

Article

The Popular, the Populist, and the Plebeian: Mamdani as a Problem for Populism Studies

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Abstract

This article develops a framework distinguishing plebeian rupture, populist closure, and plebeian-institutional articulation. It asks how popular agency can endure through institutions while those advancing demands retain the capacity to shape decisions and challenge their representatives. The analysis examines Zohran Mamdani's New York mayoral campaign from October 2024 to November 2025 through campaign statements, speeches, endorsement records, and organizational materials. Independent demands, endorsement rules, and public disagreement show organized constituencies seeking a continuing role in the project. Their influence over contested priorities and effective constraints on leadership are less clearly documented. The findings support understanding the campaign's organizational project as plebeian-institutional articulation, alongside a left-populist reading of its construction of a common identity. The framework shifts attention from the presence of organizations to the authority constituent actors retain as popular projects enter institutions.

Keywords: *populism; plebeian politics; plebeian-institutional articulation; political mediation; social movements; Zohran Mamdani.*

Introduction

On 4 November 2025, New Yorkers elected Zohran Mamdani mayor of New York City with just over 50.2 percent of the vote (New York City Board of Elections, 2025). By election day, the outcome was no longer wholly unexpected: a poll in September had already shown him with a commanding lead, and Bloomberg described him as the clear frontrunner heading into the vote (Quinnipiac University Poll, 2025; Bloomberg, 2025). Yet the victory still defied a coordinated effort to stop him. Anti-Mamdani political action committees enjoyed a substantial financial advantage, while more than twenty billionaires had contributed to efforts designed to block him; Reuters, meanwhile, noted opposition extending beyond the Democratic Party, including Donald Trump's late endorsement of Cuomo, threatening to cut funds for New York City if Mamdani were to win the mayoral race (Bloomberg, 2025; Time, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

Mamdani's lead in the polls and its translation into electoral victory was almost immediately interpreted through the familiar idiom of populism. Commentators across progressive, centrist, and conservative outlets described his campaign as "economic populism," "left populism," or as proof that *people*-centered anti-establishment politics had become endemic to the contemporary United States (O'Donnell, 2025; Sirota, 2025; Michael, 2025; Pilkington, 2025; Heer, 2025; Wimbish, 2025; Laleoğlu, 2025; Epstein, 2025). Some cast him as a left-wing counterpart to Donald Trump: a populist, different in content, but comparable in form, tone, and social appeal. Multiple sources framed Trump and Mamdani as structural equivalents in populism. Mechoui argued that "Trump and Mamdani are just as notable for their convergences as their contrasts," emphasizing that both are "manifestations of the same development: the concentration of executive power" (Mechoui, 2025) as both figures strategically shape voter desires through populist messaging. The Economist similarly observed that "Like Donald Trump, Zohran Mamdani promises 'a new approach to power,'" noting that despite their ideological opposition, both represent a shared political method focused on executive action over procedural constraints (The Economist, 2026).

Others contended that "ideology matters, but method matters more," highlighting how both leaders deploy decisiveness, norm-challenging, and narrative clarity as their primary tools, regardless of left-right positioning (CEO Today, 2026). Epstein positioned both Trump and Mamdani within a broader populist tradition, defining populism as rooted in "public distrust of established legal and social institutions" combined with "would-be champions of sweeping

reform" (Epstein, 2025), a framework that encompasses both figures despite their ideological divergence. Even more cautious analyses still implied that Mamdani's politics were populist, stressing anti-elite mobilization, the activation of disaffected voters, and the construction of a new majority coalition out of constituencies alienated from establishment politics (Dionne, 2025; Singh, 2025).

Mamdani's campaign raises a problem that a populist classification alone cannot resolve. People-centered antagonism and the linking of grievances can occur in projects with different relations to plurality, representation, and institutional mediation. The more important and urgent task is to examine how popular claims are formulated, joined, authorized, and contested: whether a common identity extends constituent actors' capacity to act together or concentrates authority to speak and decide in their name.

This article makes a theory-building intervention grounded in a bounded interpretive case study. It asks: *How can analyses of popular politics distinguish institutional articulation that preserves autonomous voice and contestation from closure around an indivisible popular will, and what does Mamdani's campaign reveal about that distinction?* The argument proposes and develops an analytical typology distinguishing among plebeian rupture, populist closure, and plebeian-institutional articulation.

These three concepts address different questions about the politics of the popular. Plebeian rupture concerns political emergence: people previously excluded or assigned a subordinate position assert their standing as actors entitled to shape collective life. Plebeian-institutional articulation concerns how that agency can endure through organizations, representation, and institutional participation. Its distinctive feature is that those actors retain meaningful opportunities to formulate demands, influence priorities, and challenge their representatives. Populist closure concerns the treatment of disagreement: it develops when a leadership or organization claims exclusive authority to express an indivisible popular will and treats competing claims as illegitimate.

Their relationship involves no necessary sequence. Political emergence need not begin with a dramatic rupture, and a disruptive mobilization may already contain claims to exclusive representation. Institutional articulation can sustain agency and provide protections against closure through independent organizations, accountable representation, and procedures that keep collective priorities open to revision. These protections do not merely depend on the

existence of institutions of representation but on their effective function. They require continuing political work. Where they weaken, representatives may increasingly displace the agency of those they represent. Making binding decisions or establishing leadership does not itself constitute closure; what is important is whether those represented retain legitimate and effective means of questioning and redirecting that authority.

Distinguishing these dimensions allows us to examine what happens to popular agency across different moments and relationships within a political project. The emergence of previously excluded actors establishes neither their continuing influence nor the accountability of their representatives. Organizational continuity tells us little, by itself, about whose demands guide the organization. Public disagreement demonstrates independent voice, while its consequences reveal more about the distribution of authority. A project may therefore expand political standing, develop durable institutions, and restrict contestation in different relationships or at different times. The distinction makes those developments visible and allows us to assess how institutional articulation preserves agency, where its protections become ineffective, and whether claims to exclusive popular representation produce closure.

By plebeian-institutional articulation I refer here to a mode of institutionalizing agency from below in which actors contesting unequal political standing retain the capacity to formulate independent claims, challenge representatives, and participate in revising collective priorities. Its defining combination is plebeian political authorship, the pursuit of institutional duration, and autonomous mediation. Populist closure, by contrast, treats an indivisible popular will as authorizing privileged representation and subordinates particular claims and independent contestation to that authority. The distinction concerns what organizational and institutional arrangements enable, not simply whether such arrangements exist.

Mamdani's campaign is analytically useful in this respect because people-centered antagonism coexists with a dense movement ecology and extensive organizing infrastructures. That combination makes it a boundary case for examining the relationship between popular articulation and mediation. I approach his campaign as a possible experiment in plebeian-institutional articulation whose character must be assessed through the relationships among constituent organizations, campaign leadership, and collective priorities. Neither the presence of intermediaries nor electoral success establishes that those actors retained autonomous voice or effective influence. What is critical conceptually is to distinguish how popular agency acquires institutional duration and how that process may preserve or restrict contestability.

Empirically, the article examines Mamdani's campaign during the 2024–25 election period, focusing on its relationships with the organizations and networks that supported it. This assessment takes the left-populist interpretation seriously. In Mouffe's account (2018), left populism can accommodate heterogeneous demands and pluralist institutions. Plebeian-institutional articulation may therefore specify relationships that a broader populist classification leaves open.

A democratic concern with plurality and equal political standing runs through the argument. It directs attention to whether participation gives those involved an effective role in shaping collective priorities and holding representatives to account. The article first develops its conceptual framework and research design, then examines Mamdani's campaign in dialogue with the left-populist interpretation. It concludes by considering how plebeian-institutional articulation might endure and how the framework could apply beyond this case.

The Popular and the Populist: Toward A Typology

The Mamdani case is useful in this context because it exposes the costs of treating populism as the default category through which politics evoking *the people* is read. Before asking where Mamdani belongs, it is necessary to clarify the broader field within which such a case can be located. This means moving from the indiscriminate expansion of populism as a label to a more differentiated typology of the politics of *the popular*.

The notion of *the people* has long occupied an unstable and contested place in political and social thought. In aesthetics and cultural criticism, distinctions between the serious and *the popular* were historically tied to hierarchies of taste, refinement, and authority. Often associated with vulgarity, shallowness, naiveté, *the people* were positioned as the inverse of elites and their allegedly more rational or elevated dispositions (Arnold, 2006; Turner, 2002). Earlier work on *the people* and *the popular* has shown how these cultural distinctions fed broader social-scientific suspicions of popular creativity, agency, and judgment.

The anti-popular inheritance of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social thought exemplified in the work of Taine, Tarde, Sighele, and above all Gustave Le Bon registered the crowd not as a political subject but as a site of pathology: impulsive, suggestible, excessive, and irrational (Taine, 2011; Le Bon, 2002; Sighele, 1903; Tarde, 1903). Popular mobilization appeared, in this optic, as evidence of social degeneration rather than as a response to exclusion

or injustice. A similar suspicion persisted, albeit in modified form, in Freud's reflections on crowd psychology and in elements of Frankfurt School analyses of fascism and the culture industry, where the masses often appeared as vulnerable to irrational, regressive, or manipulated attachment (Freud, 1955; Adorno, 1982). In the American context, Hofstadter's influential treatment of populism as a regressive and paranoid insurgency of the resentful played an analogous role, helping to consolidate a binary between responsible liberalism and dangerous popular eruption (Hofstadter, 1948; 1955; 1963). Although not all critical accounts of popular politics are reducible to anti-populism, modern political thought has repeatedly treated popular engagement in politics as a problem before it was treated as agency.

Contemporary anti-populist discourse often inherits more from this tradition than it admits. A range of recent interventions continues to treat the political activation of the excluded as inherently vulnerable to demagoguery and authoritarian simplification (Mishra, 2018; Mbembe, 2019). Critics of anti-populism (Stavrakakis, 2014; Markou, 2021) are right to note the anti-democratic implications of such arguments. Yet the answer cannot simply be to invert the hierarchy and treat all invocations of, and mobilizations in the name of *the people* as analytically equivalent or normatively emancipatory. Such an inversion closes the critical space in which different evocations, interpellations, and mobilizations of the people can be explored, differentiated, and judged (Sofos, 2022). Once every *people*-centered politics is treated as populist, the concept loses analytical sharpness and political discrimination.

It is precisely this problem that runs through the contemporary literature on populism. Gellner and Ionescu famously observed that "there can, at present, be no doubt about the importance of populism. But no one is quite clear just what it is," adding that it "bobs up everywhere, but in many and contradictory shapes" and asking whether the term has any underlying unity or whether "one name cover[s] a multitude of unconnected tendencies" (Gellner & Ionescu 1969: 1). The literature continues to move among several partially overlapping understandings of populism: as thin ideology, as discursive logic, as rhetorical style, as political strategy, as organizational form, or as response to crisis. Each captures something "real," yet none fully settles the issue of what distinguishes populism from other forms of popular politics.

The ideational definition associated with Mudde remains perhaps the most influential. Populism, in this view, is a thin-centered ideology that pits the "pure" *people* against the corrupt elite and insists that politics should express *the general will* of the former (Mudde 2004: 543). Its comparative portability is one of its strengths. Yet its weakness is equally apparent: by

treating populism as thin, and thus dependent on attachment to thicker host ideologies, it often reduces populism to an overlay on more substantive projects (Freeden 2003; 2017).

The result is to understate its capacity to reshape social imaginaries and the political field itself. Parallel difficulties appear in strategic and discursive approaches. Such approaches rightly reject the idea that *the people* is a sociological given and instead stress the political work of articulation through which a *people* is constructed (Laclau, 1977; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2018; 2020). Yet in many left-populist formulations, populism comes close to being treated as a strategic or rhetorical device for mobilization. If populism can equally well describe left and right, progressive and regressive formations, and if it is reduced primarily to a way of constructing an “us” against a “them,” then one still needs to ask whether populist discourse merely mobilizes or whether it also reconfigures democracy, representation, and rights more fundamentally (Sofos, 2022; 2027).

A more useful approach is therefore to move from the generic language of populism toward a typology of popular politics. The first ideal type in such a typology is *populist politics* in the stricter sense advanced here. Populist closure is understood here not simply as anti-elitism or *people*-centrism, but as a political logic that imagines democracy through the direct enactment of an indivisible popular will. Its defining tendency is a deeper anti-pluralist, anti-particularist, and anti-mediatory orientation. In this context, *the people* is posited as the sole authentic bearer of sovereignty and rights, while institutions that pluralize, delay, interpret, or constrain that will are cast as illegitimate obstacles.

Populist politics is not anti-institutional in some absolute sense. Populist actors build and rely heavily on institutions. What they contest is *institutional mediation*: those arrangements that filter, pluralize, or subject the will of *the people* to procedural restraint. This is why populism’s problem is not merely anti-elitism, but, perhaps more importantly, its tendency to recode legitimacy as proximity to a morally unified *people* and to treat institutions that allow competing demands to be debated (contestation) and negotiated (translation), and decisions to undergo scrutiny and review (delay), as betrayals of democracy rather than as conditions of democratic life (Urbinati, 2019; Müller, 2016; Sofos, 2027). Populist closure denotes the anti-pluralist and anti-mediatory logic specified here; it is not a claim that every approach to populism defines the category in these terms. In Mouffe’s account, heterogeneous demands and pluralist institutions can be integral to a left-populist project. The relevant disagreement concerns how popular unity relates to the continuing independence of constituent voices.

Intermediaries may formulate and contest claims, or they may chiefly transmit a will whose content and legitimate representatives have already been determined. Their existence alone does not distinguish these relationships.

A second ideal-type is *plebeian politics*. Here the relevant lineage is not that of charismatic majoritarianism but that of social histories and political theories of action from below. Thompson's work on plebeian culture and crowd politics remains foundational because it allows one to take popular action seriously without pathologizing or mythologizing it (Thompson, 1971; 1974; 1978). The plebeians he describes are not yet a fully formed "class" and do not possess a stable or programmatic political self-understanding. Yet they are unmistakably political actors, as evidenced by their non-deference, direct action, and capacity to interrupt established orders. Later work on plebeian interpellation extends this insight to contemporary cases in which those without recognized standing make themselves present as political actors without thereby constituting themselves as a durable or totalized subject (Breugh, 2013; Moulier-Boutang, 2014, see also Sofos, 2022). In this literature, plebeian politics is marked by instantaneity, and non-totalization. It may be powerful, disruptive, and even sovereign "in an instant," but it does not necessarily seek durable capture of the state or complete occupation of the political field. This makes the concept especially useful for cases such as the Gezi protests (Sofos, 2018), the Caracazo movement, or the forajidos (Corten, 2012; Huart, 2012; Peñafiel, 2012) - forms of political emergence that are meaningful and transformative but not well captured by the category of populism.

What I call *plebeian-institutional articulation* refers to a mode of institutionalizing agency from below in which actors contesting unequal political standing retain the capacity to formulate independent claims, challenge representatives, and participate in revising collective priorities. Its defining combination is plebeian political authorship, the pursuit of institutional duration, and autonomous mediation. Political projects of this kind neither reject institutions outright nor place their faith in a direct and unmediated rapport between leader and people. Instead, they attempt to repopulate institutions from outside and from below through cadres, organizers, neighborhood networks, campaign infrastructures, and surrogate party forms. Their constitutive tension is the attempt to achieve durability without bureaucratic ossification, articulation without totalization, and institutional traction without populist closure.

The three orientations share an object of analysis: the articulation of popular claims and political authority. Plebeian rupture concerns the emergence of actors contesting unequal

standing. Plebeian-institutional articulation concerns the extension of that agency into organizational and institutional arrangements that preserve autonomous claim-making and contestation. Populist closure concerns the authorization of an indivisible will and the subordination of independent mediation. A project may combine these orientations or move between them. An aspiration to institutionalize agency does not establish that contestability has been preserved; that judgment requires evidence of practice. Populist politics may (and do) draw on plebeian energies; plebeian eruptions may be absorbed into populist equivalential chains; plebeian-institutional projects may employ some populist rhetoric; and all three may emerge from similar conditions of disaffection or crisis. But shared disaffection is not enough to collapse them into one.

Similar unease can be translated into very different political projects, organizational forms, and normative horizons. Politics begins not with unease alone but with its articulation: with the forms of organization, mediation, and representation through which grievances are named, linked, and directed (Capelos & Demertzis, 2022; Demertzis, Papadoudis & Capelos, 2022). Seen in this light, the Mamdani case sits uneasily within the prevailing populist frame. His campaign clearly contains anti-elite rhetoric and invokes ordinary people against entrenched interests. Yet these features are insufficient to establish that the politics in question is populist in the stricter sense. The more fruitful question is whether this case represents an attempt to organize plebeian energies and urban grievances into durable institutional forms without fully collapsing them into populist closure. To answer that question, however, requires a more precise account of how popular claims are linked in the first place. In the next section, I turn to the problem of articulation itself, and to the strategic problem of durability that the Mamdani campaign brings into view.

Articulation and the Problem of Institutional Durability

The question that follows is how popular politics is articulated, and how that articulation shapes democracy, sovereignty, and legitimacy. Populism has often been conceptualized as a political style marked by transgression and polarization, as a thin ideology structured around a moralized opposition between the people and the elite, or as a response to crisis, dislocation, and institutional failure (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Moffitt, 2016; Müller, 2016). These approaches capture important features of populist mobilization. Their limitations become apparent when those features substitute for an explanation of how populism

reorganizes political authority. Treating populism chiefly as a property of leaders, a repertoire of rhetoric, or a symptom of crisis can obscure its capacity to structure political meaning. The approach taken here understands populism as a political logic that reconfigures how democracy, sovereignty, and legitimacy are imagined, justified, and enacted.

Articulation concerns the political work through which experiences of grievance, exclusion, and disaffection become linked within a common project. Housing insecurity, labor precarity, racial exclusion, and dissatisfaction with established institutions do not automatically lead those affected to identify with a common political project. Their relationship must be constructed through interpretations of what has gone wrong, who is responsible, and what collective action might achieve. Where this process invokes ‘the people,’ it constructs a narrative identity through which experiences of crisis, antagonism, and injury acquire a shared political meaning (Somers, 1994; Sofos, 2022). It also establishes who can speak, which claims acquire prominence, and how differences are represented. The political construction of a common project therefore raises a question about the distribution of authority among those whose claims it brings together.

Laclau’s account provides an important starting point because it treats the people as a product of articulation rather than an entity awaiting representation. Heterogeneous demands become linked through their opposition to a common adversary, forming a chain of equivalence that makes collective identification possible (Laclau, 1977; 2005). Equivalence does not mean that the demands become identical. Their particularity persists even as they acquire a shared political significance. A housing struggle and an anti-racist mobilization can belong to a common project without becoming interchangeable. The analytical achievement of this approach is to explain how a collective subject can emerge without presupposing an underlying social essence.

An organized and plural coalition may nevertheless lend itself to a left-populist reading. Movement networks, cadres, and intermediary organizations can supply the infrastructure through which demands are linked and identification with a common political project develops. Their presence is compatible with a discursive account of populism. Mouffe argues that constructing a people can preserve heterogeneous demands and democratic pluralism (Mouffe, 2018). That claim, however, does not resolve the tension between constructing a collective will and preserving the autonomy of those whose demands enter it. A coalition may remain socially and organizationally diverse while authority becomes concentrated and dissent loses its

capacity to redirect the project. The critical question concerns how constituent actors can challenge leadership, resist the subordination of their demands, and influence collective priorities effectively.

Plebeian-institutional articulation places these relationships at the center of the analysis: plurality must be sustained through the distribution and contestation of authority, rather than inferred from a project's declared democratic commitments. The issue is how the continuing independence of constituent actors is secured within the common project. Acknowledging that equivalence never completely erases difference does not establish who determines the terms of equivalence, handles incompatible demands, or authorizes a representative to speak for the whole. A shared name, leader, or political objective can facilitate collective action while also acquiring authority over the actors whose claims it connects. The risk resembles, by analogy, the subsumption of non-identical experiences under a unifying concept discussed by Adorno (1973). This is a possible tendency of articulation, rather than its necessary outcome. The critical question concerns the arrangements through which differences can remain politically consequential after a common identity has been formed.

The question is therefore not simply whether politics takes institutional form, but what its institutions do. An organization can aggregate claims, coordinate action, and confer legitimacy while restricting the independence of those it represents. It can also provide spaces in which constituent actors formulate demands, contest priorities, and oblige representatives to respond. The distinction between these relationships cannot be read from the existence of branches, assemblies, digital platforms, or campaign networks alone. Such arrangements may sustain autonomous mediation, transmit decisions made elsewhere, or combine both functions. Populist closure, in the specified sense used here, means claiming that "the people" have a single will, that only a particular leader or organization can speak for them, and that independent demands or challenges to that authority are illegitimate.

Taking part in an organization's activities is not enough; those involved must also be able to shape decisions and challenge their representatives. Actors must be able to formulate claims that are not supplied by campaign leadership, express disagreement without losing their standing as legitimate participants, and bring their priorities into consequential decision-making. Accountability further concerns whether representatives can be questioned, required to give reasons, and subjected to constraints on their authority. These capacities need not take a single organizational form, and their effectiveness may vary across issues and phases. Nor

does autonomy give every organization a veto over collective decisions. A demand's rejection can coexist with independent voice; what matters is how the decision is reached, whether it can be challenged, and what authority constituent actors retain afterwards.

Durability introduces a temporal dimension to these relationships. The ability to mobilize at a moment of crisis differs from the capacity to sustain collective agency through electoral cycles, policy disagreements, and changes in leadership. Recent work revisiting Laclau and Poulantzas draws attention to the significance of institutions and political organization in the construction of broad alliances (Karayiannides, 2025). From the perspective developed here, the question is how organizational continuity affects the distribution of political initiative: whether it enables constituent actors to remain authors of claims or gradually transfers that capacity to representatives, professional staff, and governing institutions.

Blanc's account of Milwaukee's "sewer socialism" offers a historical analogue for the problem of institutional duration. The improvement of municipal services rested on a socialist organization rooted in trade unions and working-class associational life, linking electoral action to collective power beyond government (Blanc, 2026). Its significance for the present argument lies in that relationship: organized constituencies supplied the social force through which municipal ambitions could be pursued and sustained. Institutional durability therefore concerned more than remaining in office. It depended on maintaining political capacities outside government while bringing them to bear within it.

Prefigurative politics provides an important perspective on this problem because it concerns the enactment of desired social relations within present political practice. Clarke and Drury's (2025) systematic review examines how such practices emerge through collective struggle, as participation changes actors' understandings of themselves, their relationships with others, and their capacity to bring about change. This draws attention to the formation of political agency within collective action itself. Participatory organizing can develop capacities and relationships that make democratic agency tangible in the present (Raekstad, 2018). The problem of duration concerns how these capacities are sustained as forms of action and organization change. Prefiguration can also develop through engagement with institutions. Tattersall and Iveson's (2024) analysis of housing activism in Cape Town shows how prefigurative practices operate alongside organizing, mobilization, and engagement with state institutions. Their relationship is therefore a strategic question concerning how movements carry the capacities developed through participation into institutional politics.

The Occupy and Gezi movements make the problem of duration visible. Occupy connected heterogeneous grievances through the language of the 99% and challenged the legitimacy of economic inequality (Lubin, 2012). Gezi condensed a broader refusal of majoritarian authoritarian developmentalism, exposing its efforts to reorder urban space, democratic voice, and everyday life (Sofos, 2018; Korkmaz, 2021; Apaydin, 2024). Assemblies, occupied spaces, and participatory practices gave actors new ways to challenge established terms of representation. Occupy's public visibility also exposed a strategic problem: how to build organization capable of sustaining that challenge (Monticelli, 2021; Cox, 2013). In Gezi, the movement's diffuse political form generated remarkable symbolic power (Batuman, 2015), while its subsequent neighborhood forums and civic activity opened further possibilities for continuing political engagement (Ramazanogullari, 2022). These trajectories bring political emergence into relation with the work of sustaining collective agency. Plebeian rupture can generate capacities and relationships whose consequences outlast the disruptive event; their continuation depends on how participants organize, carry forward their claims, and develop new forms of political action.

Plebeian-institutional articulation addresses the extension of that agency into more durable political arrangements. Its additional analytical purpose, in relation to movement parties, party–movement hybrids, surrogate or connective parties, radical-democratic municipalism, and prefigurative institutionalization, is to examine what happens to constituent political authorship through institutional engagement. These approaches identify forms, strategies, and relationships through which movements can acquire political continuity and influence. The proposed concept asks whether actors contesting unequal standing continue to formulate and contest claims within those arrangements. A movement party or municipal coalition might sustain this relationship, restrict it, or exhibit both tendencies. Organizational form and political aspiration cannot settle that assessment in advance.

This does not mean doing away with leadership, hierarchy or compromise. Organizations need to coordinate their work, choose among competing priorities and delegate responsibilities. Their members also differ in expertise and access to resources. The question is whether those involved can challenge and change these arrangements while remaining able to put forward their own demands and shape decisions when others act on their behalf. The argument reflects a commitment to democracy. How we classify a project depends on how it works, not on whether we approve of its policies or its promises of emancipation. Even when a coalition

includes diverse groups and encourages participation, we still need to examine whether it respects the rights of minorities and political opponents.

Plebeian-institutional articulation should therefore be approached as a process whose character may change over time. Intermediary organizations may retain independent agendas during candidate selection but acquire a more subordinate role during a campaign or after entry into government. Conversely, disagreement and organizational pressure may reopen decisions that appeared settled. Neither institutional duration nor a movement origin guarantees continuing openness. The concept is intended to identify these relationships across political settings; whether they persist beyond a particular municipal campaign, and under which organizational and institutional conditions, remains a question for further investigation.

The strategic dilemma extends beyond the afterlives of Occupy and Gezi. Debates over ‘post-liberation’ politics and fragmented resistance raise the same problem of converting political emergence into sustained collective power (Paret, 2022; Tuğal, 2021; 2023; 2025). The issue is how actors contesting unequal standing can acquire institutional influence while continuing to organize and act in their own right.

Mamdani’s campaign provides a useful case in which to examine these tensions because its people-centered antagonism was embedded in an extensive movement ecology and organizing infrastructure. This combination makes plebeian-institutional articulation a possibility to investigate, rather than a conclusion established by the campaign’s organizational density. The empirical task is to reconstruct how constituent actors formulated claims, authorized participation, influenced collective priorities, and related to campaign leadership. The same evidence must also be assessed through the left-populist interpretation, which can regard these organizations as vehicles of equivalential articulation. Their relationships may support both descriptions, reveal tendencies toward closure, or remain insufficiently documented. Establishing what can be claimed requires a bounded research design and an account of the political and organizational field from which the campaign emerged.

Studying the Mamdani Campaign

The study treats Mamdani’s 2024-25 mayoral campaign and its relationships with intermediary organizations as an interpretive case. The case is selected because people-centered antagonism coexists with extensive movement organization, making both a left-populist interpretation and

an interpretation in terms of plebeian-institutional articulation plausible. The purpose is to examine how the proposed distinctions apply to these relationships, rather than to establish the campaign's representativeness or explain its electoral success.

The main period extends from the endorsement phase in October 2024 to the general election on 4 November 2025. The analysis distinguishes endorsement, primary, and general-election phases, allowing us to examine how organizations decided to support the candidate and what influence they had as the campaign developed. Earlier organizing supplies context for the origins and independent agendas of relevant actors. The analysis focuses on the campaign. Accounts published after the election are used where they describe campaign activities. Whether the relationships examined here lasted in government requires a separate study.

Table 1: Source Register

The analysis draws on eighteen documents: twelve campaign primary records (M), two earlier contextual records (C), three retrospective accounts (R), and one journalistic report (S). Dates refer to publication unless otherwise indicated. Full bibliographical details appear in the reference list.		
Code	Source and date	Contribution to the analysis
M01	Bronx and Upper Manhattan DSA endorsement notice, n.d.; meeting scheduled for 10 October 2024	Sets out the branch and convention votes required to authorize organizational support.
M02	DRUM Beats, CAAAV Voice and New York Communities for Change joint endorsement, n.d.	Describes multilingual candidate interviews, constituency demands and an ambition for shared decision-making with elected representatives.
M03	Zohran for NYC field-launch notice, n.d.; event on 25 January 2025	Advertises training, canvasser pairing and childcare to facilitate campaign participation.
M04	NYC-DSA trans-rights rally account, 1 April 2025	Records Mamdani's support for gender-affirming care through appeals to city and state human-rights protections.
M05	NYC-DSA immigrant-rights statement, 18 April 2025	Records support for immigrant protections and opposition to immigration enforcement and the suppression of dissent.
M06	New York State Tenant Bloc endorsement, 6 May 2025	Reports a leaders' vote ranking Mamdani first and Lander second, following petitioning for rent-freeze commitments.
M07	Mamdani's housing statement, 12 June 2025	Connects housing insecurity to donor power and presents proposals for rent regulation, investment and small-landlord assistance.
M08	Mamdani's primary-election-night speech transcript, 25 June 2025	Links material demands through an anti-elite appeal while promising service to opponents' supporters and non-voters.
M09	Blanc, Lemmerman and Zhuang's organizational proposal, 28 August 2025	Proposes neighbourhood and workplace organization to sustain mobilization beyond the election.
M10	Holden T. and Curtis R.'s response, 12 October 2025	Challenges the proposal's democratic structure and calls for independent organization, collective deliberation and accountability.
M11	Campaign to Close Rikers candidate questionnaire, 2025; exact date unspecified	Records Mamdani's commitments to incarcerated people's rights, institutional oversight and eligible voters.
M12	Mamdani and campaign staff's election-night addresses, transcript published 5 November 2025	Provides statements on popular identification, volunteer leadership and delegated organizing responsibility.
C01	DRUM Beats' endorsement statement, 2023	Establishes earlier criteria for conditional support and reports withholding renewed endorsement from Amanda Farias.
C02	NYC housing survey findings, February 2024	Provides official rental-vacancy and affordability estimates as context for housing demands.
R01	CAAAV Voice's primary-fieldwork account, n.d.	Describes multilingual volunteer training and outreach through neighbourhood institutions.
R02	Yaka's participant account, 19 November 2025	Describes September–October canvassing, recruitment, coordination and field-leader training.
R03	Maisano's "Partyism without the Party", 25 November 2025	Examines NYC-DSA's organizing role, the campaign's performance of party functions and emerging post-election organizations.
S01	Evans's reporting on staging homes, 3 November 2025	Uses interviews with hosts and staff to describe domestic spaces supporting campaign coordination and political sociality.

The empirical revision assembles a documentary corpus comprising campaign speeches and substantive interviews, policy materials, organizational endorsement records and public statements, and documents concerning selected decision episodes. The initial organizational focus includes NYC-DSA, DRUM Beats, CAAAV Voice, and New York Communities for Change, whose relationships to the campaign are already identified in the case discussion. Documents were selected for their relevance to claim-making, leadership, organizational

autonomy, decision-making, and accountability, with material sought across the three campaign phases.

I selected sources that could challenge my interpretation as well as support it, including public disagreements about the campaign's priorities and future organization. I also looked for responses from leaders and evidence that these disagreements influenced decisions. The source register describes the documents used, explains how they were found and selected, and identifies gaps in the available evidence.

The analysis examines political relationships and decision episodes rather than assigns a single label to the campaign as a whole. The typology provides three analytical orientations that may coexist or change over time. The indicators below identify the evidence relevant to distinguishing them; they are not a numerical index or an exhaustive inventory of popular politics.

Table 2: Popular Politics Differentiation Indicators

Dimension	Plebeian rupture	Populist closure	Plebeian-institutional articulation
Popular claims	Actors contest exclusion and assert political standing.	An indivisible people authorizes privileged representation.	Actors contesting unequal standing formulate independent claims within a common project.
Internal plurality	Heterogeneous claims coexist in a disruptive mobilization.	Dissent is subordinated or treated as disloyalty.	Disagreement retains legitimacy and can affect collective priorities.
Leadership	Authority emerges through participation and remains unsettled.	Leadership claims privileged interpretation of the popular will.	Delegated authority remains open to challenge and revision.
Intermediaries	Networks enable collective appearance and action from below.	Organizations chiefly transmit or enforce an authorized will.	Organizations retain independent agendas, voice, and organizational capacities.
Accountability	Immediate contestation supplies uneven constraints.	Loyalty or acclamation displaces independent scrutiny.	Constituents can question decisions, obtain reasons, and constrain representatives.
Opposition and rights	Expanded standing does not itself establish rights safeguards.	Opponents' equal political standing is denied or made conditional.	Minority and opposition rights constrain the common project.
Temporal orientation	Political emergence centres on interruption and mobilization.	A mandate is treated as settled and exclusive.	Continuity depends on revisable priorities and renewed authorization.
State institutions	Existing channels are challenged, interrupted, or bypassed.	Institutional constraints are subordinated to the authentic popular will.	Institutional engagement coexists with autonomous organization outside office.

For each episode, I trace who formulated demands, how decisions were made, and how leaders responded to disagreement. I distinguish independent voice and shared positions from influence over campaign priorities. I assess accountability through constituents' ability to require explanations for decisions, challenge their representatives, and constrain their authority. The same episodes are assessed through the left-populist explanation of linking demands and constructing a common identity.

Before Mamdani: Hollow Parties, Urban Grievance, and Movement Ecology

Across liberal democracies, the weakening of parties as dense civic organizations has been widely noted (Gidron & Ziblatt, 2019; Demker, Heidar & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2019; Jacobs & Milkis, 2022; Tarrow, 2022). Parties remain electorally central but are often less present as everyday institutions in neighborhoods, workplaces, congregations, and associational life. Their retreat weakens the social relationships through which representation acquires continuity. In urban settings, housing, transport, policing, and public services are encountered as immediate features of everyday life. The political challenge is to connect these experiences to organized claims and relationships through which residents can help shape public decisions.

Mamdani's candidacy drew on organizations with constituencies and political histories of their own. Schlozman and Rosenfeld's diagnosis of hollow parties draws attention to the weakening of durable links between everyday association and formal representation (Schlozman & Rosenfeld, 2024). Maisano's 'partyism without the party' identifies how such links were being rebuilt through movement organizations, unions and civic associations performing the work of political linkage, mobilization and leadership formation (Maisano, 2026). His description of NYC-DSA as a 'party surrogate' places the campaign within a wider organizational ecology sustaining political activity beyond the candidate. This ecology provided the campaign with more than electoral support: it brought organized constituencies, accumulated experience and independently formulated demands into the construction of a common project.

The terrain was also shaped by the accumulation of urban grievance. Mamdani's campaign entered a city marked by disaffection that was at once material and moral: rent burden and housing insecurity; long commutes and unreliable transport; the fragility of care and social reproduction; labor precarity; and the experience of over-policing alongside inadequate public provision. For racialized and migrant communities, these pressures were also entangled with deportability, Islamophobia, and the unequal terms of belonging. Together, they supplied a shared field of experience through which otherwise distinct struggles could acquire political connections.

This helps explain the force of affordability as a campaign language. Before it became an electoral promise, affordability was already lived as an organizing condition of urban life: in rent payments, childcare decisions, food insecurity, transit routines, and struggles over time itself. These experiences could sustain different political responses; their direction depended on how demands were connected and organized. The campaign's achievement lay in bringing them into a common project, drawing on communities that had already been organizing around

them in partially overlapping ways. Its language acquired force through these existing relationships, while the organizations sustaining them brought their own histories and priorities into the electoral coalition.

Housing insecurity gave these demands urgency. The city's 2023 Housing and Vacancy Survey, released in 2024, estimated a net rental vacancy rate of 1.41 percent and documented persistent affordability pressures among low-income renters despite declining rent burden overall (New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, 2024: 21, 68). Organizations gave these pressures political direction through the demands they pursued and their judgments about electoral support.

DRUM Beats' 2023 statement tied its movement-builder endorsement to a commitment to co-governance. It declined to re-endorse Councilmember Amanda Fariás because members judged her approach to budget decisions and constituent participation inadequate (DRUM Beats, 2023). Withholding endorsement put the organization's standards for representation into practice. NYC-DSA's October 2024 endorsement notice invited member discussion before voting and required approval by at least four of seven branches, with sixty percent support among voting members in each approving branch, followed by sixty percent support among branch-elected convention delegates (Bronx and Upper Manhattan DSA, n.d.). These rules made organizational support subject to member and delegate authorization. The joint endorsement by DRUM Beats, CAAAV Voice, and New York Communities for Change reported candidate interviews involving more than one hundred working-class leaders, conducted in four languages. The organizations linked support to housing, childcare, transport, and the political standing of Black and immigrant communities, while seeking shared decision-making with elected officials (DRUM Beats, CAAAV Voice, and New York Communities for Change, 2025).

Diasporic and immigrant organizing formed an important part of this movement ecology. Mamdani's campaign drew on organized South Asian, Indo-Caribbean, Asian immigrant, and broader Black and immigrant communities. The coalition of DRUM Beats, CAAAV Voice, and New York Communities for Change described itself as representing more than 50,000 working-class New Yorkers, while reporting on DRUM Beats documented multilingual canvassing and intensive volunteer mobilization on Mamdani's behalf (DRUM Beats, CAAAV Voice, and New York Communities for Change, 2025; The Guardian, 2025). These were

already organized constituencies, bringing accumulated experience and collective capacities into electoral politics.

CAAAY Voice's account of its primary-election activity describes training volunteers in Mandarin, Cantonese, Fujianese, Bangla, and English, alongside outreach through neighborhood institutions (CAAAY Voice, n.d.). Such work tied electoral participation to the languages and institutions of an organized constituency. Taken together, these records show organizations advancing their own priorities, assessing candidates and developing avenues for collective participation. The question now is how far these organizations could shape the campaign's decisions and hold its leadership to account.

Articulation, Infrastructure, and Cadre

The campaign linked material grievances to a common political horizon, but that linkage did not have a single, self-evident meaning. In his housing statement, Mamdani connected displacement to the power of real estate donors and proposed a four-year rent freeze alongside public investment and housing construction. He also recognized that some small landlords faced maintenance difficulties and committed to retaining assistance and hardship provisions (Mamdani, 2025a). The text constructed an adversarial account of the housing crisis while differentiating interests within the category of landlords. It therefore gives grounds for examining both the production of a popular frontier and the limits placed on its simplification.

The primary-election-night speech linked rent, buses, childcare, work and protection from deportation to a city in which ordinary people could live with dignity. Its account of democratic renewal set the claims of working New Yorkers against the influence of billionaires and political betrayal (Mamdani, 2025b). On general-election night, *'We will fight for you because we are you'* expressed an especially close identification between representatives and represented (Mamdani & campaign staff, 2025). The speeches give a left-populist reading a substantive basis: heterogeneous demands are brought into a common project defined against an adversary, with the candidate providing a focal point of identification. Within this reading, organizational networks and social diversity help sustain the construction of a people.

The Tenant Bloc's endorsement brings the authorship of these demands into closer view. On 6 May 2025, the New York State Tenant Bloc announced that its leaders had voted to rank Mamdani first and Brad Lander second. The release gave distinct reasons for supporting each

candidate and reported that the Bloc had petitioned for rent-freeze commitments before making its endorsements (New York State Tenant Bloc, 2025). The organization approached the election through a substantive housing demand and a judgment about which candidates could advance it. Support for Mamdani formed part of that wider electoral strategy.

Read alongside Mamdani's June statement, the endorsement shows the convergence of a constituency's publicly formulated demand with the candidate's programme. The Bloc made that demand a basis for deciding whom to support, bringing its own priorities into the electoral relationship. Its initiative is visible in both the articulation of a claim and the decision to commit organizational support to its pursuit. The record leaves open how much the Bloc influenced the pledge itself and how members participated in, or could challenge, their leaders' endorsement decision.

Mamdani's primary-election-night speech addressed a public extending beyond the victorious coalition. He promised to serve Cuomo's supporters and those who had not voted and acknowledged that citizens would disagree with him (Mamdani, 2025b). Opposition was thus included within the political community he undertook to represent. Disagreement, in this account, did not diminish a resident's claim to be served by the city's government.

Rights commitments gave this account of political belonging a more concrete form. NYC-DSA's account of a March rally described Mamdani invoking city and state human-rights protections in support of gender-affirming care. Its April statement reported his backing for New York for All alongside organizations opposing immigration enforcement and the suppression of dissent (NYC-DSA, 2025a; 2025b). In his responses to the Campaign to Close Rikers questionnaire, Mamdani pledged cooperation with the federal monitor, protection of incarcerated people's rights, and practical support for eligible incarcerated voters (Campaign to Close Rikers, 2025). Together, these commitments presented public authority as subject to rights and institutional scrutiny, with protections extending beyond the electoral majority. Their implementation in government falls outside the campaign period examined here.

The campaign gave participation a practical form through arrangements that addressed the difficulties of entering political work. Its January field-launch notice offered training and pairing for inexperienced canvassers, with childcare available on request (Zohran for NYC, n.d.). Training and pairing offered newcomers a route into shared political activity, while childcare recognized responsibilities that could otherwise restrict their involvement.

Maisano's account places NYC-DSA at the center of this organizing work. Members occupied leading campaign positions and were prominent among field leaders; he also writes from his experience co-leading a weekly Brooklyn canvass during the primary (Maisano, 2026). Yaka's retrospective account describes online registration, coordination through messaging applications, and NYC-DSA's recruitment and training of field leaders during September and October (Yaka, 2025).

Evans's account of the "kitchen-table strategy" shows how apartments, porches, and shared homes became hubs of canvassing, debriefing, coordination, and everyday political sociality (Evans, 2025). These spaces gave campaigning a recurring place in everyday life. Volunteers entered local environments in which political work could be undertaken with others, discussed, and renewed through familiar relationships. Homes became informal mediating institutions: they connected the campaign's wider ambitions to the practical and social conditions of participation. This gives concrete substance to the problem of duration. Political activity acquired continuity through neighborhood relationships and routines that made repeated involvement possible. The question is whether those who built and sustained this infrastructure could also shape the project's priorities and call its representatives to account.

Cadre gives participation continuity through political labor that turns demands into organized activity and connects a campaign to existing social relationships. On election night, the campaign's field director described canvassing shifts led by volunteers who repeatedly welcomed and organized new participants (Mamdani & campaign staff, 2025). Such work can cultivate political initiative while also carrying priorities decided elsewhere. The question is who can direct the project this labor sustains.

That question surfaced during the general-election campaign in a debate over the organization of the project beyond the election. On 28 August, Blanc, Lemmerman, and Zhuang (2025) proposed sustaining the volunteer operation through a broad Movement for an Affordable New York. They envisaged neighborhood and workplace hubs, leadership development, and pressure on state officials to fund the affordability agenda. Mamdani was assigned an important initiating role, while movements were expected to organize beyond what he could accomplish in office. The proposal sought to give electoral mobilization a continuing organizational life.

On 12 October, Holden T. and Curtis R., NYC-DSA members writing in the Marxist Unity Group's publication, contested this vision. They distinguished independent socialist

organization from the mayor's economic programme and questioned the proposed coalition's democratic structure. Their criticism of what they regarded as closed decision-making accompanied demands for collective deliberation and accountability, alongside objections to anticipated policing compromises (Holden & Curtis, 2025). The dispute went to the political authorship of the project: who would decide what it became, and through which procedures?

The exchange placed disagreement inside the organized coalition. Participants were contesting both its priorities and the terms on which a common project would be formed. The critique itself asserted an independent political position and demanded a role in shaping the future organization. Its consequences for decision-making are not documented in the sources examined here.

A left-populist interpretation would read these intermediaries as participants in constructing a people. Organized tenants, immigrant constituencies and socialist cadres carried heterogeneous demands into a common affordability agenda framed against an elite adversary. Mouffe proposes that such a construction can retain plurality and operate through democratic institutions (Mouffe, 2018). That claim needs to be assessed where it becomes politically difficult: when constituent demands conflict with priorities advanced in the name of the common project. Recognizing plurality is one thing; explaining how its bearers retain influence over the project is another.

Plebeian-institutional articulation makes that relationship central. It asks whether those who contribute demands and organizational capacities remain able to shape the project as they entrust others to represent them. Endorsement procedures, substantive conditions of support and public disagreement show organized actors bringing their own priorities into the electoral relationship. The substantive issue is whether this initiative carries into decisions and whether representatives remain answerable when priorities diverge. Accountability concerns the capacity to secure responses, revise collective priorities and constrain representatives who depart from their commitments.

Popular identification and forceful leadership can coexist with legitimate disagreement. Populist closure develops where a leadership claims to be the sole voice of 'the people' and uses that claim to deny others the right to make independent demands or challenge its authority. The relevant evidence concerns how dissent is treated and how authority is justified.

Writing after the election on 25 November 2025, Maisano described two initiatives intended to carry this infrastructure forward: Our Time, which would mobilize campaign volunteers around the incoming administration's agenda, and the People's Majority Alliance, bringing together endorsing organizations (Maisano, 2026). These initiatives gave concrete form to the effort to sustain political organization beyond election day. They also brought the question of constituent authority into the emerging relationship between the movement and the administration.

Blanc's discussion gives these efforts at continuing organization a historical perspective. His warning against the "progressive solo operator" identifies the limits of municipal reform carried by an officeholder without an independent organized base (Blanc, 2026). Mamdani's movement ecology and the initiatives described by Maisano bring this relationship into view. Their strategic significance lies in sustaining political capacities beyond the election, with organizations able to support a governing project while retaining the authority to press their own demands and challenge its direction.

The August–October debate makes duration a struggle over the future of political agency. It asks whose demands will guide the project beyond the election and to whom its representatives will remain answerable. Campaign evidence captures competing answers to those questions; following them into government requires a separate study. Mamdani's campaign combined popular identification, independent claim-making and struggles over representative authority within the same political project. The typology follows what happens to political authorship as such a project enters institutions. The democratic challenge is to give agency duration while keeping representatives answerable to those who made the project possible.

Conclusion

The organizational process examined in Mamdani's campaign is best understood as a project of plebeian-institutional articulation. Constituencies contesting unequal standing brought demands of their own into electoral politics, made judgments about whom to support, and disputed the forms through which their agency should endure. They entered the campaign as political actors seeking a continuing part in determining its direction. The concept captures this effort to carry collective initiative into institutions while retaining authority over the representatives entrusted to advance it.

The endorsement records give this interpretation substance. NYC-DSA set out procedures through which members and delegates would authorize organizational support. The Tenant Bloc made its housing priorities a basis for assessing and ranking candidates. The joint endorsement by movement organizations connected electoral support to demands formulated through their constituencies and to an ambition for shared decision-making. The August–October dispute then brought the future of these relationships into contention. Participants argued over who would direct the project, through which organizations, and under whose authority. Political authorship was itself at stake.

A left-populist reading captures an important part of the same campaign: heterogeneous demands were linked through a common identification, an anti-elite frontier and a candidate who gave the project a recognizable face. Organizational plurality can sustain that process. Plebeian-institutional articulation provides the sharper account of the question pursued here: what authority do the authors of those demands retain over the project formed in their name? It follows the relationship between popular identification and continuing constituent initiative, making the distribution of authority central to the analysis.

The evidence establishes independent claim-making and organizational judgments about electoral support more clearly than their effects on contested campaign decisions. This is why the designation concerns a project of articulation: actors sought institutional duration for their agency, while the terms on which they could hold representatives to account were still being fought over. The distinction between voicing demands and exercising authority over their pursuit is the substantive problem the campaign exposes.

The distinction among rupture, articulation and closure makes these changing relationships visible. Rupture identifies challenges to exclusion and unequal standing; articulation follows the effort to give that agency duration; closure develops where leadership claims exclusive authority to express a single popular will and disqualifies independent challenges. These dimensions can intersect within a political project. The framework can guide inquiry beyond left municipal campaigns wherever actors pursue institutional influence while maintaining independent organizations. Opportunities for association, contestation and institutional access shape what those organizations can do.

The transition to government is the next setting in which this relationship must be examined. Institutions can extend popular agency while concentrating the power to act in its name. The

democratic promise of plebeian-institutional articulation lies in carrying political initiative into that setting while keeping representatives answerable to those they represent. The durability at stake is the continuing agency of those who made the project possible.

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