

Indian-Origin Political Leaders in the United States: The Case of Zohran Mamdani

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ABSTRACT

The political empowerment of Indian Americans is a major chapter in the history of evolving patterns of political representation and immigrant incorporation in the United States. In the past three decades, Indian-Americans have become one of the most socio-economically successful and politically prominent immigrant populations, with the community making increasing inroads into leadership positions in local, state and federal organisations. Most scholars have focused on prominent figures such as Kamala Harris, Nikki Haley, Bobby Jindal, Ro Khanna, and Pramila Jayapal. But far less has been written about the emergence of a new generation of Indian-origin political leaders who are actively engaged in grassroots activism, multiculturalism, and progressive politics. This study analyses the political ascension of Zohran Mamdani, and his election as the 111th Mayor of New York City in November 2025, as a case study of contemporary diaspora politics and minority political representation in the United States. This study uses theories of diaspora politics, identity politics, political incorporation, and descriptive and substantive representation to analyse the intersection of Mamdani's ethnicity, religion, immigrant identity, class consciousness, inequality and transnational experiences in shaping his political trajectory. The paper employs a qualitative analysis of scholarly literature, public speeches, campaign discourse, policy positions and secondary electoral data, to argue that Mamdani represents a transformative model of Indian-origin leadership that goes beyond traditional ethnic politics and reflects broader changes in American democracy. His political success, with a landslide electoral victory and record turnout, reveals how much power immigrant-origin politicians now have in political institutions, and how they are simultaneously challenging prevailing ideas about representation, citizenship and belonging. This study contributes to the burgeoning knowledge on diaspora political participation and underlines the evolving significance of Indian-origin politicians in moulding the future of American politics.

Keywords: Indian diaspora, Indian-Americans, Zohran Mamdani, diaspora politics, immigrant political involvement, inequality, political representation, identity politics, multicultural democracy, transnationalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

revolutionary model of Indian origin political leadership which synthesises immigrant identity, progressive political ideology, grassroots activism and multicultural coalition building. His political success is a sign of larger trends in American democracy that are creating space for more diverse kinds of political participation and representation. His rise also illustrates how politicians of immigrant origin can speak both to community-specific issues and broader policy agendas around social justice, economic equality, and democratic inclusion.

The study is based on a qualitative and analytical methodology, informed by notions of diaspora politics, identity politics and political representation. This paper situates Mamdani's political career in the broader context of Indian-American political participation with the aim of providing a nuanced view of the potential and pitfalls for leaders of immigrant origin in contemporary democratic democracies.

The United States has long been characterised as a nation of immigrants, shaped by numerous waves of migration, with political institutions, social structures and cultural identities that have been moulded by these migrations. The integration of immigrant groups into the American political system has long been regarded as an important barometer of democratic inclusion and social integration. Immigrant communities have evolved from being marginalised to being significant players in American public life, influencing electoral outcomes, policy debates, and the form of governance (Alba & Nee, 2003). The Indian diaspora has a special place among the diverse immigrant communities that have helped shape the social and political fabric of the United States, owing to its exponential demographic growth, high educational achievements, economic prosperity, and increasing political influence (Kapur, 2010).

The Indian-American community today is one of the fastest-growing ethnic communities in the United States. Demographical studies have revealed that the population of Indian-Americans has grown significantly due to the liberalisation of U.S. immigration rules through the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). The Indian diaspora was first consisted of highly skilled professionals in medicine, engineering, science, and academics, but progressively built strong economic, social, and political networks that enabled more engagement in American civic life (Jaffrelot, 2015). As a result, Indian-Americans have become one of the most politically active immigrant groups, contributing heavily to campaign fundraising, political advocacy, lobbying, and electoral politics (Kapur, 2010). The community has grown from over 0.39 million people in 1980 to 5.4 million in 2024, with the more than thirteenfold rise underpinning its increasing electoral weight, as Figure 1 shows.

Broader changes happening in American culture are mirrored by the increased political activity of Indian Americans. The diversification of the United States' population has created new avenues for minority groups to achieve political representation and influence public policy (Bloemraad, 2006). "It is in this context that politicians of Indian origins have become increasingly visible at the local, state and national levels. The election of Kamala Harris, Nikki Haley, Bobby Jindal, Ro Khanna, and Pramila Jayapal, among others, shows the increased involvement of Indian-Americans in the US political sphere (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Recent developments nevertheless show the emergence of a new generation of Indian-origin political leaders whose political trajectories are distinctly different from preceding generations. Earlier Indian-American politicians often focused on professional success, assimilation and establishment politics, but younger leaders are more likely to highlight multicultural identities, grassroots activism and progressive policy objectives. Among these newly powerful figures is Zohran Mamdani, who has gained a lot of attention for being an example of a new kind of immigrant-origin political leadership.

Zohran Mamdani's political rise is so significant because it points to the convergence of identities and political forces in contemporary America. As a South Asian, Muslim, immigrant-origin politician with a democratic socialist political orientation, Mamdani maintains a special position within the greater terrain of political representation in the U.S. He reached the pinnacle on November 4, 2025, when he was elected the 111th Mayor of New York City with a roughly 50.4 percent vote, defeating independent candidate Andrew Cuomo (roughly 41.6 percent) and Republican Curtis Sliwa (roughly 7.1 percent) in an election that saw the highest mayoral turnout in the city since 1969 (NPR, 2025; Associated Press, 2025). He entered office on January 1, 2026, becoming New York City's first Muslim mayor, the city's first mayor of South Asian heritage, and the city's youngest mayor in more than a century. This consequence is shown in Figure 3. This elevates the stakes of the present case study considerably: Mamdani goes from being a rising state senator to the chief executive of the largest city in the United States. His political trajectory subverts orthodoxy about the routes through which minority communities acquire political power and highlights the growing significance of grassroots mobilisation, social movements, and identity-based political participation in contemporary democratic politics.

But Mamdani's political life is important for more than just ethnic representation. His rise reflects larger transformations in American democracy in terms of the meaning of political participation, the salience of identity in electoral politics, and the changing power relations between immigrant communities and political institutions. Discussions of immigration, multiculturalism, racial justice, economic inequality, and democratic inclusion remain at the forefront of American political discourse. Mamdani and other political leaders of immigrant origin give us helpful ways of thinking about how to address these issues and how to represent multiple constituencies.

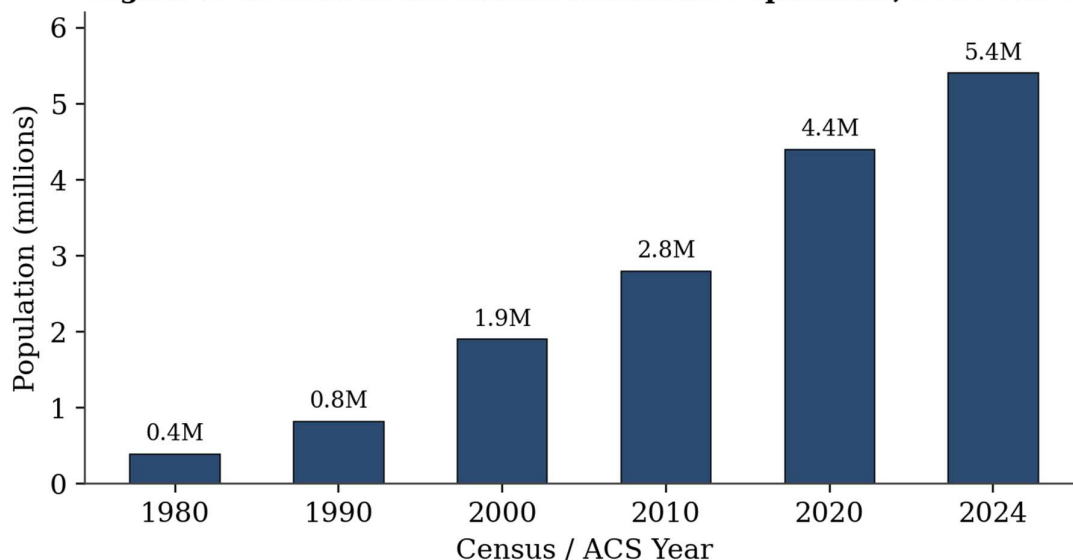
The advent of Indian-origin politicians has also sparked important scholarly discussions on diaspora politics and transnationalism. Diaspora populations are increasingly seen as powerful agents who sustain links across national borders and actively participate in host societies' political processes (Vertovec, 1999). Political participation, economic collaboration, and cultural interaction between India and the USA have been facilitated by the Indian diaspora that has established complex transnational networks (Shain, 1999). Consequently, the political success of Indian-origin leaders brings up crucial considerations about the connection between diaspora identity, political involvement and democratic representation.

While the profile of Indian-origin politicians has increased, the literature has mostly been on the more prominent of such persons working inside the established political structures. Little emphasis has been paid to how newer generations of Indian-origin leaders engage with problems of identity, social justice and grassroots activism. Furthermore, a significant void exists in the literature on the role of progressive political groups in shaping current Indian-American political leadership.

In this paper attempt has been done to bridge this gap through an analysis of the case of Zohran Mamdani as a representative example of emerging trends in political participation of Indian-origin Americans. It seeks to contribute to wider debates on diaspora politics, immigrant incorporation and democratic representation in multicultural countries by evaluating his political history, ideological orientation, campaign techniques and representational relevance.

Ultimately, the case of Zohran Mamdani provides important lessons for the future course of political representation in the United States. And as demographic diversity continues to reshape American society, understanding the experiences and contributions of emerging minority leaders is becoming increasingly important for scholars, policymakers, and citizens. The study thus contributes to the literature on Indian-American politics and to larger discussions on democracy, citizenship, inclusion and representation in the twenty-first century.

Figure 1. Growth of the Indian-American Population, 1980-2024



Indian-American population growth, 1980–2024. According to AAPI Data (2025) and the Migration Policy Institute (2026).

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Theorising Diaspora and Diaspora Politics

Over the past several decades, the idea of diaspora has changed dramatically in theory. In early scholarship diaspora communities were mostly linked with the experiences of displacement, exile and collective memory (Safran, 1991). However, the notion has been broadened in recent scholarship to incorporate transnational

communities that retain different forms of social, cultural, economic and political participation across national boundaries (Cohen, 2008).

Vertovec (1999) argues that diasporas should be seen as transnational forms, maintained through exchanges between homeland and host societies. The exchanges allow for the transit of ideas, resources, identities, and political behaviours. Brubaker (2005) contends that diaspora should not be seen as a demographic category but as a dynamic process through which communities build collective identities and political aspirations.

Diaspora politics are political activity undertaken by migrant populations in both their countries of residency and countries of origin (Shain, 1999). Today's diasporas are increasingly engaged in electoral politics, foreign policy, public opinion, and governance structures through advocacy, lobbying, fundraising, and transnational networking. This dynamic is shown by the Indian diaspora, which has a large presence worldwide and increasing political power.

Scholars have argued that diaspora populations are typically major political players because they have certain resources at their disposal, including educational capital, professional competence, economic prosperity, and transnational connections (Kapur, 2010). Such resources allow diasporic communities to perform well in relation to political institutions and policy discourses.

2.2 The diaspora in USA

The Indian diaspora in the United States has drawn great scholarly attention for its quick development and extraordinary socio-economic success. Indian migration to the United States rose dramatically after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Lal 2006). The Act abolished discriminatory immigration quotas and relaxed the admittance of highly qualified professionals.

Successive waves of migration significantly varied the Indian-American population in terms of class, religion, language and geographical origins (Kurien, 2017). Despite this variation, Indian-Americans have generally attained a high level of education and economic success, earning them the reputation as a "model minority" community (Kibria, 2002).

Kapur (2010) and Jaffrelot (2015) have capitalised on the socioeconomic success of Indian-Americans to ease their political inclusion. Economic resources have enabled community people to be active in campaign finance, advocacy organisations and electoral politics. Indian-Americans' demographic concentration in key states has also increased their political importance, as shown in Figure 1.

Research also shows that Indian-Americans are relatively politically active compared to many other immigrant groups (Pew Research Center, 2023). They vote, donate money to candidates, participate in civic activities and run for public office. Such tendencies indicate a slow transition from economic integration to political empowerment.

2.3 Political Inclusion and Immigrant Participation

Political integration is the process by which immigrant populations are integrated into the political institutions and decision-making processes of host nations (Bloemraad, 2006). For scholars, political incorporation typically refers to a complex process of acquiring citizenship, participating in elections, engaging in civic life, and gaining representation in political institutions.

In fact, Alba and Nee (2003) find that political inclusion typically happens in conjunction with broader processes of social and economic incorporation. Immigrant groups become more able to influence political outcomes as they build resources and organisational networks.

According to Bloemraad (2006), successful political inclusion depends on both community-level resources and institutional opportunities. Immigrant groups with strong organisational resources and access to favourable political settings are more likely to win representation and influence.

These theoretical ideas are generally supported by the Indian-American experience. Over time the community has created an extensive network of organisational structures that promote political mobilisation and representation. Indian-American political organisations, advocacy groups and professional associations have been instrumental in advancing civic involvement and leadership development.

2.4 The Portrayal of Minorities and Identity Politics

Identity politics has emerged as key to understanding political mobilisation of marginalised communities. Scholars claim that ethnicity, colour, religion, gender and cultural identity have a strong impact on political activity and representation (Young, 2000).

In the words of Mansbridge (1999), descriptive representation is the idea that elected representatives share demographic traits with the populations they represent. Such a representation may engender political trust, legitimacy and responsiveness among populations that have previously been marginalised.

The classic distinction between descriptive and substantive representation by Pitkin (1967) is particularly pertinent to studies of minority political leadership. Descriptive representation is about shared identity. Substantive representation is about furthering community interests through policy action.

Recent literature has argued that minority politicians take on both symbolic and substantive roles. They are also visible representatives of under-represented populations campaigning for policies that address broader social inequities (Bird, Saalfeld, & Wüst, 2011).

The increased prominence of politicians of Indian ancestry in American politics has therefore attracted considerable attention from scholars interested in the relationship between identity and representation. Previous research indicates that Indian-American leaders often manage several identities when addressing varied communities.

2.5 Indian-American Political Leadership in the United States

The political ascendance of Indian-origin leaders in the United States has drawn increased scholarly interest during the past two decades. The Indian-American community's early concentration was on economic advancement and professional accomplishment, but political involvement gradually evolved as a significant channel for impact and representation (Kapur, 2010). The emergence of Indian-origin leaders is consistent with larger trends of immigrant inclusion, demographic change and multicultural representation in American democracy.

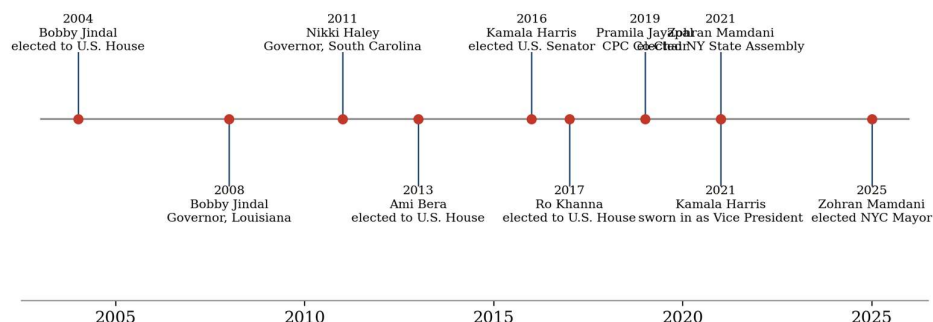
Studies on immigrant political participation have shown that highly educated immigrants are more likely to delay political participation due to their greater concern with economic integration rather than civic mobilisation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). But Indian-Americans increasingly embraced political politics and public service as they gained economic resources and formed strong organisational networks (Jaffrelot, 2015).

The rise of politicians of Indian ancestry to elected offices in municipal, state and federal governments was an important milestone in the political integration of the Indian diaspora. Political leaders including Bobby Jindal, Nikki Haley, Kamala Harris, Ro Khanna, Ami Bera, Raja Krishnamoorthi, and Pramila Jayapal have shown the increasing visibility and impact of Indian-Americans in the political system (Lal, 2006) a trajectory that is summarised in the timeframe in Figure 2.

Scholars have identified numerous elements that have contributed to this political success. First, Indian-Americans have high levels of education and economic success, which gives them access to political resources and networks (Kibria, 2002). Second, demographic concentration in urban and suburban areas has made them more electorally relevant (Pew Research Center, 2023). Third, persistent community organisations have helped to mobilise voters, train leaders and advocate politically (Kurien, 2017).

The current literature, however, is largely restricted to elite politicians in regular party systems. Younger leaders whose political trajectories are derived from grassroots action, social movements and progressive political coalitions have received relatively less recognition. Hence, there is a need to explore how modern Indian-origin politicians negotiate questions of identity, representation and social justice in changing political situations.

Zohran Mamdani is a particularly useful case study with which to fill this vacuum, as his political career differs significantly from those of previous Indian-American politicians. His emergence represents multiple types of political mobilisation that value grassroots engagement, community organising and intersectional identities.

Figure 2. Timeline of Selected Indian-Origin Political Milestones in the United States, 2004-2025

Timeline: Selected Political Milestones of Indian Origin in the United States of America, 2004-2025

2.6 Zohran Mamdani and the new generation of political leadership

Zohran Mamdani's rise is a break from the mould of what Indian-American political leadership has looked like. Mamdani's journey contrasts with many past politicians whose political careers were founded on professional achievements, legal knowledge or connections to networks within party establishments. It epitomises the increasing significance of activist politics and mobilisation from below.

Recent scholarship increasingly acknowledges that social movements, racial justice campaigns, labour action, and community organising shape younger generations of immigrant-origin politicians (Bloemraad & Trost, 2008). Such encounters often lead to political identities quite different from those constructed by prior assimilationist tactics.

Mamdani's political activism is located within a larger background of progressive movements concerned with housing rights, economic justice, racial equality and social welfare. His political rhetoric focuses on structural inequity, public accountability and democratic involvement. These themes resonate effectively with younger voters and marginalised areas.

Scholars contend that modern urban politics has rendered cities significant settings for new modes of political engagement and coalition-building (Mollenkopf & Castells, 1991). Leaders can galvanise broad coalitions around common issues of ethnic diversity, economic injustice and demographic change in urban areas.

These factors are reflected in Mamdani's political success. His initiatives have focused on universal issues such as affordable housing, public services, labour rights and social justice rather than on ethnic solidarity alone. This enables him to connect identity-based representation to wider policy issues, and thus to broaden the scope of his appeal beyond narrowly defined ethnic groupings. Section 9 details his emphatic victory in the 2025 New York City mayoral contest, providing empirical validation of this coalition-building approach.

Hence Mamdani's political career is significant outside the Indian-American community. His ascent reflects wider trends in political leadership, representation and democratic engagement in heterogeneous countries.

2.7 Research Gaps

The existing literature on diaspora politics, immigrant incorporation, and Indian-American political participation has expanded considerably in recent years, but there remain many important gaps in our knowledge.

Previous studies have focused on the socio-economic success of Indian-Americans and not on their evolving political identities (Kapur, 2010; Jaffrelot, 2015). There is a substantial body of research on educational attainment, professional success and transnational networks, but comparatively little attention has been paid to the political socialisation of newer generations of Indian-origin leaders.

Second, the academic literature on Indian-American political participation has been mostly limited to high-profile individuals like Kamala Harris, Nikki Haley, Bobby Jindal, and Ro Khanna. As a result, emergent leaders linked with grassroots action and progressive political movements are understudied.

Third, the lack of research on the interaction of immigrant identity, religion, ethnicity, and political philosophy in contemporary Indian-origin leadership. Much of the existing literature tends to consider these variables separately rather than as interlinked in their effect on political action and representation.

Fourth, the political inclusion of leaders from immigrant backgrounds is a subject that has not been thoroughly investigated by contemporary study in the context of democratic socialist and progressive political movements. This is a significant analytical lacuna in the literature, given the growing importance of these movements in urban politics.

Finally, there has been little written about how younger politicians of Indian origin negotiate multiculturalism, representation and coalition building in increasingly diverse political settings, including the transition from grassroots organiser to chief executive of a major American city.

This study aims to fill these gaps by examining Zohran Mamdani as an emergent case of Indian-origin political leadership in the United States.

3. Research Objectives

- To Examine the historical evolution of Indian-American Political Participation in the United States.
- To Analyze the social, cultural, and political factors contributing to the emergence of Indian-origin Political leadership.
- To Investigate Zohran Mamdani's political socialization and leadership formation.
- To Assess the role of immigrant identity, ethnicity, religion, and class in shaping Mamdani's political career.
- To assess Mamdani's contribution to debates on representation, social justice and democratic inclusion.
- To Analyze the larger implications of a new breed of Indian-origin leadership for American democracy.

4. Research Questions

- How do Indians in the diaspora get politically assimilated into the American political system?
- What elements have helped Indian-origin political leaders to emerge in the United States?
- How does Zohran Mamdani exemplify a new generation of Indian-American political leadership?
- How can grassroots activism contribute to representation and electoral victory?
- What makes Mamdani's politics different from earlier generations of Indian-origin politicians?
- What does his election as Mayor of New York City mean for multicultural democracy and minority representation?

5. Theoretical Framework The study is informed by a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that includes diaspora politics, political incorporation theory, identity politics and representation theory.

5.1 The Theory of Diaspora Politics

Diaspora politics provides a useful lens to understand how migrant communities interact with political institutions and sustain transnational identities (Shain, 1999). Contemporary diasporas are not merely passive migrant communities, but active political actors who can shape public policy, election outcomes and international relations (Vertovec, 1999).

The example of the Indian diaspora is particularly important because of its global reach, its economic resources and its organisational capacity. Theory of diaspora politics argues that Indian-American political participation should be explained not only in terms of local political integration but also in terms of transnational identity creation.

Zohran Mamdani's political trajectory is reflective of these dynamics in that his experiences are impacted by diverse cultural, national and political forces.

5.2 Political incorporation theories

Political incorporation theory explores the processes that facilitate the absorption of immigrant groups into political institutions and structures of governance (Bloemraad, 2006).

Political incorporation is conceived as unfolding through a set of interconnected processes: acquisition of citizenship, electoral participation, civic engagement, organization-building, and political representation.

The theory argues that communities with strong organisational resources and positive institutional opportunities are more likely to gain political power.

The Indian-American experience generally bears out this claim. The community has created vast networks throughout the years that assist in political mobilisation and leadership development. Mamdani's political achievement might thus be read in the perspective of immigrant political absorption more generally.

5.3 Theory of Identity Politics

The politics of identity focuses on the social identities that influence political behaviour and collective action (Young, 2000).

People often organise themselves politically around common experiences of ethnicity, race, religion, gender or culture. These identities inform perspectives on injustice, belonging and representation.

Mamdani's political career is a case study in the junction of various identities: South Asian, Muslim, immigrant, urban, and progressive political.

Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory also indicates that such identities should not be seen as separate from one another, but rather as interrelated aspects of social experience.

This paradigm helps explain how Mamdani builds political narratives that speak to many constituencies and also embodies marginalised communities.

5.4 Representation Theory

The study further elaborates on Hanna Pitkin's (1967) theory of political representation that distinguishes between descriptive representation, that is, when political representatives have demographic characteristics similar to their constituents, and substantive representation, that is, the promotion of constituent interests through policy action and political advocacy.

Mansbridge (1999) argues that descriptive representation can strengthen democratic legitimacy by boosting levels of trust among historically marginalised groups.

Mamdani's political importance stems from both types of representation. He is a South Asian Muslim politician and so a descriptive representative. He advocates for housing rights, economic equality and social justice and thus he is a substantive representative .

6. Research methodology

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design. This qualitative technique is particularly suitable because this study has the purpose of understanding political identities, leadership creation and representational practices, not establishing causal correlations with quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). The study is exploratory and interpretive and seeks to create deeper insights on modern forms of immigrant political participation.

The case study method was used in the investigation. According to Yin (2018), case studies are particularly helpful for investigating current political events in their real-life situations. More generally, the fundamental instance through which concerns of diaspora politics and political representation are studied is Zohran Mamdani. Descriptive quantitative data were used to provide context to the qualitative research and included population trends and the 2025 mayoral election result (Figures 1 and 3). This fits with mixed-method case study approaches (Yin, 2018).

The primary sources used in this study are public speeches, campaign materials, legislative statements, interviews, policy documents, and social media interactions. Secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government documents, election reports, newspaper archives, and investigations by think-tanks.

Content analysis is used to identify themes recurring in speeches, policy statements, and campaign materials (Krippendorff, 2018). Discourse analysis is employed to examine the construction of political identities, social justice concerns, and representational claims through language and political communication (Fairclough, 2013).

This work contributes to the literature in various ways. First, it spreads knowledge of Indian-American political participation beyond the existing political elites. Secondly, it points to the increasing role of grassroots activism in moulding political leadership. Third, it addresses concerns of multiculturalism, representation and inclusion in democracy. Fourth, it offers one of the few scholarly analyses of Zohran Mamdani within the larger frame of diaspora politics and immigrant political incorporation, updated to take account of his victory as Mayor of New York City. Lastly, the study provides insights on how new generations of immigrant-origin leaders are remaking political institutions in more diverse democratic nations.

7. History of Indian-American Political Engagement

Indian-American political participation has changed dramatically from the mid-twentieth century. Before the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, America's Indian population was very limited due to restricted immigration laws and racial barriers (Takaki, 1998). Political mobilisation among Indian immigrants was therefore restricted and concentrated mostly on civil rights and immigration-related issues.

The post 1965 period was a turning point in the demographic and socio-economic change of the Indian diaspora. The abolition of national-origin quotas allowed the movement of highly trained people, especially in medical, engineering, academics, and information technology (Kapur, 2010). The demographic trend is depicted in Figure 1. These immigrants swiftly reached high levels of education and economic success, thereby preparing for future political involvement.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Indian-Americans started to create more and more professional associations, cultural organisations, and advocacy groups to serve community concerns and promote civic engagement (Kurien, 2017). The Indian American Forum for Political Education and a number of community associations promoted voter registration, political funding, and candidate support.

Indian-Americans have gained far greater political clout in the early twenty-first century. With increased numbers, geographic concentration in important election states, and civic involvement, the community's political exposure increased (Pew Research Center, 2023). Indian-Americans were major supporters to political campaigns, and created vast networks linking business executives, professionals and officials.

This larger trend was visible in the emergence of Indian-origin elected officials (Figure 2). The election of Bobby Jindal as governor of Louisiana and Nikki Haley as governor of South Carolina proved that Indian-origin candidates may succeed in conservative political settings. At the same time, Indian-American presence in the Congress was growing with the likes of Ami Bera, Ro Khanna, Raja Krishnamoorthi and Pramila Jayapal. The election of Kamala Harris as Vice President was a historic moment for Indian-Americans and for minority representation in the United States. Harris's triumph reflected the growing acceptance of multicultural leadership in national politics and the increasing political power of immigrant-origin communities (Mishra, 2016).

The rise of figures like Zohran Mamdani represents another wave of Indian-American political activism. Unlike many of his predecessors whose political careers were built on professional success and institutional routes, Mamdani's political trajectory was built on grassroots activity, social movements and community organization. November 2025 saw him elected Mayor of New York City, becoming the first Indian-origin, South Asian and Muslim politician to lead the executive government of the largest city in the United States. This path leads directly to the municipal executive office, not just the legislative or gubernatorial office.

8. Zohran Mamdani on Politics of Socialisation and Leadership Formation

Political leadership tends to be a product of a mixture of family background, social environment, education and personal experience. In the case of Zohran Mamdani these forces converged to forge a distinct political identity rooted in social justice, multiculturalism and progressive activism.

Mamdani was born in Kampala Uganda to a family of intellectual and cultural prominence, and was exposed at a young age to arguments surrounding colonialism, inequality, democracy and social reform. His father, Mahmood Mamdani, is a world-famous scholar of colonialism, citizenship, and African politics (Mamdani, 1996). His mother Mira Nair is an internationally acclaimed filmmaker whose works deal with themes of migration, identity and cultural hybridity.

These factors helped to nurture an international outlook. Rather of seeing politics primarily in a national context, Mamdani's experiences created an awareness of global disparities, migration, racial discrimination and social justice problems.

His political socialisation was further refined by his experiences in New York City, one of the most diverse urban areas in the world. Direct engagement with the structural difficulties faced by marginalised groups, including urban inequality, housing insecurity, racial segregation, and economic imbalances.

Before venturing into political politics, Mamdani had worked for many years as a community organiser and housing campaigner. Political scientists have long posited that community organising is an important gateway to political leadership since it develops skills around coalition-building, communication, mobilisation, and lobbying (Ganz, 2010).

These experiences set Mamdani apart from many typical politicians. His political consciousness did not develop in the law, business or party structures, but through his direct involvement in the struggles of the

people, first as an Assemblymember in the New York State Assembly from 2021 representing Astoria and part of Long Island City and then as a mayoral candidate.

This experience provided him with tremendous credibility among working-class voters, immigrants, tenants, and younger generations looking for alternatives to traditional political leadership, a coalition that was essential to his win in the 2025 mayoral election (Section 9).

9. Political Ideology, Electoral Mobilisation, and the 2025 Mayor's Race

One of Zohran Mamdani's political career hallmarks is his connection to progressive politics and democratic socialism.

Contemporary political movements in the United States define democratic socialism as an effort to reduce economic inequality, enhance social welfare benefits, strengthen labour rights, and increase democratic participation in economic decision-making (Sunkara, 2019). Democratic socialism is not revolutionary socialism. Democratic socialism is about reform in the democratic system and through democratic politics.

Mamdani's policy positions always focus on topics such as affordable housing, tenant protections, public transportation, healthcare access, labour rights, educational equity, climate justice and economic redistribution. As mayor-elect and then mayor, these priorities were translated into concrete proposals such as fare-free bus pilot programs, a proposed Municipal Grocery Authority for city-owned grocery stores in food deserts, a universal child-care initiative, expansion of social housing stock, and a "good cause" eviction bill (Brownstein Report, 2025).

These concerns strike a chord with younger voters, who have grown more worried about expanding inequality, housing affordability and falling economic mobility (Piketty, 2014).

His electoral campaign is also a case study in contemporary trends in political mobilisation. Mamdani's campaigns have been less dependent on big donors or traditional political machines and more on volunteer networks, grassroots organising and community outreach; his mayoral campaign reportedly mobilised tens of thousands of volunteers and held a double-digit lead in pre-election polling.

Studies of modern political movements reveal that grassroots mobilisation can have a major political impact by building trust, involvement, and a shared identity among supporters (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). This dynamic is well exemplified by Mamdani's campaigns to mobilise different constituencies around common concerns for economic justice and social inclusion. Over two million votes were cast in the November 2025 general election, the highest total since 1969.

Importantly, his political rhetoric often links local problems to wider structural problems. For example, housing affordability is not only an individual concern, but a consequence of wider economic and political institutions. This framing allows supporters to connect their own experiences to wider political stories. Figure 2. Timeline: Selected Political Milestones of Indian Origin in the United States of America, 2004-2025

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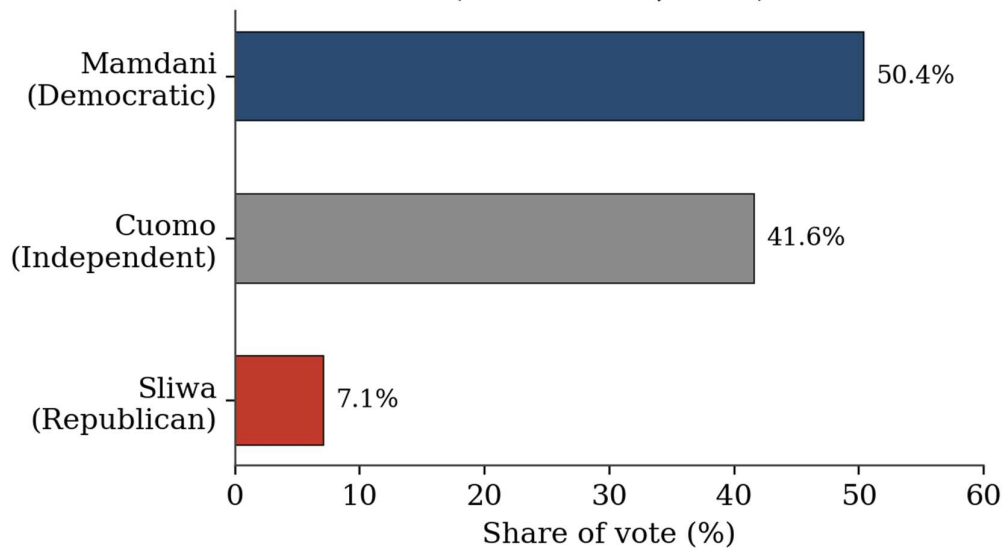
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Figure 3. 2025 New York City Mayoral Election Result (November 4, 2025)



Results of the 2025 New York City mayoral election, general election, November 4, 2025.

The 2025 New York City mayoral election serves as an empirical test of the theoretical claims presented in the previous sections of this article. Mamdani, an under-the-radar state assemblymember, entered the contest and won the Democratic primary in June 2025 by a twelve-percentage-point victory over former Governor Andrew Cuomo (Wikipedia, 2026; USA Today, 2025). Mamdani won the general election on November 4, 2025, with about 50.4 percent of the vote, defeating Cuomo, who ran as an independent after losing his primary and got about 41.6 percent, and Republican Curtis Sliwa, who got about 7.1 percent (NBC News, 2025; Brownstein Report, 2025). The results are visually shown in figure 3.

The election has a number of analytically relevant elements. First, turnout was over two million votes, the greatest since a New York City mayoral election in 1969, pushed in large part by young and first-time voters (NPR, 2025). Secondly, exit polling suggested that the cost of living, especially housing, was the most important issue for voters – a recurring theme of Mamdani’s policy work over many years (CBS News, 2025). Third, Mamdani’s alliance included progressive organisations, labour unions, renters, and public sector workers, and he won Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan, with Staten Island being the sole borough to vote for his opponent (Brownstein Report, 2025).

The findings back the paper’s main argument that Mamdani’s political triumph is rooted in the confluence of descriptive representation as the first Muslim and first South Asian mayor of New York City and substantive representation tied to a redistributive policy program for housing, transit, and child care. The scale of his victory, and the coalition that produced it, demonstrate that identity-conscious, grassroots-oriented leadership can win enduring elections in one of the most diverse and politically consequential cities in the United States.

10. Identity, Religion and Representation

One of the key issues in modern democratic theory is the link between identity and political representation. Minority politicians often have a dual role of representing specific communities and broader constituencies (Mansbridge, 1999).

Zohran Mamdani’s political career is a prime example. His South Asian ethnicity, Muslim identity, immigrant background and progressive political leanings intersect in ways that have implications for public perceptions and political prospects.

The exposure Mamdani gets is particularly important as a Muslim politician in the America of post-9/11. The problems facing Muslim communities in the United States have been well documented. These include stereotyping, discrimination and political marginalisation (Cainkar, 2009). The election of Muslim candidates therefore provides a boost to broader processes of political normalisation and inclusion. NPR (2025) in its

coverage of the 2025 mayoral contest noted that Mamdani's criticism of Israeli government policies in Gaza was a sticking point for some voters, demonstrating how issues of identity can both build and fracture an electoral coalition.

Mamdani's South Asian ethnicity also links him to the growing political power of the Indian diaspora. Indian-origin politicians are increasingly being elected to leadership positions at all levels of government, which reflects the growing involvement of the community in public life (Jaffrelot, 2015).

But Mamdani's understanding of representation is not that of narrow ethnic politics. Instead of focusing just on issues affecting a single community, he combines identity-based representation with universal policy goals such as housing, healthcare, labour rights and social justice.

This approach aligns with what scholars refer to as intersectional representation, when political leaders understand the intersections of many identities and forge coalitions across social, racial and economic borders (Crenshaw, 1989).

Thus, his political success shows that minority identity can be a resource for the construction of inclusive political coalitions rather than an impediment to wide electoral appeal. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that he carried four of the five boroughs in New York City in the 2025 general election (Brownstein Report, 2025).

11. Comparing Zohran Mamdani with other Indian-Origin Political Leaders

The influx of Indian-origin politicians in the United States has brought forth tremendous ideological variety. The comparison of Mamdani with other key leaders indicates considerable disparities in political tactics, identity creation and policy direction. Table 1 summarises these comparisons across five dimensions. Each example is discussed further.

Chief

Political Pathway

Ideological Alignments

Main Policy Focus

Most Senior Position

Zohran Mamdani

State legislature, grassroots activism, community organising

Progressive / democratic socialist

Housing, tenant rights, transit, labour, child care

Mayor of New York City (2025-).

Kamala Harris

Legal practice District Attorney state Attorney General U.S. Senate

Mainstream Democrat / establishment liberal

Civil Rights, Health Care, Criminal Justice Reform

Vice President of the United States 2021–2025.

Nikki Haley

Governor's office State legislature Federal appointment

Conservative Republicans

Economic growth, entrepreneurship and national security

Governor of South Carolina U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations.

Pramila Jayapal

Non-profit advocacy, community organising, US House

Democratic Progressive

Healthcare reform, social fairness, immigrant rights

U.S. (Co-Chair, Congressional Progressive Caucus, House of Representatives.

Ro Khanna

U.S. legal practice, technology policy Home

Tech-oriented / progressive Democratic

Digital Equity, Economic Development, Innovation Policy

United States House of Representatives (U.S.).

Leader	Political Pathway	Ideological Orientation	Primary Policy Focus	Highest Office Attained
Zohran Mamdani	Community organizing, grassroots activism, state legislature	Democratic-socialist/ progressive	Housing, tenant rights, transit, labour, childcare	Mayor of New York City (2025–)
Kamala Harris	Legal practice, District Attorney, state Attorney General, U.S. Senate	Mainstream Democratic/institutional liberal	Criminal justice reform, civil rights, healthcare	Vice President of the United States (2021–2025)
Nikki Haley	State legislature, gubernatorial office, federal appointment	Conservative Republican	Economic growth, entrepreneurship, national security	Governor of South Carolina; U.S. Ambassador to the U.N.
Pramila Jayapal	Non-profit advocacy, community organizing, U.S. House	Progressive Democratic	Immigrant rights, healthcare reform, social justice	U.S. House of Representatives; Congressional Progressive Caucus Co-Chair
Ro Khanna	Legal practice, technology policy, U.S. House	Progressive Democratic / tech-oriented	Innovation policy, economic development, digital equity	U.S. House of Representatives

Table 1. A comparative survey of selected political figures of Indian heritage in the United States.

Kamala Harris is a more institutional form of political leadership. She moved up the traditional ladder, through law practice, district attorney, state office, and national politics. Harris, 2019). While Harris acknowledges her multicultural roots, her political orientation is mostly grounded in mainstream Democratic Party politics. In contrast, Mamdani's political identity is more closely linked to grassroots activity and progressive social movements.

Nikki Haley was a product of conservative Republican politics, and she often stressed themes of entrepreneurship, economic growth and national security (Haley, 2019). Haley, unlike Mamdani, tended to pursue a less identity-based politics and emphasised assimilation into mainstream American society.

Among leaders of Indian heritage, Pramila Jayapal has the most in common with Mamdani. Both are committed to immigrant rights, social justice, healthcare reform, and progressive policy agendas (Jayapal, 2020). But Mamdani's political path is more closely entrenched in local grassroots organising and urban action, and his 2025 victory granted him executive, not legislative, power.

Ro Khanna is a rare combination of progressive politics and tech innovation. He is for economic reform and social fairness yet his political priorities often include innovation, economic development and technological policy (Khanna, 2022). Mamdani, on the other hand, is more concerned with housing, labour concerns and urban inequalities.

These similarities indicate that Indian-American political leadership is not a monolithic entity. It is not that. It includes a wide spectrum of ideological perspectives, policy issues and representational techniques.

12. Main Findings and Discussion

This work shows some interesting facts.

First, Indian Americans have moved from symbolic participation to substantive leadership in political inclusion. The community is moving from economic success to more and more influence on governance and policy-making, now reaching the local executive office.

Second, Zohran Mamdani represents a new generation of Indian-origin political leaders whose legitimacy stems from grassroots activity rather than traditional elite channels, and his 2025 mayoral victory shows that this path can reach the highest levels of city governance.

Third, identity is still crucial for political representation, but it is mediated by wider policy goals. Mamdani's success is evidence that minority identities can coexist with, and even complement, universal political appeals based on affordability and economic fairness.

Fourth, the high turnout and volunteer mobilisation reported in Section 9 is indicative of the growing reliance on community organising, volunteer participation, and internet communication in contemporary political mobilisation, rather than on traditional party institutions alone.

Fifth, immigrant-origin leaders are redefining ideas of citizenship and representation by showing how varied identities can buttress, not erode, democratic institutions.

Finally, the story of Mamdani implies that future political leadership among Indian Americans may grow increasingly diversified in terms of philosophy, social background, and political strategy and that city government may serve as an increasingly crucial forum for such leadership.

13. Conclusion

The rise of Zohran Mamdani is a crucial moment in the history of Indian-American political involvement and democratic representation in the US. His political career is a reflection of larger changes occurring in American culture, including demographic diversification, increased immigrant absorption, and rising aspirations for social justice and political participation. The election in November 2025 as the 111th mayor of New York City and the entry into that office on January 1, 2026, are the outcome of the trajectory analysed in this article within the span of this study.

Unlike the earlier generations of Indian-origin politicians who were more inclined to professional achievements and institutional progress, Mamdani's political identity has been shaped by grassroots activism, community organising and progressive politics. This differentiation is a sign of changing trends in political participation of the younger generations and points to the increasing significance of social movements in determining the present leadership.

The study suggests that Mamdani represents a new model of diaspora leadership that blends immigrant identity, multicultural representation and vigorous policy advocacy. His political career pushes against standard assumptions about political participation and exemplifies how minority leaders can be representatives of particular communities and at the same time serve larger public interests.

And more generally, the Zohran Mamdani case is a sign that American democracy keeps expanding. As immigrant-origin communities continue to be incorporated into political institutions, new forms of leadership are anticipated to emerge that are representative of the complexity, diversity, and dynamism of modern society.

Future research should focus on a comparative analysis of second-generation immigrant politicians, the role of transnational networks in political mobilisation, the policy outcomes and governing record of Mamdani's mayoralty as it unfolds, and the impact of changing demographic realities on democratic representation in multicultural states.

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