



New York City Mayoral Election: Money and Bigotry at Work

As the 2025 New York City mayoral election this coming Tuesday, November 4th approaches, many observers have expressed alarm at the nature of the attacks that have been directed at Democratic nominee and frontrunner Zohran Mamdani. The election sees New York State Assemblymember Mamdani pitted against Republican candidate Curtis Sliwa and disgraced Former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo – who lost the Democratic primary to Mamdani back in June and has since decided to run a third-party bid as an independent candidate. Mamdani's upset victory in the Democratic primary over the far more established and well-funded Cuomo was viewed as a breath of fresh air in American politics. His grassroots mobilization efforts and ability to galvanize young and new voters in order to form a diverse base of support overpowered Cuomo's campaign. Alongside this, however, it has opened the door for a wave of disturbing bigoted rhetoric against Mamdani, in addition to an increase in "big money" backing behind the Cuomo campaign.

Since Mamdani's Democratic primary win, the makeup of the attacks against him has shed light on a troubling common theme of bigotry and Islamophobia. Some of the familiar racist tropes have included an attempt to associate him with terrorism and extremism, depictions as being foreign or "un-American," and painting him as a "threat" to American society. Most concerning, these have not come from fringe groups or entities but instead have been deployed by major political figures such as his electoral opponents. Cuomo has not only failed to condemn the bigoted attacks but has even joined in on them. During a recent radio interview, the former governor laughed after the host said that Mamdani "would be cheering" if another 9/11 attack occurred, responding in agreement to the remark by saying "That's another problem." Additionally, a super PAC tied to Cuomo's campaign ran an ad that featured Mamdani's face superimposed with the phrase "Jihad on NYC." Slanders like this have also come from the Republican candidate in the mayoral race, Sliwa, who has baselessly commented that Mamdani "supports global jihad." Furthermore, Mamdani's criticism of Israeli government actions and policies has left him subjected to the too often deployed wrongful conflation of this with antisemitism. As social justice advocates have long pointed out, this is highly problematic as it shields Israel from valid criticism by trying to tie this to the immorality of antisemitism.

On top of the evident bigotry, there has also been an uptick in "big money" spending in support of Mamdani's opponent Cuomo as harmful entities look to reshape the mayoral election. Following his re-insertion into the race via a bid as an independent candidate, Cuomo has seen a significant boost in his campaign finances through donations from a mix of wealthy individuals – once again demonstrating the negative influence of "big money" on American politics. Cuomo received a large number of contributions the day after incumbent New York City Mayor Eric Adams dropped out of the race for a second term. Much of this financial influx has gone towards super PACs, with millions being spent on attack ads against Mamdani. Despite all of this, Mamdani has maintained overall leads in both polling and money, thanks in large part to continued broad and enthusiastic support of his campaign among everyday New Yorkers – which has resulted in a massive lead in the amount of public funds received. Research groups have documented how small donors are driving Mamdani's overall fundraising advantage and that his campaign has garnered significantly more public funding than his opponents because the majority of contributions qualify for matching funds. The widespread scale of his supporter base is highlighted by the fact that a whopping more than two-thirds of campaign contributors donated less than \$100 – showing the degree to which

the Mamdani campaign is resonating among ordinary citizens. As Mamdani campaign spokespeople have expressed, while “billionaires continue to throw out their last-ditched efforts to prop up Andrew Cuomo, we have genuine enthusiasm and 80,000 volunteers on our side.”

The final outcome of Tuesday’s election remains to be seen, but what is already clear is that multiple elements surrounding the 2025 New York City mayoral race have been alarming to see. Chief among these is the injection of bigotry and destructive “big money” spending in an attempt to influence the electoral result and derail what has been an organic political movement driven by a diverse coalition of supporters. At the same time, it has been encouraging to witness the resilience of the Mamdani campaign in the face of all of this. Regardless of outcome, many have been impressed at the graceful handling of the bigoted attacks which have demonstrated the importance of continuing to push back against these and strive towards a more tolerant society.