



Zohran Mamdani speaks at a Democratic Socialists of America meeting at the Church of the Village in New York City Nov. 11, 2024. (Wikimedia Commons/Bingjiefu He)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Zohran Mamdani ran a brilliant campaign to [win](#) the Democratic primary for mayor of New York City. Rooted in a [social media effort](#) with fun and funky [posts](#), while zeroing in on the daily struggle with [affordability](#) New Yorkers face, he overcame the odds to defeat former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Since Mamdani's primary win last week, Democrats have been asking if the 33-year-old's political style and agenda can be exported nationwide. James Carville and Stanley Greenberg, two legendary Democratic strategists, [noted](#) that "the Democratic Party of New York City is not a microcosm of the nation" and worried specifically that Mamdani's self-identification as a democratic socialist would prove a hurdle for too many Americans.

Is it? Is there a way to take the edge off the label?

"In many respects, democratic socialism was and is close to Catholic social doctrine and has in any case made a remarkable contribution to the formation of a social consciousness." That is the kind of thing that upset conservative Catholics whenever Pope Francis would shoot from the hip, challenging their understanding of how religion and politics go together. Except, Pope Francis did not say those words. Pope Benedict XVI did in his 2006 book [Without Roots](#), co-written with Marcello Pera.

If Benedict had said those words during an in-flight press conference, or repeated them a few times, he might have been able to convince Catholics to at least modify their suspicion of democratic socialism. Yes, the Catholic Church was one of the great opponents of Marxist socialism throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Although you wouldn't know it from listening to Fox News, while every Marxist is a socialist, not every socialist is a Marxist.

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Democratic socialism helped shape what we in America know as the New Deal and the Great Society. It is the idea that the people, through their government, should be

able to regulate markets so that they do not breed excessive inequality, but invest in the common life of the society. Democratic socialism holds that workers should have some say in the direction of the companies that employ them, and some share in the profits, too.

In Europe, governments have leaned more in this direction than ours in the U.S., which is why public transportation in Europe is so much better than in the U.S. and why health care is more affordable and accessible.

Still, it is doubtful any Democrat outside New York or San Francisco could win running as a democratic socialist. The word *socialist* carries too much baggage. And if you have to explain it to people, it is time to get a better label.

The same thing happened with the phrase "Defund the police," which emerged at rallies after the murder of George Floyd. The first time I heard it, I thought the idea was crazy, but someone explained to me that by "Defund the police" what was intended was to allocate more resources to public health services so that policemen were not involved in work for which they were ill-suited, like coping with a citizen's mental illness.

It was too late. The slogan had taken root and was burnished on placards at protests. Trendy academics defended it in print and on TV, explaining what it really meant.

In politics, the adage goes, if you are explaining, you are losing. That is only half true. One of the reasons politics have become so lousy is that our campaigns focus too much on the person, not the policies, and rely on gimmicks and slogans. Parties once drafted platforms that mattered, that bound party members, and addressed serious political issues across several campaigns. Democrats had to explain why they supported civil rights from the 1948 national convention platform fight onward, and that explaining helped shape the successful outcome of the debate over civil rights.

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Having to explain what one's slogan or self-identification means is different; it is a self-inflicted wound.

There is a different slogan that also stalked Mamdani's campaign, and it is worrying for a different reason. He refused to retract [his call](#) to "globalize the intifada."

Perhaps he and his young supporters think of an intifada as a series of protests, the kind of thing one finds on college campuses. Those of us who are a little older remember the [bombings](#) of buses and pizza parlors, which killed more than 400 civilians in Israel in the first two years of this century. Is that what Mamdani wants to globalize?

Slogans, like social media, may be an inescapable part of modern political life. Writing last month about the chanting of slogans at anti-Israel protests, Cynthia Ozick [observed](#): "Here there is no history, no honest journalism, no honorable discourse, no argument, no analytic engagement. Not so much as a coherent sentence. What we are hearing is the cruel zeal of an up-to-date hypnotic cultism: the politics of chant."

This absence of critical thinking is worrisome on any issue. With complicated issues like the history of Israel and of Jew-hate, slogans like "Globalize the intifada" are chilling. Public officials should know that.

It would be great for this hyper-individualistic nation of ours if we could embrace democratic socialist principles and policies. But it is doubtful the slickest ad campaign and the grooviest candidate can affect such a sea change in American values. The embrace of democratic socialism must start from a more conservative place. If I were voting for mayor of NYC, I would write in "Joseph Ratzinger."