Opinion New York City

How New York became a political laboratory

Trump, AOC and Mamdani: the New Yorkers shaping America's future

By Richard Florida

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Donald Trump, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (known almost universally as AOC) and Zohran Mamdani are three of the most charismatic and arguably politically consequential figures of our era, and they are all products of New York. How did that happen and what does it represent?

Politicians weren't supposed to hail from New York anymore. They were expected to rise from America's south like Bill Clinton, the heartland like Barack Obama, or the west like Mitt Romney and John McCain.

The irony is that New York, supposedly a coastal elite bubble, actually remains America's most representative political laboratory. Its extreme inequality, diverse population and economic dynamism create conditions that are a test for every political strategy. If Mamdani can organise them effectively, he could become the next Big Apple politician to break through nationally.

Although he was born into New York real estate wealth, Trump's Maga movement mobilises working-class resentment against a system they believe has left them behind. Yet he simultaneously embodies our new Gilded Age — a billionaire president flanked at his second inauguration by tech oligarchs such as Tim Cook, Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg.

Born in the Bronx but raised in Westchester county, AOC appeals to the hipster denizens of Brooklyn and Queens, as well as Manhattan's progressive gentry. Her support is rooted in the college-educated creative classes, many of whom are navigating rising housing costs and an increasingly precarious job market.

Mamdani, born in Uganda and raised in Manhattan's Morningside Heights where his father is a professor at Columbia, is building a new political coalition. While Trump captured the working class and AOC the creative one, Mamdani has forged a cross-class coalition that brings together service workers with young creative professionals — home health aides alongside struggling artists, delivery drivers with freelance designers, joined by economic precarity rather than divided by education levels.

Trump, AOC and Mamdani aren't just united by their New York origins, but also by their undeniable charisma. The city rewards those who can command

attention and project star quality. And charisma is a quality that matters even more in the age of social media.

This isn't the first time New York has shaped American politics. From Alexander Hamilton's financial revolution to Tammany Hall's machine politics and Progressive Era reforms, the city has repeatedly incubated political innovations.

After the first Gilded Age, Fiorello La Guardia built a coalition of the city's outsiders — Jews, Italians and progressives excluded by Tammany's Irish-dominated machine. Like Mamdani, La Guardia spoke multiple languages and was able to unite diverse communities around shared economic interests. Both emerged during periods of extreme inequality to forge new political coalitions.

Today, Trump, AOC and Mamdani represent different responses to the same underlying pressures of inequality, displacement and economic transformation that are reshaping cities across America.

If Mamdani or even AOC seem like long shots for higher office, consider this: 15 years ago, who would have imagined that a reality TV star hawking steaks and ties bearing his name could become president of the United States — twice? What seems unthinkable often becomes inevitable faster than anyone expects.

What happens next in our country will be determined not by traditional partisan or ideological divides, but by how charismatic politicians are able to forge new class coalitions. The city that produced these three figures may be a harbinger of the competing trajectories that will define America's political future.