



The Taft Institute

FOR GOVERNMENT & CIVIC EDUCATION

Making Democracy Work

EXPANDING AND IMPROVING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE U.S. SINCE 1961

The Taft Institute for Government & Civic Education
Fall 2025 Seminar for Teachers



Teaching an Insurgent Election:

Zohran Mamdani and the NYC Mayoral Election

Overview

- ❖ First hour—presentation/discussion
- ❖ Second hour—breakout groups—
- ❖ Discussion in breakout groups--Lesson preparation
- ❖ Reconvene--Lesson presentations

FIRST HOUR

OTHER TEACHING RESOURCES

- SIMULATIONS
- INDIVIDUAL LESSONS WITHIN SIMULATIONS

MAMDANI AND THE NYC MAYORAL ELECTION

- HISTORY AND ANALYSIS:
 - DEFINE INSURGENCY
 - WHERE DID THIS GUY COME FROM? HOW DID HE GO FROM UNKNOWN TO FRONT RUNNER?
 - NYC ELECTION STRUCTURE: OPENING THE DOOR FOR A GRASS ROOTS CANDIDATE; FOR INSURGENCY

FIRST HOUR—PART TWO

- THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM AS FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS
 - DIFFERENCES – SOCIALISM VERSUS COMMUNISM
 - SOCIALISM VERSUS SOCIAL DEMOCRACY
- IS MAMDANI REALLY A COMMUNIST?

Election Simulations

- ❖ Election simulation manuals
- ❖ Uniquely rigorous, comprehensive, realistic, and fun
- ❖ Posted each year on the Taft web site
- ❖ Single classroom or whole school
- ❖ Presidential election (2024)
- ❖ Presidential nominations (2023)
- ❖ NY State elections plus Congressional midterms (2022)
- ❖ New York City elections (2021)

Lesson Plans Within the Simulation Manuals

- ❖ Media Literacy—
 - Pages 22ff of the One Classroom manual (on Taftinstitute.org) and
 - pages 27-29 of the whole school manual (on Taftinstitute.org)
- ❖ Assessing Candidates' Positions—Pp. 24-25 of the Whole School Manual

INSURGENCY DEFINED

- ❖ A CANDIDATE WHO HAS LITTLE OR NO SUPPORT FROM THE PARTY ESTABLISHMENT
- ❖ A CANDIDATE WITH POSITIONS THAT ARE OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM OF THE PARTY
- ❖ MAMDANI HAD NO ESTABLISHMENT SUPPORT AT THE BEGINNING OF HIS CAMPAIGN
- ❖ MAMDANI'S POSITIONS—FREE CHILD CARE, FREE BUSES, A RENT FREEZE—ALL OUTSIDE THE NORM WHEN HE STARTED

QUESTION

- ❖ In the recent history of the national Republican Partye (last twenty years), who is the insurgent candidate?

Mamdani

- ❖ How did he do it?
- ❖ How did he come from nowhere to be the front runner?
- ❖ Started with a core group based on ideas (ideology)
- ❖ Democratic Socialists of America (New York branch)
- ❖ Previously elected members of the state legislature
- ❖ Including Mamdani and
- ❖ Members of the New York City Council

Growing a Movement

- ❖ Hundreds of well trained canvassers become
- ❖ Thousands of canvassers
- ❖ When Mamdani emerges as a charismatic candidate
- ❖ With a platform that resonates
- ❖ **Affordability**
- ❖ Rings a bell for many, many New Yorkers

The Laws--1

❖ Money

- ❖ 8 to 1 match—public funds for small, local contributions
- ❖ Mamdani has enough \$ to be competitive in the primary
- ❖ Can hire professionals to make ads and distribute them

The Laws--2

- ❖ **Voting**
- ❖ **Ranked choice voting with transferrable ballots**
- ❖ Vote first, second, third, fourth, fifth choices
- ❖ Ballots of losing candidates redistributed
- ❖ Cross endorsements—Brad Lander and Mamdani
- ❖ Avoid a situation like the one in 2021 where
- ❖ Liberal candidates get more votes in total,
- ❖ But the conservative Democrat—Adams—wins because it is first-past-the-post—Plurality wins

General Points--1

- ❖ Big money corrupts our politics
- ❖ Makes government responsible to the big money interests
- ❖ Current rules for federal elections
- ❖ Including the Citizens United decision by the Roberts led Supreme Court
- ❖ Seriously undermine democracy
- ❖ Seriously empower small, wealthy elites
- ❖ Name for this: OLIGARCHY
- ❖ Counter—Public financing of campaigns

General Points--2

- ❖ First-Past-the-Post Elections corrupt our democracy
- ❖ Elections where a plurality wins—more than anyone else
- ❖ Even if it's 34% in a three way race (34% to 33% to 33%)
- ❖ To the one who has the most votes, even if that isn't a majority
- ❖ May give victory to the candidate backed by a minority
- ❖ Need a system that makes every vote count
- ❖ Ranked choice voting is such a system

General Point—3: Democracy in action

- ❖ Shows that everyday people can make a difference
- ❖ No limit on what an active people can do

Political Spectrum

- ❖ One dimensional
- ❖ Based on equality
- ❖ Combines social and economic equality and political equality (freedom)
- ❖ Other versions such as The Political Compass use two dimensions:
 - Social/economic equality
 - Freedom/liberty

Missing pieces

❖ Definitions for fascism, etc ?

The Left

- ❖ Socialism
- ❖ Communism
- ❖ Anarchism

- ❖ What do they have in common?

- ❖ How do they differ?

What does it mean to call Mamdani a communist?

- ❖ If you apply the definitions to this attack, what do you learn?
- ❖ What is propaganda? What is a smear?
- ❖ What is the difference between this kind of accusation and a negative ad that is truthful?
- ❖ For example, “Andrew Cuomo doesn’t care about working people because he is against free busses.” That’s negative, but is it a smear?

Socialism vs Social Democracy

- ❖ Social democracy
- ❖ Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland
- ❖ Holland, Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Luxembourg, Ireland
- ❖ Mixed system
- ❖ Capitalism, but regulated and
- ❖ Welfare state—big social programs

Mamdani? Bernie Sanders? AOC?

- ❖ What are their proposals?
- ❖ Are they calling for the overthrow of capitalism?
- ❖ Are they socialists or social democrats?

Seminar break out rooms

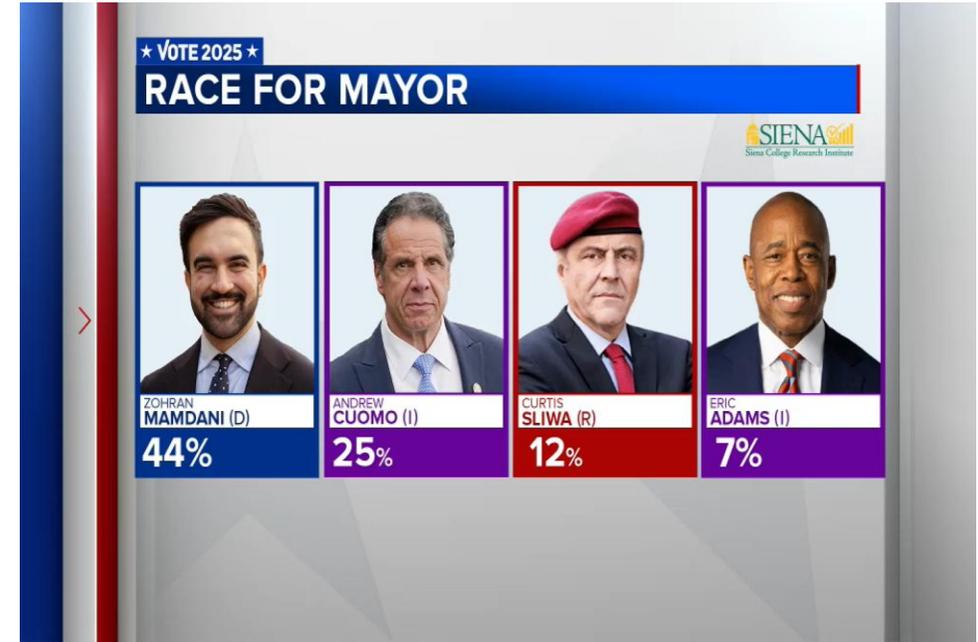
We will shortly divide all of you into randomized break out rooms.

Please work with your colleagues to formulate ideas for lesson plans specifically related to the Mayoral race in NYC.

Nominate someone in the group to take notes/ideas/minutes related to your discussions in a google doc. A google doc shall ensure all participants in the seminar are able to see your draft plan.

Please nominate at least one spokesperson to discuss your lesson plans ideas to the seminar participants. Please be prepared to answer questions related to your draft ideas.

All participants in this seminar are encouraged to create a lesson plan related to the Mayoral campaign, teach the lesson to their students, write a one page evaluation, and reconvene for a second seminar on (October 28), to discuss their findings, and be eligible for a further \$300 stipend.



Ideas for Lesson plans

1. Mayoral Race Simulation
2. Media Bias towards the campaigns/candidates
3. Monetary interests: Real Estate v.s. Grass Roots
4. Negative ad campaigns
5. The ideology of the candidates
6. Analyze the debates
7. Analysis of the adverts: - affordability - free buses - city owned supermarkets - rent freeze - palestine - crime - economy

