

Zohran Mamdani Says He's a Democratic Socialist. What Does That Mean?

The term has no singular definition. But simply put, it's an ideology rooted in its opposition to capitalism and wanting to shift power from corporations to workers.



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By Kellen Browning

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Zohran Mamdani, a New York state assemblyman, stunned the Democratic establishment on Tuesday evening with a performance in the Democratic primary for mayor of New York so commanding that his chief rival, former Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, quickly conceded to him.

Mr. Mamdani's primary victory is not yet official, and he still faces a competitive general election this fall. But if he is successful, he would become one of the most prominent democratic socialists in the country. Here's what that label means.

What is democratic socialism?

The term has no singular definition, and its supporters and critics assign it various descriptions. But the simplest way to understand democratic socialism, from an academic standpoint, is as an ideology rooted in its opposition to capitalism and wanting to shift power to workers from corporations.

In the United States, the policies that self-described democratic socialists advocate for generally do not involve the complete abolition of capitalism, but rather working within the system to enact left-wing priorities, such as raising the minimum wage. That makes them closer to social democrats — a common ideology in Europe that emphasizes strong social safety nets and government involvement in areas like health care — than traditional democratic socialists, who tend to see less room for compromise around capitalism. Either way, it places them further to the left than the average Democrat.

“These labels are fuzzy,” said Sheri Berman, a political science professor at Columbia University’s Barnard College. Democratic socialism, she said, is “not a tradition with a huge following or a huge impact thus far; the term means different things to different people.”

Is Bernie Sanders a democratic socialist?

Yes, or at least that’s how he describes himself. Democratic socialism was not particularly well-known or popular in the United States until Mr. Sanders, a Vermont senator, ran for president in 2016. But in practice, he sounds a lot like the social democrats in Europe.

While running for president a second time in 2019, Mr. Sanders described his view of democratic socialism as an extension of former President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s vision “to go forward in the wealthiest country in the history of the world and guarantee a decent economic standard of living in life for all of our people. And to do that, obviously we have to combat oligarchy and the incredibly unfair and unequal distribution of wealth and income, and to take on the incredible political power that the 1 percent have.”

What about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez?

Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York are both liberal politicians who identify as democratic socialists. Mikayla Whitmore for The New York Times

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, another liberal political figure who has similar views to Mr. Sanders on income inequality and social policies, has also identified as a democratic socialist. But the Democratic Socialists of America, a national left-wing group, pulled its endorsement of Ms. Ocasio-Cortez last year, accusing her of being insufficiently supportive of the pro-Palestinian movement and its efforts to end the war in Gaza.

The group, which has previously endorsed Mr. Sanders, says on its website that it has over 90,000 members. It advocates for reform-oriented policies like the Green New Deal. Mr. Mamdani is a member of the group's New York City chapter.

Other progressive lawmakers elected soon after Ms. Ocasio-Cortez's head-turning primary defeat of a longtime congressman in 2018 are also members of the Democratic Socialists of America, including Cori Bush and Jamaal Bowman — though Mr. Bowman also faced his own conflict with the group over Mideast affairs. But both lost their House re-election bids.

Given the high-profile role of New York mayor, and the scant number of prominent democratic socialist politicians, if Mr. Mamdani is elected, “he would then be catapulted into the forefront of not just that movement, but what democratic socialism is seen to stand for,” Professor Berman said.

Are there any democratic socialist countries?

If democratic socialist and social democrat are being used as synonyms, then sure.

Social democrats in Europe have been in somewhat of a decline in recent years as right-wing political parties have grown in prominence. But a lot of European countries, including France, Portugal, Spain and the Scandinavian nations, still have policies that many in the United States would say puts them under this rubric — like forms of universal health care that would be considered quite far to the left here.

Left-wing governments also hold sway elsewhere around the globe, including in Australia and Brazil.

What policies do democratic socialists espouse?

Democratic socialists openly push for policies that Democrats might view as ideal but unrealistic, and that Republicans would roundly criticize: for instance, universal health care, free tuition at public colleges and higher taxes on the

wealthy. Mr. Sanders has pushed for such measures for decades.

Mr. Mamdani focused on affordability in his campaign. He wants to incrementally raise New York City's minimum wage to \$30 by 2030, freeze rent for stabilized apartments and make city buses free. He also argued that opening city-run grocery stores could bring down food prices. Such plans may be difficult to realize, but they resonated in a city struggling with skyrocketing costs of living.

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