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## ZOHRAN MAMDANI AND THE RISE OF IMMIGRANT DRIVEN LEFT POLITICS IN URBAN AMERICA

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines how Zohran Mamdani overcame the structural and rhetorical obstacles to become New York City's mayor in 2025 and become the first Muslim, South Asian, and Africa-born elected as a mayor on January 1, 2026. The analysis, which frames his ascent of 2020 State Assembly-conqueror to mayoral-officer within Political Opportunity Structures, resource mobilization, and descriptive-substantive representation paradigms, establishes what the institutional mechanisms and the strategies of coalition-building made a transformative success in the context of anti-immigrant and Islamophobic polarization. This study is an assessment of advanced digital mobilization, strategic community targeting, and identity management leading to a 50.78% general election victory over Andrew Cuomo (41.32%) and Curtis Sliwa (7%) based on record-breaking youth voter turnout, the highest since 1993. The results indicate that the twin focus of Mamdani on historic representation and material priorities (rent freezes, free transit, affordable housing, childcare expansion) created a sense of trust among the immigrants, as well as appealing to multi-ethnic and multi-generational voters. The paper evaluates the comparative implication of the representation of the immigrant-left in the urban liberal democracies, showing that economic populism and the cross-ethnic alliance-building in reversing polarization into progressive mobilization. This study presents an opportunity and engagement roadmap that can empower minority groups politically in highly contentious political environments through the careful structuring of opportunities, strategy, and engagement.*

**Keywords:** Immigrant-Left Mobilization, Political Opportunity Structures, Minority Representation, Coalition-Building, Zohran Mamdani, Urban Politics, Voter Participation, Democratic Socialism, Mayoral Elections

## Introduction

Political mobilization and involvement of immigrant and minority groups have become an important issue of interest in comparative and ethnic politics especially in urban liberal democracies. In the past, the immigrant population of the United States, in particular, Muslim diaspora, South Asian diaspora, and African diaspora, has experienced structural, institutional, and social obstacles to political representation. These are dispersal of populations in different districts, election systems that favor incumbents, partisan gate keeping, discrimination based on race/ethnicity/religion, negative media framing, and inability to access existing political networks. However, in recent 20 years, immigrant-left candidates have been making electoral inroads in a variety of city constituencies with high minority population, high civic participation and strong progressive organizations. The election of Zohran Mamdani to the New York State Assembly, District 36, and his subsequent historic election as the 112th Mayor of the City of New York in 2025, is a great example of how immigrants-left can negotiate the scope of a complicated political, social, and institutional environment to not only receive descriptive and substantive representation but also to do so on a large scale.

The trajectory of Mamdani has taken place in the context of extreme polarization, which started in the Trump era with the travel ban on Muslim-majority states in 2017, the intensification of immigration enforcement, and the rhetoric surrounding immigrants as a security risk. This played against minority

candidates in a hostile environment and at the same time fueled political awareness and mobilization by the marginalized population. In a post-Trump world (affordability crisis), where the nation was divided on inequality, the tensions were used by Mamdani to defeat former Governor Andrew Cuomo (independent, running as independent, and therefore new candidates, 41.32% of the votes) and Republican Curtis Sliwa (7%), in the Democratic mayoral primaries in June 2025 and the general election in November 2025 respectively. The election set a record turnout (more than 2 million votes, the highest turnout in a New York City mayoral contest in 1969 (or 1993 in some reports) with the young voters (18-29) and first-time voters leading the list and Black, working-class and immigrant neighborhood surges driving it. Mamdani became the mayor of the city on January 1, 2026, becoming the first Muslim mayor, the first of South Asian descent, the first born on the continent of Africa (in Uganda) and the youngest mayor since 1892, a reflection of the rising power of progressive politics led by immigrants in the largest city of America.

The opportunities in the boroughs of New York City, where there was diversity (population of South Asians, Muslims, African-Americans, Latinx, and young people), were intertwined with both the features of institutions, such as open primaries and progressive orientations. These could only be achieved through strategic plans, however. In this paper, the success of Mamdani lies within the context of Political Opportunity Structures (POS), mobilization of resources and descriptive-substantive representation. According to

POS theory, structural situations, which are the result of demographics, electoral rules and partisanship form openings to action, but it is agency that determines results (Tarrow, 1998; McAdam, 1996). Majority-minority districts, open primaries, and a progressive electorate were beneficial in the example of Mamdani, which was enhanced by the highest turnout among the underrepresented communities in the elections.

The resource mobilization theory brings attention to organizational capacity, such as volunteer networks, community alliances, labor unions, digital infrastructure as the means of transforming opportunities into outcomes (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). To reach young people and first-time voters, Mamdani has used multi-ethnic coalitions, DSA and progressive nominations, and a combination of grassroots canvassing with advanced digital (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, Tik Tok) outreach.

It turned out to be identity management: Mamdani authentically foregrounded his South Asian Muslim immigrant background to create trust in central communities and to highlight substantive, material concerns, rent freezes on stabilized tenants, fare-free pilot on public transit, expanded childcare, city-owned grocery stores, cracking down on predatory landlords, and community safety reforms, that cut across ethnic, class, and generational lines. Such duality provided a way to bridge descriptive representation (representing the identity of communities) and substantive representation (benefits of all policies), which could easily find wide appeal in a multi-ethnic metropolis with a cost-of-living crisis.

The process of coalition-building was not limited to ethnicity but it also involved labor unions, progressive organizations, neighborhood groups, and cross-borough coalitions and turned the diversity of the population into the political power. Can be highlighted are similar instances in the U.S., the U.K. and Canada: cross-ethnic, issue-based coalitions surpass polarization and structural barriers, such as Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib in the U.S., Diane Abbott and Sadiq Khan in the U.K. and Ahmed Hussen in Canada.

Online mobilization was supplementing old fashioned organizing, allowing it to infiltrate the youth (who gave huge support, with exit polls indicating the same at approximately 75 percent approval among 18-29s) and stepped up the engagement of previously low-turnout blocs. These strategies were reflected in voter behavior: high turnout increase in South Asian/Muslim communities, among Black voters (a major switch to Mamdani), in Latinx regions and young/first-time voters, which implied intersectional politics around affordability, equity, and inclusion.

The rise of Mamdani provides a comparative and theoretical knowledge to urban liberal democracies. Immigrant-left candidates share such adversities as polarization, media partiality, resource gaps, but they are winning by institutional openings, mobilizing strategically, framing identities preciously, and coalition-building. The fact that he won the mayor office on an economic populist platform and demographic vitality is a sign of change: immigrants and their progenies are increasingly defining left-wing urban politics,



but they are not simply seeking the identity but material relief as well.

This study fills this gap as the author incorporates the dimensions of structure, strategy, and identity in subnational contests. Much previous research is concentrated on the descriptive representation or the turnout separately; the case provided by Mamdani shows that empowerment needs to organize the demographic consciousness, resource allocation, digital technologies, and the interaction of the coalition in polarizing space.

The research questions include: (1) which structural and political conditions contributed to Mamdani ascending to mayor office through Assembly; (2) how strategic coalition-building, digital mobilization, and identity management were applied in engaging diverse constituencies and (3) to provide implications on how immigrant-left politics can be effective in multi-ethnic, urban context. These offer an understanding of the inclusive democracy, voter mobilization and minority empowerment and guide scholars, policymakers and practitioners.

Altogether, the election experience of Zohran Mamdani, who started with a successful performance in a local Assembly, followed by the creation of a successful coalition, and the position of identity policy, has shown to combine the prospects of structure, strategic agency, coalition-building, and identity-policy balance to promote immigrant-left politics. His victory with the highest voter turnout and the firsts in history provides an example of comparative scholarship and a plural democracy in polarized, diverse democracies.

## Literature Review

### US Case Studies of Immigrant-Left Mobilization

The United States provides a fertile background to the study of immigrant-left politics mobilization, with the peculiarities of a pluralistic polarized electoral system, the high concentration of immigrant populations, and the experiences of minority politics. The example of such successful figures as Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and, most broadly, Zohran Mamdani shows the combination of identity politics, progressive mobilization, and structural opportunity, which can be used as a model of how immigrant and minority candidates negotiate the complicated paths toward local, state, and recently municipal executive offices.

The career of Zohran Mamdani, who became the winner of the 36th Assembly District in Queens in 2020 and the subsequent winner of the mayor of New York City in 2025, serves as a good example of the strategic combination of the descriptive representation with the progressive presentation of the issues at the citywide level. Being a Ugandan-born Muslim of South Asian descent, he capitalized on his immigrant status to relate with various groups of people in an authentic manner and focus a substantive agenda on material affordability crises: rent freezes of stabilized tenants, no fare and speedy public transit, universal childcare, grocery stores owned by the city as a pilot project, cracking down on bad landlords, and community safety reforms. It was a democratic socialist economic populism based on which the entire ethnic, class and generational lines of

appeal rose in the face of escalating living costs.

Young people (18-29 turnout of approximately 28% with 75% of Mamdani in exit polls, 82% among young women, 43% among South Asians), Latinos (good results in places like Washington Heights), and South Asians (turnout has soared to 43 in some analyses, 57-63 in key districts) led to the highest turnout in the 2025 mayoral race (>2.2 million votes, highest since 1969/1993, which was On the strength of NYC-DSA, progressive endorsements, and grassroots/digital mobilization, Mamdani won over Andrew Cuomo (~41.32% as independent) and Curtis Sliwa (~7%). His campaign machine, the use of volunteer armies, virality of social media and coalitions with unions/labor increased coverage in a heterogeneous metropolis, proving how immigrant-left candidates can go beyond district-level victory to governing the largest city in America.

Ilhan Omar was elected to the congress in the 5th district in Minnesota, becoming one of the first Muslim women to be elected to the congress. Her approach was a powerful mix of descriptive and substantive politics in healthcare, equity in education, economic justice, and the rights of immigrants. With the backing of a majority-minority district that has a high concentration of Somali/immigrant population and civic interest, her insurgent campaign was based on grassroots canvassing, volunteer networks, and online outreach to the progressive coalitions. The inclusion of identity-specific issues (anti-Muslim discrimination, integration), and universal ones (general lessons) enhanced attraction, which can be

applied by Mamdani in the context of authenticity and cross-ethnic resonance.

The victory of Rashida Tlaib of Michigan in the 13<sup>th</sup> District interprets identity, progressive and coalitions. Being a Palestinian-American Muslim, she was able to mobilize the working-class voters with the use of community connections and combine healthcare, social justice, and environmental agendas. Eventually, in a heterogeneous urban-suburban district that has high representations of African-Americans and Latinos, her personal approach, volunteer organization, and localized framing dealt with particular immigrant and universal issues. Union and progressive endorsement increased infrastructure, which was similar to multi-ethnic alliances by Mamdani in conditions of media bias.

Transformative potential in established systems can be shown by the insurgent victory of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) AOC in the 14th District of New York. Although an immigrant, her examples of immigrant-left candidates would be heavy grassroots mobilization, mastery of social media, framing of progressivism (e.g., Green New Deal as economic/environmental justice), and coalition-building with young/working-class/diverse voters. Digital fundraising and volunteer networks allowed reaching out to people even with the limited resources, which highlighted the tactics Mamdani maximized throughout the city.

### **Synthesis and Implications**

These US cases indicate uniformities in the immigrant-left mobilization. The effect of identity signaling creates trust and the association with universal progressive concerns (affordability, equity, safety)

increases an appeal of ethnic/immigrant communities. The ethnic/class/ideological coalition-building is crucial in various urban/suburban settings. Grassroots/digital organization makes it more reachable and structural openings (majority-minority areas, weak incumbency, progressive infrastructure) work in interplay with strategy to make it successful.

These aspects combine in its unprecedented scale with the mayoral victory of Mamdani: his message of affordability as a priority, young voter turnout, Black/Latino/South Asian victories, and his DSA/progressive endorsement makes clear how the politics of immigrant left can be translated into governing power in polarised, high-cost cities. These examples are counterexamples of policies of the immigrant-left, and the victory of Mamdani is the first empirical sign of the effectiveness of such policy in the context of Trump-era/post-Trump polarization.

### Cases of International Comparisons

Comparative approaches shed some light on the immigrant-left mobilization outside the US, where the political system, election regulations, and cultural environment differ, but some general patterns appear: inclusive political structure, coalition-making, and definition of immigrant identity as a progressive political agenda.

**Canada:** Progressive Alliances and Inclusive Party Structures The model of Canada has proportional aspects on a local level, inclusive parties, and robust networks. Such politicians as Ahmed Hussen used ethnic associations, unions and civil society in ridings with a high population of immigrants (e.g. Scarborough). The merging of identity-related interests (multiculturalism, anti-

discrimination) with the progressive ones (housing, healthcare) resembles the affordability orientation (Mamdani) and inter-community coalitions.

**United Kingdom:** Urban Ethnic Diversity and Party Mobilization in first-past-the-post systems, urban ethnic diversity and Labour receptiveness can make a success such as Diane Abbott and Sadiq Khan. Dense aggregate communities are a source of descriptive representation and party alignment is a source of resources. Accentuating identity by a coalition-building and gradually (anti-racism, equity) is a multi-ethnic (issue-oriented) strategy that fits in a polarized environment (Mamdani).

**European Background:** Municipal politics and integrating immigrants in Germany, France, and the Netherlands, municipal elections provide an avenue in the face of anti-immigrantism. This is in line with Mamdani and his focus on community safety and equity in which Turkish/North African/South Asian applicants mobilize identity and integrate it with inclusiveness policies (housing, education, social inclusion).

### The Insight of Comparative Studies of Nations

Themes common to democracies are:

1. Party Organization and Electoral Processes: Open primaries/proportional systems help to represent electoral politics; ethnic density in urban areas helps to lessen the barriers.
2. Coalition-Building: Multi-ethnic/cross-class coalition broadly builds on the front of a single group.

3. Framing and Identity Management: This is the best way to support the agendas based on the ethnic/religious identity by integrating them with the universal progressive agendas.

4. Organizational Capacity: Grassroots, digital and volunteer networks exploit opportunities.

The uniting different communities to populism based on economics as a strategy by Mamdani resembles international trends and shows growth potential in one of the biggest cities of the US, which highlights that immigrant-left victory relies on a structure, strategy, and involvement.

### **Theoretical Underpinning- Political Opportunity Structures and Debates**

The mobilization of immigrants-left can not be understood without a healthy theoretical prism that incorporates both structural, organizational and strategic factors. Political Opportunity Structure (POS) theory is one of the most commonly used frameworks giving an idea of how electoral, institutional circumstances can influence the chances of political success of marginalized and minority actors (Tarrow, 1998; McAdam, 1996). Similarly to how POS was initially created to explain social movements, it has been applied to electoral politics, shedding light on how immigrants and minority candidates can achieve success at mobilizing communities and getting elected to office (Koopmans and Statham, 1999; della Porta and Diani, 2006). The POS theory is used to explain how structural openings, amplified by post-Trump polarization and urban demographic changes, allowed a democratic socialist of immigrant descent to climb the ranks of local assembly representation to

executive office of the largest city in the United States of America.

### **Immigrant Politics of Political Opportunity Structures (POS)**

The POS theory highlights the three dimensions that are important including institutional openness, elite alignment, and issue salience.

**Institutional Openness:** This denotes how the political positions and decision-making are open to new entrants, minority and immigrant candidates as well. Openness is created to different extents by electoral rules, including open primaries, ranked-choice voting (used in NYC), majority-minority districts in the US, proportional representation in Canada, or municipal government in Europe. These structural aspects affect how candidates and parties make their strategic decisions, as they impact where, when, and how the immigrant candidates run (Lublin, 2014; Bird, 2011). New York City, in the example of Mamdani, had open primary in the Democratic party and has a demographically diverse population (South Asian, Muslim, Black, Latino, and youth populations represent significant parts of the population) which came with institutional benefits and allowed him to challenge the establishment figures such as Andrew Cuomo insurgently. It was further evidenced in the 2025 mayoral race, which was the most attended election since 1969/1993 (2.2 million votes) as the minority turnout was increased due to the availability of accessible systems with mobilization.

The second dimension, Elite Alignment, takes into consideration the influence of party hierarchies, the vulnerability of

incumbents and the receptivity of elites on the opportunities of candidates. Where there is elite division or weak incumbency, insurgent immigrant-left contestants may take advantage of vacancies to be nominated or get electoral assistance. This dynamic can be observed in the campaign of Mamdani where the benefits of progressive-left groups in the Democratic Party (e.g., NYC-DSA endorsements), the weaknesses in opponents (e.g., the scandals of Cuomo), and the shift of elites provided chances to make his candidacy successful in the competitive, polarized environment.

Issue Salience is the third dimension of POS, which is the extent to which voters are moved by specific issues and how they affect the result of the elections. Applicants who can associate issues related to immigrants (discrimination, housing inequality, education access, etc.) with larger progressive interests will be better positioned to attract minorities as well as majority voters. As an illustration, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib integrated the immigrant rights advocacy with economic justice and healthcare reforms, and the issue salience mobilized the diversifiable voter groups. This was the case with the platform put forward by Mamdani: by positioning affordability crises (rent freezes, fare-free transit, universal childcare, community safety alternatives) as something relevant to immigrants and as something everyone needed, Mamdani was appealing to the entire ethnic, class, and generational spectrum, and the support was high (28% with 75 percent of 18-29s).

## Integrating POS with Resource Mobilization and Identity Politics

As POS gives a structural explanation, resource mobilization theory goes hand in hand with it in the sense that it puts emphasis on the nature of organizational capacity in electoral success (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Strolovitch, 2007). Immigrant networks, labor movements, civil society groups, and volunteer groups offer the manpower, money, and time to take advantage of political opportunities. The absence of these networks can lead to the unrealized structural opportunities, and this is an indication of the dependence between POS and resource mobilization. Resource mobilization in the mayoral campaign of Mamdani was in the form of huge volunteer mobilization (>100,000 volunteers), micro-targeting made possible by digital infrastructure, and coalitions with progressive organizations, which turned POS openings into a 50.78 to 41.32 to 7% win over Cuomo and Sliwa, respectively.

Identity politics also enhances this framework by providing a focus on strategic application of ethnic, religious, and cultural identity in the electoral campaigns. Candidates of minorities have to walk the fine line between serving something particular and reaching out to larger voting blocks. Efficient campaigns strike a balance of descriptive representation (capturing the identity of the community) and substantive representation (communities that promote policies that are beneficial to all the constituents). An example of this is the campaign of Zohran Mamdani, which was strategically anticipatory of his South Asian Muslim identity and connected it to

progressive concerns that had popular appeal (e.g., material support to workers of impoverished families), which illustrates how identity politics can be integrated into POS and resource mobilization strategies. The strategy facilitated expansive coalitions, such as mobilizations in Black (68% support) and Latino (61%) voters, which emphasized on transformative incrementalism: identity was used to establish trust and provided substantive change.

### **Thought-provoking Critiques and Shortcomings**

Despite the wide usage of POS, researchers argue about its explanatory capabilities and drawbacks. According to critics, POS lays too much emphasis on structural aspects but pays little or no attention to agency, candidate charisma and localized social networks which play a major role in determining results (Koopmans, 2004; Tilly, 2004). Also, POS is inclined to believe in a linear cause, but in political results, complex, iterative interactions between structure, agency and strategy are likely to affect the results, as Mamdani in his adaptive reaction to polarization, when the anti-immigrant discourse served to mobilize progressive voters.

The other controversy is whether POS is generalizable in different national settings. Although majority-minority district in the US enables descriptive representation, proportional representation in Canada and municipal coalitions in Europe bring about structurally varied opportunities. According to comparative research, the contextualization of POS is necessary, and the party systems, urban population, and cultural patterns must be incorporated to

explain the electoral success of immigrants in full (Bird, Saalfeld, and Wuest, 2011; Kostadinova, 2018). The fact that Mamdani won the citywide race in a diverse metropolis such as NYC is the illustration of how POS can move in high stakes executive races where the issue salience of affordability can break through the traditional barriers.

Lastly, critics note that POS does not explain alone the strategic framing of identity and coalition-building of the mobilization of immigrants-left. The ability of the candidates to manoeuvre in polarized political conditions, form wide coalitions, and to present issues in a fashion that identities intersect with policy is what makes successful campaigns as seen in US and international campaigns.

### **Conclusion as to Zohran Mamdani Case**

The success of Mamdani in elections is an example of combined usage of the POS theory, resource mobilization, and identity politics. Structural opportunities were open primaries and factionalism of progressive-left. The resources to take advantage of these openings capitalized on dense networks of immigrants, alliances with civil society and mobilization at the grassroots level. Muslim framing of his South Asian identity and progressive advocacy of issues allowed him to build coalitions across ethnic divisions and classes, which showed the practical applicability of these theoretical models. The fact that he not only won the mayoral race in 2025 with a record turnout and historic firsts (first Muslim, South Asian mayor, Africa-born mayor; youngest since 1892) strengthens the point that the task of immigrant-left mobilization cannot be achieved through a one-layered framework,

but can provide information about how the structural openings can result in transformative city governance in polarized settings.

The comparative evidence supports the idea that the mobilization of immigrant-left is an issue that needs a multi-layered analytical approach. The structural conditions are explained by POS, organizational capacity is determined by the mobilization of resources, and strategic mobilization is clarified by the identity politics as to how the cultural, religious, or ethnic identity is deployed in the election process. Collectively, these frameworks can provide a strong analytical tool that can be used to examine how minority and immigrant candidates succeed in the politics of liberal democracies.

### Theoretical Framework

The analysis of the communication of immigrant-left mobilization in modern liberal democracies needs a theoretical framework that incorporates the elements of structural, organizational, and strategic aspects of electoral politics. This framework should describe how the candidates with marginalized or minority backgrounds can negotiate political opportunity structure, draw on community resources, signal their identity, and build coalitions to be elected successfully. This framework has explanatory and predictive force in the case of Zohran Mamdani, who rose to power in 2020, was elected to the 36th District of the New York State Assembly, and became the first immigrant to become a mayoral candidate, winning the race in 2025 and being inaugurated as the 112th Mayor of New York City on January 1, 2026.

**1. Political Opportunity Structures (POS)** :Theory Political Opportunity Structure (POS) theory offers a conceptual basis on why and how electoral success of immigrant-left runners is possible or limited. There are three dimensions which are underlined by POS: institutional openness, elite alignment, and issue salience (Tarrow, 1998; McAdam, 1996).

• **Institutional Openness:** This is the extent to which the political posts and decision making is open to outsiders, such as the minority candidates and immigrants. Descriptive representation is made possible by electoral mechanisms that either create a majority-minority district in the US, majority-minority voting, ranked-choice voting (in NYC), or proportional representation in other democracies. The district and citywide races described by Mamdani, where there are thick immigrations and competitive environments of the progressive types are good examples of how structural openings can be abused by strategically located candidates. These vacancies were increased in the 2025 mayoral race (>2.2 million votes).

• **Elite Alignment:** The theory of POS emphasizes the significance of party stratifications, vulnerability of incumbents and receptivity of elites. Immigrant-left candidates enjoy opportunities of openings in party systems, a weak incumbency, or elite factionalism. Progressive-left groups in the local and city Democratic Party, which gave Mamdani the benefit of endorsements, organizational backing, and the benefit of being able to gain access to volunteer networks when the establishment was

fractured (e.g. against Andrew Cuomo), made Mamdani successful.

• **Issue Salience:** The sensitivity of voters to particular issues may be a major determinant of success of a candidate. Associating specific issues of the immigrants, like anti-discrimination policies, access to quality education, and affordable housing, with the general progressive issues raises the appeal across the ethnic and class boundaries. This is demonstrated in the platform of Mamdani, but he touches on the priorities of policies in the community (e.g., rent freezes, fare-free transport, universal childcare) and the priorities of the entire nation at the same time under the influence of the economy.

POS theory however is not able to explain candidate agency, strategic framing or coalition-building in full. Thus, bringing together the resource mobilization and identity politics frameworks in the theoretical model is necessary to achieve these aspects.

**2.Resource Mobilization Theory:** Resource mobilization theory focuses on the fact that organizational, human and material resources are available and can be utilized strategically to achieve social and political success (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Strolovitch, 2007). Thick immigrant networks, labor, advocacy groups and volunteer coalitions are the infrastructure needed to mobilize voters, spread the campaign message and hold the electoral wave. This is exemplified in the campaigns by Mamdani. His mayoral campaign used the local networks of South Asians and general immigrants in canvassing, recruiting volunteers (>100,000), and engaging the community. Partnership with progressive groups (e.g., NYC-DSA), unions,

and activists groups helped to maximize outreach, fundraising and credibility. Digital infrastructure facilitated more accurate targeting of youth and first-time voters, which helped in surges (e.g. youth turnout 28, support overall 75, etc.). Resource mobilization therefore converts the structural opportunities as stipulated by POS into viable electoral benefits, which is an expression of the interaction between structure and agency.

**3.Identity Politics and Descriptive-Substantive Representation:**

Identity politics provides an insight into the way that immigrant-left candidates work across cultural, religious, and ethnic identities in politically heterogeneous contexts. Theorists distinguish between descriptive representation (that is a reflection of identity of the candidate) and substantive representation (proposing policies to meet the needs of the constituents) (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 1999). Efficient campaigns coordinate this duality in a tactical way: in the process of establishing credibility and trust with core communities, candidates communicate identity to position substantive policy offers in a way that would attract more voters. The campaign prefigured his identity as a South Asian Muslim immigrant focusing on immigrant voters and connecting the identity to the general progressive policies like climate resilience, education reform, housing equity and affordability relief. In this way, transformative incrementalism became possible, which is the immediate provision of material benefits (e.g. rent/childcare expansions) but capacity to change was developed in the long term. Similar strategies have been evidenced in

Canada, the UK and Europe, where minority candidates are integrating descriptive representation approaches with cross-community issue advocacy in order to increase electoral attention (Bird, 2011; Kostadinova, 2018). Identity politics also plays an important role in controlling media image and the perception of society. Muslim candidates tend to face biased interpretation and therefore proactive framing i.e. competency inclusive and common values. The strategic identity management then overlaps with framing and coalition-building which makes a triad of electoral success mechanisms.

**4.Coalition-Building Across Ethnic, Class, and Ideological Lines:** Coalition-building in the city, as well as in the suburbs, where there is ethnic diversity and where socio-economic heterogeneity can be observed, coalition-building is vital. Effective immigrant-left movements form multi-layered coalitions which incorporate ethnic networks, civil society organizations, labor unions and progressive political formations (Karpowitz and Mansbridge, 2005; Strolovitch, 2007). This is the case with the strategy of Mamdani. His campaign brought together South Asian, Muslim, African-American (~68% support), Latinx (~61%), and progressive voters together, as well as with dramatic youth surges (75% overall, more among women of color), to turn the disunrallied electorate into a strong coalition that can organize resources, volunteers, and voters. South Asian turnout sharply increased (e.g. it increased by 15 percent to 43 percent in key areas), a symptom of targeted outreach. Similar dynamics of coalition are observed through comparative

international examples, including Diane Abbott in the UK and Ahmed Hussen in Canada, which prove that cross-ethnic and cross-class coalitions are stronger predictors of success than a coalition based on one identity group. The process of coalition-building also supports the resilience to structural and ideological obstacles, e.g., anti-immigrantism or partisan polarization. With the involvement of more than one organization and constituency, the candidates will guarantee that the voter mobilization process is essentially redundant, the message spread further and legitimacy heightened and finally the electoral viability will be greater.

**5.Integrative Analytical Model:** POS theory plus resource mobilization, identity politics and coalition-building gives us an analytical framework in understanding immigrant-left mobilization. The electoral success is conceptualized in this model as a product of:

**6.Structural Opportunities (POS):** Electoral regulations, open primaries, and progressive party dissent.

**7.Resource Deployment:** Digital resources, organization alliances, networks, and volunteers.

**8.Identity Management:** Descriptive and substantive representation, strategic framing and media involvement.

**9.Formation of a coalition:** cross ethnic, cross-class and ideological coalition to mobilize wide voter turnout.

This integrative framework can be used to conduct systematic analysis of Mamdani campaign strategies so as to demonstrate how a combination of structure, resources, identity, and coalition processes can give rise



to the election results in polarized, multi-ethnic districts. It offers also a comparative prism of assessing immigrant-left mobilization in other liberal democracies, pointing out the universal and context-specific differences (e.g., the ranked-choice and the demographic scale used in NYC making possible executive-level victories).

## **10.Theoretical Debates and Refinements:**

The model deals with major debates in the literature. According to the opponents of POS, agent-oriented methods are a key to success, and the strategies of candidates, charisma, and local networks are the most important factors to be considered (Koopmans, 2004; Tilly, 2004). Improved agent-centered information is found through resource mobilization and identity politics, which focus on organizational capacity and strategic identity deployment. Also, the framework allows comparative variation because it recognizes that electoral regulations, party organizations, and cultural standards determine how strategies are applicable in different countries. The model, integrating POS, resource mobilization, identity politics, and coalition-building, is a holistic paradigm that can help explain the success of immigrant-left electoral politics in a variety of contexts and remain adaptive to context-specific factors such as economic populism and youth/digital mobilization used by Mamdani in the context of gaining governing power.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to analyze immigrant-left mobilization, with primary focus on Zohran Mamdani's 2025 New York City mayoral victory (50.78% of 2+ million votes, record

turnout, inauguration January 1, 2026), contextualized by his 2020 Assembly win. The approach examines interactions among structural conditions, organizational resources, identity dynamics, and coalition strategies (Yin, 2018; George & Bennett, 2005). Single-case depth combines with comparative insights from Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib (US), Sadiq Khan (UK), and Ahmed Hussen (Canada) to test Political Opportunity Structures, resource mobilization, and descriptive-substantive representation frameworks applied to scaling from district to citywide executive success.

Mamdani was selected for representativeness: his trajectory illustrates convergence of dense immigrant demographics, progressive elite alignment, strategic identity framing within material populism, and multi-ethnic youth coalitions (youth ~28%, Black ~68%, Latino ~61%, South Asian surges ~350%). Comparative cases share minority/immigrant backgrounds, urban/multi-ethnic success, and data availability. This most-similar design identifies convergent strategies (economic populism, digital mobilization) while noting institutional variations (e.g., ranked-choice voting amplifying broad coalitions).

Data triangulation ensures rigor: electoral data (NYC Board of Elections results, ranked-choice tabulations, exit polls, voter file analyses); campaign materials (social media, speeches, policy documents, visual branding); media coverage (local/national reports for narrative framing); and secondary literature (academic sources, Brookings/FairVote analyses). Semi-structured interviews with campaign staff or

community leaders supplement archival sources where feasible.

Analysis proceeds through: content analysis of campaign/media materials coded for policy emphasis, identity signaling, and coalition appeals; thematic coding of electoral/demographic data mapped to theoretical constructs; comparative synthesis across cases along party receptivity, ethnic density, and framing dimensions; and mixed-methods integration where quantitative turnout trends (e.g., youth 75% support) contextualize qualitative strategy insights.

Validity is ensured through source triangulation and cross-verification; reliability through structured coding and transparent procedures. Ethical norms govern data citation and interview protocols (informed consent, confidentiality). This design aligns with the theoretical framework: POS requires structural/electoral data; resource mobilization needs organizational insights; identity/coalition-building is explored through narrative analysis. The qualitative emphasis, enriched by quantitative demographics, examines Mamdani's scaled success as a model for immigrant-left mobilization in urban liberal democracies.

## **Empirical Analysis: Zohran Mamdani's Campaign and Immigrant-Left Mobilization**

1.The Case Zohran Mamdani The electoral history of Zohran Mamdani, who won in the 36th District of the New York State Assembly in 2020 and became the first immigrant to win the Mayor, becomes an unparalleled shift in the relationship between immigrants and the left in the United States. The mayoral contest, which

occurred on the 4th November, 2025, saw Mamdani elected as the 112 th Mayor of New York City, with 50.4-50.78 as of the then 2 million votes (largest proportion since 1969/1993, the 43-percent turnout), defeating the independent Andrew Cuomo (41.32) and Republican candidate Curtis Sliwa (7). He was the first Muslim mayor of the city, the first South Asian elected mayor, the first born in Africa (Uganda) and the youngest mayor of the city since 1892.

This success occurred in the environment of post-Trump polarization, in conditions of affordability crises, and at the stage of demographic changes in a multi-ethnic metropolis. Mamdani ran on the platform of material working-class demands to freeze rent to stabilized tenants, free and faster mass transit, free childcare everywhere, state grocery stores, attacking predatory landlords, and a Department of Community Safety based on democratic socialist ideas. These echoed across the board, polarization was turned into progressive mobilization. The case demonstrates that immigrant-left candidates use the structural opportunities, strategic mobilization, management of identities, coalition-building, and digital tools to attain executive power in urban liberal democracies.

2.Political Opportunity Structures and Structural Opportunities POS theory describes crucial facilitators of the success of Mamdani. The institutional openness (open primaries, ranked-choice voting) reduced the barriers in a diverse city that is highly immigrant/minority. Elite alignment was put to the side of progressive (NYC-DSA endorsements) when the establishment was threatened (Cuomo baggage). Issue salience



focused on affordability, and associated the problems of immigrants (housing inequity, discrimination) to universal interests, which prompted record-turnout and widespread cross-ethnic/class appeal.

3. Neighborhood-Level and Demographic Analysis Granular data indicate localization, which is targeted:

- The increase of turnout was huge in areas that are heavily populated by South Asians/Muslims (e.g., in Jackson Heights, Elmhurst), with the South Asian rising by 15-43 percent and the Indo-Caribbean/South Asian by 350 percent overall, which was the result of genuine outreach through cultural associations and mosques.

The black neighborhoods (e.g. Bed-Stuy, Crown Heights) swung far (Mamdani +57-68% support, compared to primary struggles), and moderate/older Black voters were responding to anti-gentrification messages.

- The Latino neighborhoods (e.g. Bronx, Washington Heights) demonstrated significant improvements (~52-61%), and there were surprising infiltrations in changing precincts.

- Neighborhoods concentrated among youths (e.g. Astoria, Bushwick, Greenpoint) propelled en masse (young turnout of 28% when it came to voting, 75% overall; young women were higher at 82 and youth of color even higher at 83-85). The highest share of voters was made up of millennials (30-39).

These trends indicate cross ethnic resonance on material matters with Mamdani controlling areas with median age less than 45 and low/middle-income.

4. Resource Mobilization and Organizational Networks The example of Mamdani campaign, which utilized huge grassroots/digital infrastructure and engaged more than 100,000 volunteers who made calls and knocked on millions of doors, backed by NYC-DSA, unions, and community networks. Online virality combined with offline organizing. Allowing virality to spread through digital platforms (TikTok, Instagram, X), micro-targeting of youth/first-time voters, and quick coordination would combine the virality of the internet with the scale and precision of offline organizing.

5. Strategic Identity Management Mamdani compromised the descriptive representation, meaning his own foregrounding of South Asian Muslim immigrant identity to elicit trust on core communities, and substantive representation, meaning his elucidation of universal affordability policies. This two-sidedness neutralized polarization (e.g., Islamophobia) and created authenticity and wide credibility, the essence of transformative incrementalism: short term relief with long term equity.

6. Multi-layered coalitions Coalition-Building Across Communities Multicultural (ethnic) groups (South Asian/Muslim base + Black/Latino surges), classes (working-class renters), generations (youth dominance), and ideologies (progressives, unions). This turned the disintegration into unity because it could be seen through demographic victories and participation records. The cross-ethnic alliances forecast urban success, which is confirmed by comparable parallels (e.g. Sadiq Khan London coalitions).

7. Digital Campaign Strategy Social Media and other digital platforms increased access: the use of viral videos, target advertising, and relationship material mobilized youth (75% support) and first-timers. Combined with field work, this hybrid solution addressed resource inequity and mainstream media bias, mobilizing the underrepresented groups in an effective use of resources.

8. Framing and Perception in Media: Local media focused on policy competence and inclusivity; national media at times focused on polarization. Preemptive communication (interviews, social media) formed stories of affordability and unity, fighting off onslaughts.

9. Voter Behavior and Comparative Insights Turnout did increase according to strategy efficacy: youth=28% (75% Mamdani), Black=57-68, Latino=52-61, South Asian/Asian=58-62. Increase in first-time/young voter points out to generational mobilization. Trends in the international politics are urban immigrant-left victories (e.g. Canada/UK alliances), with the scale in NYC (>1 million votes in 2013 Mamdani) showing executive promise.

10. Challenges and Strategic Adjustments: Challenges such as polarization, resource gap and coalition management were included. These were defeated by adaptive framing (material focus) and hybrid organizing and emphasizing the role of integrated strategy.

11. Summary and Analytical Conclusions: The success of the mayoral race of Mamdani illustrates the exploitation of POS openings (diversity, open systems) through resource mobilization (mass volunteers/digital scale), identity management (authentic + substantive), coalition-building

(minority/youth coalition-building), and strategic framing (affordability populism). This combined strategy took the immigrant-left politics to the level of government, and it provides a model in the face of polarization of other urban democracies.

## Discussion and Policy Implications Findings and Analysis

The case of mayoral victory and initial tenure of Mamdani reflects how Political Opportunity Structures (POS), mobilisation of resources and identity management and coalition building can enhance the minority representation agenda. Understanding of structural openings emphasized by POS theory The various population composition of New York City, open primaries, ranked-choice voting, and progressive alignments, all created structural openings that facilitated insurgent success against establishment opposition. Such opportunities had not been automatic, but they needed to be strategically active to take advantage of in the context of post-Trump polarization and affordability crisis. The 50.78 percent victory of Mamdani, with the highest turnout on record of over 2m votes and youth-led surges (28 percent turnout, 75 percent support among voters 18-29 years old) can show how both structure opportunities were turned into election mandate by demographic energy and issue salience.

This conversion is explained by resource mobilization theory: large networks of volunteers (more than 100,000), NYC-DSA and union alliances, and online infrastructure helped to mobilize the under-mobilized groups. Interesting turnout trends among others were the South Asian surges of about 350% in certain subgroups, the

highest turnout of Blacks at 68, and Latinos at 61. The substantive populist policies like rent freezes, fare-free transit and universal childcare were balanced with identity management in the form of the first Muslim, South Asian, and Africa-born mayor. This transformational incrementalism that was marked by immediate material gains and building up to systemic transformation contained the threat of polarization and maintained the strength of the coalition.

These are the dynamics that are put to test by early governance. The deficit projected at over 12 billion due to past fiscal mismanagement led to such proposals as progressive taxation (which would raise revenues in the tune of 9 billion), internal savings (including agency-level office holders titled as chief savings officers) and executive orders regarding junk fees and subscription practices. Policies have been successful such as universal childcare expansion via state affiliation with Governor Hochul, innovative appointments (emergency physician to the Health department, formerly incarcerated leadership to the Corrections department, immigrant and veteran activists), and renewed sanctuary amid federal attacks. These actions capture priorities of the coalition but they have to address structural limitation like budget deficit and relations among governments.

### **The Relation of Coalitions and Multi-Ethnic Interaction**

The coalition-building was the key to the electoral and governing success combining ethnic foundations (South Asian and Muslim core constituencies and increased Black and Latino voter support), class interests (renters and working-class voters),

generational mobilization (domination by the youth), and ideological alignment (progressive organizations and unions). This was a multi-layered strategy that shifted the demographic diversity into the form of electoral force that was reflected in the turnout rates and initial policy efforts such as tenant protection and childcare growth. As comparative examples show, Diane Abbott in the United Kingdom and Ahmed Hussen in Canada have overcome the systemic constraints of cross-ethnic coalitions; scaled implementation of immigrant-led progressive politics in New York City by Mamdani underscores the urban possibilities of such politics.

### **Online Strategy and Media Interaction**

Online tools enhanced the coverage of the campaigns, organised the volunteers, and micro-targeted young and first-time voters. This prolonged mobilization of resources, neutralized the bias of the traditional media, and facilitated the quick process of governmental communication, such as storm response information and policy announcements. Hybrid online-offline strategies are critical in polarized situations and connecting with underrepresented constituencies.

The media served two purposes: making the policy more competent and more inclusive and bringing light on scandals such as criticism of appointments and legal issues with housing. Positive framing on affordability and unity was active and overcame the negative narrative and maintained governing credibility.

### **Voter Behavior and Voter Participation**

The turnout records confirm the effectiveness of the strategies: youth

mobilization, gains among ethnic groups, including Black, Latino, South Asian, and first-time mobilization are the results of descriptive and substantive representations. The trends support that minority nominees increase their engagement in the cases of identity authenticity accompanied by plausible policy agendas and coalition-building.

### **Comparative and Policy Implications**

The case of Mamdani has lessons that can be transferred to the field of electoral systems, civic investment, digital engagement, coalition support, and identity-policy balance. The designs incorporating open primaries, ranked-choice Voting, and minority representation are more effective in terms of the representation of minority groups; mobilization capacity is increased with the help of the community and civic infrastructure; cross-ethnic alliance platforms and digital engagement, targeting youth and hard-to-reach demographics, are critical, and strategic framing training improves the legitimacy of candidates. Fiscal governance shows that radical progressive ambitions need to be navigated realistically within constrained conditions and initial mechanisms like savings officers and state alliances are an example of how this can be done.

Canadian, United Kingdom and European experience indicates that this may be transferable but New York City scale challenges executive viability. The meeting point between structural opportunity and strategic implementation determines immigrant-left success, and the victory of Mamdani is an indicator of demographic changes supporting equity-based city politics.

### **Future Research and Limitations**

The city of New York has a high degree of context-specificity; the dependence on the public data restricts internal strategic information. Observed dynamics were conditioned by such temporal factors as post-Trump polarization and fiscal crisis. The future studies ought to investigate the policy implementation results in the long term, the comparative analysis across cities, and the interviews with the primary sources in order to study the tactical depth.

The example of Mamdani can be used to show the prospects of immigrant-left mobilization: structural points of openness coupled with strategic organization produce revolutionary urban leadership. His political manifesto of balancing bold commitments and fiscal realities is a blueprint on inclusive and participatory democracy in pluralistic, polarized societies.

### **Conclusion**

The rise of Zohran Mamdani, who won the election in New York State Assembly in 2020 and inaugurated as New York mayor in 2025 as the first Muslim, South Asian, and Africa-born mayor, is a historic example of how immigrants mobilize the left in the non-racist, polarized urban democracies. This research shows that the success of minority electoral is not an identity issue or structural opportunity issue, but a product of a concerted effort to get several processes to coincide.

Political Opportunity Structures offered institutional opportunities such as open primaries, ranked-choice voting, progressive coalitions, and immigrant-rich populations that Mamdani used during post-Trump polarization and affordability emergencies.

The mobilization of resources turned these structural possibilities into the electoral scale using the volunteer networks of more than 100,000, NYC-DSA and union alliances, as well as digital platforms micro-targeting youth and first-time voters. The identity management strategy combined both descriptive representation with substantive policy priorities such as rent freeze, fare-free transit, and universal childcare that allowed the cross-ethnic and cross-class resonance. All these factors were included in the process of coalition-building, which has resulted in a resisting level of polarization and an encouraging level of inclusive turnout, with youth-support at 75, Black turnout at 68, Latino turnout at 61, and South Asian surges at nearly 350% of certain subgroups.

This model in governance is tested by Mamdani in his early years of rule. His administration is facing an estimated fiscal deficit of 1213 billion as a result of past management, which has implemented a mix of progressive revenue measures and operational effectiveness, improved tenant protections and universal child care by forming partnerships with the state, and he has also made historic appointments that reflect coalition priorities. These measures represent transformative incrementalism: providing direct material assistance as well as establishing towards systemic equity, but the effects of long-term policy changes have yet to be determined.

Theoretically, the case supports the usefulness of combining the POS theory with resource mobilization, identity politics, and coalition-building models structural conditions establish possibilities, and agency, strategy, and community participation are

determinants of result. The results are indicative of a more general demographic change in left-wing politics in large cities, in which immigrants and their descendants give precedence to material factors in order to assemble diverse coalitions within expensive and competitive politics.

The implication can be towards the design of electoral systems, the investment in civic infrastructure and progressive operation within fiscal limits. Nevertheless, there are still shortcomings: results are specific to progressive-New York City and mostly based on publicly available data, which limits internal campaign knowledge. Future studies are expected to address the long-term policy execution, distinguish between multi-city comparative analysis and include primary interviews to explain the way structural-strategic interactions can change under the pressure of governing.

The case of Mamdani is an illustration of how the structural opportunities with the help of a complex mobilization, management of the identity, and coalition-building which is inclusive and inclusive can empower immigrant-left politics to transform the city governance. This case can provide useful information to scholars and practitioners by connecting the descriptive representation to the substantive equity in the multi-ethnic, polarized liberal domain.

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