



By: James Oliphant

US Republicans look to exploit Democratic divide to hold onto power



Wins by three **U.S. congressional candidates** in New York City backed by Mayor Zohran Mamdani have had progressives across the United States cheering. But they aren't the only ones celebrating.

The primary victories by the self-described democratic socialists may give Republicans a lifeline in their effort to keep a grip on Congress.

The slate's triumph last week rocked a Democratic Party that has struggled to find its way since Donald Trump was elected president for a second time in 2024 – with the party's left wing claiming that it has been handed a mandate while moderates quickly sought to keep their distance.

The Mamdani-backed candidates knocked off two Democratic incumbents in the U.S. House of Representatives, while another won a primary for a vacant House seat.

All of the candidates share Mamdani's agenda, which includes economic reforms such as rent controls and higher taxes on the wealthy, universal healthcare, and opposition to Israel's war in Gaza.

Given New York's largely liberal electorate, all are likely to win their races in November.

At a Brooklyn party attended by the 34-year-old Muslim mayor, who is in his first year in office, his young and diverse supporters chanted "Free, free Palestine" and "DSA," – which stands for **Democratic Socialists of America**, the faction within the party to which Mamdani belongs.

The promise to America

The mayor took a victory lap with the media, ensuring that he has become the face of the insurgency. "I think a democratic socialist can get elected anywhere across this country for any position," **Mamdani** crowed to ABC News in an interview.

Along with New York City, Seattle elected a

democratic socialist, Katie Wilson, as mayor last year. Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. could join them in November.

Democrats need a net gain of only three seats to assume control of the House and a net gain of four to take the Senate. Winning either chamber would allow them to stymie much of Trump's agenda.

More than a dozen centrists signed a manifesto last week titled "The Promise to America"

But the congressional primary wins have hit home in a more profound way. They alarmed establishment Democrats to such an extent that more than a dozen centrists signed a manifesto last week titled "**The Promise to America**". It was an attempt to publicly disown Mamdani and his followers, arguing that they aren't representative of the party as a whole.

"We are capitalist, not socialist," the document reads. The candidates – all of whom are in vulnerable seats or in tight races – made clear they stand for a market-based economy and public safety, including secure international borders.

At times, they sounded as if they were trying to preempt Republican attack ads by saying, "We are proud, not ashamed, of America."

Sweet music to Republican ears

The worry is that what plays well in affluent urban centers such as New York and Los Angeles will fall flat with moderate voters in states like Georgia and Michigan.

James Carville, the venerable Democratic strategist who was the mastermind behind Bill Clinton's successful 1992 presidential campaign, took particular exception to one victorious New York candidate, Darializa Avila Chevalier, a 32-year-old Afro-Latina who helped lead pro-Palestinian protests at Columbia University.

Avila Chevalier's incendiary social media posts (since deleted) became an issue in her race against Democratic incumbent Adriano Espaillat, 71, who was backed by the Democratic House Leader, Hakeem Jeffries.

In one, she called former President Joe Biden a "rapist." In another, she said, "F—k Kamala Harris" then the vice president. Both are Democrats.

"Lady, I ain't in the same party as you. I'm sorry," Carville said on his podcast last week. "I'm just not, and I actually do think it's time for Democrats to talk 'the S-word.' 'Schism.' I really do."

"I don't want to be in a political party that denies the right of the state of Israel to exist" – James Carville

He also blasted the Mamdani candidates' stance on the Israel-Hamas conflict.

"I don't want to be in a political party that denies the right of the state of Israel to exist," Carville said.

That's sweet, sweet music to Republican ears. The unrest within the party complicates what was shaping up to be potentially a banner year for Democrats, who have been locked out of power in Washington since Trump and his fellow Republicans seized the White House and Congress.

This year's midterm elections put all 435 seats in the House of Representatives up for grabs, along with 35 of 100 Senate seats.

Only a handful of races, however, are expected to be truly competitive given the polarized electorate and efforts by states to redraw congressional districts to favor one party or the other.

The dangers of creeping socialism

Hamstrung by persistent inflation and the war with Iran, Trump has never been less popular.

In the meantime, Republicans have struggled to demonstrate to voters they are addressing their concerns about the rising cost of energy, groceries and healthcare, along with their worries about jobs lost due to AI.

The president hasn't made things any easier for his party. He supported successful challenges to incumbent Republicans in Louisiana and Texas that ended up antagonizing those senators whose votes on Capitol Hill he needs.

Last week, he scuttled a ceremony promoting a bipartisan housing package because Congress hasn't taken action on a bill to tighten voting laws.

The housing measure was exactly the kind of we're-here-for-you legislation Republicans were hoping to take home and sell to voters ahead of the midterms.

But the victories by the Mamdani Three have allowed Republicans to change the subject and employ a timeworn stratagem: warning about the dangers of creeping socialism.

"The Democratic Party is in big trouble. This is not stopping with New York" – Trump

The party's goal now is to nationalize the results in New York to brand all Democrats as DSA candidates in sheep's clothing.

Trump, unsurprisingly, has led the charge. In a speech last week to religious conservatives, he said "The Democratic Party is in big trouble. This is not stopping with New York."

Mike Johnson, the Republican Speaker of the House, warned the same audience that "there are little mini-Mamdani's popping up all around the country running for Congress."

Such attacks have long been perhaps the first page in the Republican playbook – think how

the likes of Nancy Pelosi and Bernie Sanders have been featured in negative ads for years – but results have been mixed.

Biden, with his working-class sensibility and long track record of service, largely dodged the frame in his 2020 presidential bid, while his intended successor Harris fared less well in 2024.

But that was in part due to Harris' own history of shifting stances to curry favor with different elements of the party.

Branding every candidate a socialist

Still, the divide within the Democratic Party could blunt the advantage it holds going into the midterms. As a matter of U.S. history, the party in power typically loses seats two years into a presidency.

It happened in 2018, when Democrats took the House during Trump's first term and again in 2022 when Republicans grabbed it back during Biden's presidency.

Midterm elections feature lower turnout than presidential years, making organization critical. The energy among Democrats right now is among younger voters on the left who historically fail to turn out in these contests.

The party's challenge is to harness their enthusiasm to buoy as many candidates as possible regardless of ideology.



The risk for Democrats is that independent voters may

view the party as too radical for their tastes

At the moment, several polls show Democrats with a slight lead on the generic congressional ballot – meaning the midterms could be theirs to lose.

And branding every candidate a socialist may not be enough to reverse that momentum. Voters are looking to Washington for results, not food fights.

But it's not in the bag. **Americans** continue to view both parties unfavorably and the risk for Democrats is that independent voters may view the party as too radical for their tastes.

That certainly is the Republican objective over the next few months. Which means expect Mamdani's face to pop up in ads everywhere from Maine to Texas.

Mamdani says Republicans go down this avenue at their peril, pointing to his early run of success as mayor of America's largest city.

He was able to close a budget deficit without raising taxes and persuade housing officials to adopt a rent freeze. Even the star-crossed New York Knicks won a title with him on hand.

Last week, Mamdani celebrated the primary victories – and the opening of the city's pools – by leaping into one pool fully clothed.

Like with many moments with Mamdani, the video went viral, certifying his status as the Democrats' newest star. Now he has to hope he hasn't dragged his party into deeper water.