the Democratic Party, until these recent November elections, has seemingly been inert.

Mamdani's populist message may appear to be fighting fire with fire from the outside, but this is far from true. The 34-year-old is delivering optimistic, pro-New York ideas with a big smile on his face. He reaches out to young voters, doesn't take himself too seriously on social media, and has the kind of story we love on this side of the Atlantic — a newbie with a vision, who's down-to-earth and is dreaming big. Zohran Mamdani's campaign has gained national attention, as political operatives across the country scramble for the one-size-fits-all approach to win back voters for the progressive cause. Unsurprisingly, there is no such silver bullet.

It seems that socialism, centrism and bending the rules of the game are all serving their purpose — in different parts of the country among different kinds of constituents.

Almost exactly a year after the 2024 elections, these electoral victories across the country have now sparked hope among progressives in America. Not only was a Democratic socialist elected Mayor of New York City — but moderates such as Mikie Sherill and Abigail Spanberger are now the Democratic Governors-elect of Virginia and New Jersey. Sherill and Spanberger both triumphed with a larger margin of victory than projected in polling, successfully honing in on their strong security-affiliated and veteran backgrounds. Even Californians overwhelmingly helped Governor

Gavin Newsom pass Proposition 50, the decidedly not so *playing-by-the-rules* measure to redraw districts to secure Democratic seats in future elections — an initiative that emerged as a reaction to Texas' lawmakers doing the same earlier this year. It seems that socialism, centrism and bending the rules of the game are all serving their purpose — in different parts of the country among different kinds of constituents. And that is exactly the lesson to be learned from recent blue victories.

The Democratic Party has a brand problem. But as steep as it has fallen, there are many opportunities to explore different messengers and approaches on the way up. It should come as no surprise that the solutions to addressing the US' multi-problems will require diverse problem-solvers, thinkers and messages. Key takeaways from these victories, especially Mamdani's, are that people want to see themselves in a candidate. They need to be met where they are, heard, and above all, see their lived reality and hopes for their city, district and state represented in one political warrior.

No one is disputing that Mamdani will very likely fall short on a few of his promises. That is the nature of working in a field that relies on donations and short terms in office, especially in a city that is always facing pressing issues. But Mamdani brings back a spark of hope that there is still time until next year's midterms to keep message-testing — because clearly something has resonated with voters.



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