

Making progress is more than making policy – what Mamdani can learn from de Blasio about the politics of urban progress

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New York City Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani speaks in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on Nov. 8, 2025.

AP Photo/Alejandro Granadillo

After a decisive election win, Zohran Mamdani will become mayor of New York on Jan. 1, 2026. His impressive grassroots campaign made big promises targeted at working-class New Yorkers: universal child care, rent freezes and faster, free buses.

Nevertheless, questions remain about whether Mamdani's policies are economically and practically feasible.

Critics, from President Donald Trump to establishment Democrats, condemned his platform as radical and unrealistic. And The New York Times warns that Mamdani risks becoming the latest "big-city civic leader promising bold, progressive change" to "mostly deliver disappointment." Among past offenders, it lists former New York Mayor Bill de Blasio.

But the comparison to de Blasio reveals a paradox.

As candidate for mayor in 2013, after the Occupy Wall Street movement against economic inequality, de Blasio campaigned on the core progressive tenet of tackling inequality through social welfare and the redistribution of wealth.

De Blasio's promises – strikingly similar to Mamdani's – included universal pre-K, rent freezes and a US\$15 minimum wage. De Blasio delivered on all three.

So what was the “disappointment” the Times so confidently cites?

New Yorkers today remember de Blasio not for his policies but for his persistent unpopularity.

Over two terms, de Blasio alienated many New Yorkers and became a pariah among Democratic politicians. A committed progressive, he is perceived to have lost touch with the movements and communities that he hoped to lead.

Maybe the question is not whether Mamdani's policies are realistic, but what it actually takes to win over citizens with a progressive vision. De Blasio himself cautions that it takes more than policy. He recently said that he “often mistook good policy for good politics, a classic progressive error.”

As a scholar of public policy, I think that policy achievements are neither self-evident nor self-sustaining. In my research on urban governance, I have found that it takes continuous political work to maintain local belief in urban progress and its leaders.

Based on an analysis of de Blasio's two terms, I have identified three key respects in which his politics fell short.

Keep up the ground game

Many accounts of de Blasio's unpopularity emphasize his personal flaws. Open and humorous in person, he was described by critics – and even some supporters – as stubborn, didactic and self-righteous. His designs on higher offices – first governor, then president – repeatedly backfired.

But for someone elected with the support of progressives, de Blasio's bigger problem was losing touch with local progressive politics. He missed the rise of the anti-corporate left in Queens in 2018, led by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – so much so that his team miscalculated and agreed to place an Amazon headquarters near her district.

And while de Blasio successfully ended his predecessor Mike Bloomberg's racially discriminatory stop-and-frisk policing – feuding with the New York Police Department in the process – he later alienated progressives, including his own staff, with his tepid response to the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020.



Many New Yorkers remember former Mayor Bill de Blasio for his unpopularity.

AP Photo/Seth Wenig

The contours of progressive politics can shift under one's feet. But as a veteran of street-level politics, Mamdani has the skills to respond to, and keep shaping, the city's progressive movement. A dynamic "ground game" – on the model of his walk of the length of Manhattan – will likely remain as important in governing as it was in campaigning.

Protect local autonomy

In New York, hostility between the city's mayor and the governor is a time-honored tradition. De Blasio and former Gov. Andrew Cuomo famously took hostility to the extreme.

Early in de Blasio's first term, while seeking state funding for universal pre-K, de Blasio angered Cuomo by insisting on funding it through a tax on the city's wealthy. Lacking necessary state approval, de Blasio eventually accepted a different state funding source. Universal pre-K became de Blasio's cornerstone achievement, but the lasting feud with Cuomo remained a problem, even compromising the city's plans to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

Critics also thought de Blasio could have been tougher on Big Tech. Letting a Google-backed consortium run the city's free Wi-Fi program without meaningful oversight left the city with a privacy scandal and serious financial deficits.

In trying to attract Amazon's headquarters, de Blasio's administration offended New Yorkers' sensibilities by allowing the company to bypass local development review processes. Though famously byzantine, these processes were created to ensure local control over development decisions. One could not simply bulldoze them aside.

In another case, and to his credit, de Blasio was quick to see the need to regulate Uber's explosive growth, but it took years to overcome the company's aggressive opposition campaign.

Though some progressives wish mayors ruled the world, U.S. cities have traditionally depended on states, the federal government and private companies for capital and resources. As I and others have shown, and de Blasio's experiences attest, these outside players can undermine the progressive ideal of a city that seeks to redistribute economic benefit.

Mayoral powers are limited, but Mamdani can use his popularity to protect New York City's capacity for self-government from outside interference, while cooperating strategically with the state when necessary. Gov. Kathy Hochul's endorsement of Mamdani, driven by a shared interest in universal child care, was a start. United, they stand a better chance of defending local – city and state – autonomy against threats from President Donald Trump.

Meanwhile, there is little evidence that it pays for cities to court private businesses with expensive incentives – a common but contested city practice. Instead, following mayors elsewhere, Mamdani might pressure tech companies to end union-busting practices and thereby ensure local workers' right to organize.



Supporters for Democratic mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani watch returns during election night, Nov. 4, 2025, in New York.

AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura

Lead with the social compact

Though de Blasio delivered many progressive policies, he was unable to keep alive his campaign promise to end New York's "tale of two cities" – the stark divide between extreme wealth and poverty.

A major, self-admitted failure was on homelessness, especially among single adults. Homelessness among this group grew despite increased spending on homeless services, creating the impression that de Blasio was insufficiently concerned with the welfare of his city's most beleaguered residents.

Such inconsistencies loomed large in the public discussion. Over time, de Blasio's administration could no longer convince the public that its energies were being channeled toward a coherent vision of progress.

I believe that urban governance is about clarifying the rights and responsibilities that urban residents can expect to have, what I think of as the social compact between the city and its subjects. De Blasio's growing unpopularity weakened his ability to show that his policy achievements amounted to upholding a tacit progressive promise to guarantee basic economic rights for all.

Former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo, father of losing mayoral candidate Andrew Cuomo, often said: "You campaign in poetry. You govern in prose." While campaigning, Mamdani offered a poetic vision for a new social compact in New York.

"City government's job," he has said, "is to make sure each New Yorker has a dignified life, not determine which New Yorkers are worthy of that dignity."

Many commentators insist that Mamdani must now abandon poetry and deliver the policy. But that is only partly right.

New Yorkers will disagree about the details, but the election results suggest that they want to believe in the promise of a dignified life for all. Mamdani's ability to lead New York City – and a wider post-Trump progressive movement – will be a matter of setting an example in rearticulating and reaffirming what that promise means, to him and to his city.

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