



Why Zohran Won

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): All right, now I want to focus on a couple of the really fascinating parts of this campaign, because there were, in this campaign, despite, again, the very real possibility that Zohran Mamdani will basically just be a standard kind of nice left liberal Democratic Party politician, not doing very much that's very controversial. He'll be used by Republicans as kind of a fear-mongering tool. But it's possible his morality will be him being very accommodating, more so than a lot of people think, to the power standard he's supposed to oppose. Who knows? Maybe he won't be, but there's certainly a big expectation. But looking backward, there were definitely moments that were incredibly interesting for the times that we're in.

And I think none is more so than the moment in the primary that was held, the primary debate in the New York City Democratic Primary when you had Mamdani and Andrew Cuomo and six or seven other more minor candidates who debated on television. And the question that was asked – and it was obviously intended to see what Mamdani was going to say, but it was asked of all the candidates – was: "If you were to win and become New York city's mayor, which country would you make as your first stop in a foreign visit?" Now, I'm not even sure why mayors make visits to foreign countries. I suppose there are times when it's appropriate. Maybe they have exchanges between cities or partnerships or some kind of trade deals. I'm not saying that I can never imagine it, but in general, foreign policy is run by Washington. Trade deals for states are run by governors. It's certainly not something that would ever be, in the absence of Zohran on the Israel question, on the minds of anybody. And yet, the Israel question is always on the minds these days of our elections and our media. And so they ask this question and it's remarkable to compare how every person on that stage running to be the nominee of the Democratic Party for mayor answered the question and how radically different the answer from Zohran was.

David Ushery (DU): The first foreign visit by a mayor of New York is always considered significant. Where would you go first? Left, right, Ms. Adams.

Adrienne Adams: First visit? I would visit the Holy Land.

DU: Mr. Cuomo?

Andrew Cuomo (AC): Given the hostility and the anti-Semitism that has been shown in New York, I would go to Israel.

DU: Mr. Tilson, where would you go?

Whitney Tilson (WT): Yeah, I'd make my fourth trip to Israel, followed by my fifth trip to Ukraine – two of our greatest allies fighting on the front lines of the global war on terror.

DU: Mr. Mamdani?

Zohran Mamdani (ZM): I would stay in New York City. My plans are to address New Yorkers across the five boroughs and focus on that.

Melissa Russo (MR): Mr. Mamdani, can I just jump in? Would you visit Israel as mayor?

ZM: As the mayor I'll be standing up for Jewish New Yorkers and I'll be meeting them wherever they are across the five boroughs whether that's in their synagogues and temples or at their homes or at the subway platform because ultimately we need to focus on delivering on their concerns and –

MR: Just yes or no, do you believe in the Jewish state of Israel?

ZM: I believe Israel has the right to exist.

MR: As a Jewish state?

ZM: As a state with equal rights.

WT: He won't say it has a right of existence as a Jewish state to be very clear.

AC: And his answer was no, he won't visit Israel. That's what he was trying to say.

ZM: No, no, no, unlike you, I answer questions very directly.

Scott Stringer: My goal would be to take my first trip to Israel. My wife's life work in this area means a lot to our family.

GG: All right, it's such a kind of microcosm of American politics. I said this before, but for as long as I can remember, I can think of so many presidential and vice presidential debates where this was true, where you would have the candidates fighting over who is more pro-Israel. But this isn't even a presidential debate where at least foreign policy should be

asked about every aspect of it, because it is the purview of an American president. Why should a New York City mayoral candidate even have to talk about their foreign policy at all? And it's true, Zohran has criticized Israel and its genocide in Gaza and US support for it, but he didn't make that anything close to the centerpiece of his campaign. That was raised by other people who thought that was his big vulnerability. You could see how excited Andrew Cuomo was – one of the most excited moments he had in the last, I would say, decade, but certainly when running for mayor, where he thought that that was going to be would turn New York voters against Zohran Mamdani was that he wouldn't vow not just to visit Israel, but that would be the very first country that he would visit.

And what Zohran said should be so unnotable that you shouldn't even have to say it as a politician. You're running for New York Mayor, you shouldn't have to say my priority isn't going to be to go visit foreign countries and make pilgrimage to other foreign countries. I'm running for mayor of New York City. I want to govern New York city. I want to focus on the lives of people who live in New York, not in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. And yet in our politics, where the expectation is that you pledge loyalty to Israel, as you saw reflexively every other one of those candidates do, they perceive this kind of the prevailing new way of understanding these issues, especially among younger voters. They thought that was a huge gap that was going to bring him down.

And he didn't say, "I'm not going to go to Israel. I don't want to go to Israel, but I'm going to go to all these other countries" – he just said, my focus is on Americans or New Yorkers in this case. And I think that's what most people want to hear. And yet, they barely ever hear that. And if they do hear it, they rarely see the actions that are followed up on it. I thought that was one of the most notable parts of this election because it said so much not just about Zohran's candidacy and why he won, but also our politics more generally.

Now I've talked about this before, but I didn't know much about Zohran at the end of 2024 or early 2025. I knew he was a kind of left-wing assemblyman from Queens associated with DSA, but I didn't have an opinion about him. I didn't know much about him. I knew that he had cited my articles before. I've seen him do that. I knew he followed me online, but I didn't have an opinion about him at all, one way or the other. And this was what really first not only caught my attention, but made me impressed with his political skills. And I said it at the time. It's not like I'm just saying it now in retrospect, I go, he won and I saw this early. I actually went on Twitter and posted about this and recommended this video and said, this is really an interesting candidate and an interesting candidacy that I think could end up making a lot of impact.

And the reason for that was – this was fairly shortly after Donald Trump won, beating Kamala Harris. It was November 15th. So, barely a week after Trump won. And most Democrats were either in such meltdown, crisis, panic mode that they could barely speak. They were in this daze for weeks, if not months. Or they were just lashing out and calling everybody a racist, and a fascist, and a Nazi, and warning that we were headed toward concentration camps and dictatorship. And what Zohran decided to do, instead of being

paralyzed with shock and fear, or resorting to accusing people who voted for Trump of being racist and Nazis, was he decided to do something which politicians ought to do but which they so rarely do, which is he just went not just on the street in some kind of photo op, but he purposely sought out the neighborhoods that had huge swings toward Donald Trump.

In fact, some New York City neighborhoods, and they weren't wealthy neighborhoods, they were mostly outer borough, multi-racial, working-class neighborhoods, had among the biggest shifts, as compared to 2020, from voting Democrat, and they had the highest numbers of people moving, migrating, to vote for Trump. And he wanted to go find those people who had previously voted Democrat, but this time voted Trump. And he wanted to understand why they did that. He wasn't looking to demonize them. He wasn't looking to impose preconceived notions on them. He really listened. And then he constructed his campaign around the answers that he was given.

And the way he asked the questions, the demeanor he exhibited, the respect he had for voters that wasn't contrived but was genuine and that they could see was genuine and so opened up and talked to him, just really impressed me. Especially because this is what you ought to be doing if you want to actually understand voters as opposed to manipulating them and controlling them. Just take a look at some of what he did and even beyond the Zohran issue, it was super interesting to hear immigrant working-class people in New York, black voters in New York, people in working-class neighborhoods talk about why they voted for Trump.

ZM: Did you get a chance to vote on Tuesday?

Person 1: I didn't vote.

ZM: And why did you not vote?

Person 1: Because I don't believe in the system anymore.

ZM: Did you get a chance to vote on Tuesday?

Person 2: Yes!

ZM: And who did you vote for?

Person 2: Trump!

Person 3: Ahh, the million dollar question. Trump.

Person 4: Trump.

Person 5: Donald Trump.

Person 6: Well, I actually voted early. I voted for Trump.

Person 7: Honestly, I didn't vote.

Person 8: Oh, she voted for Trump.

Person 9: I voted for Trump.

Person 10: I voted for Trump.

Person 11: Me too.

Person 12: I voted Democrat. At this moment, I voted for Donald Trump.

ZM: Hillside Avenue in Queens and Fordham Road in the Bronx are two areas that saw the biggest shift towards Trump in last week's election. Even more residents didn't vote at all.

Person 13: They like Trump because they don't want the Palestinians, the brothers, to be killed. The war in Ukraine, the Democrats giving all the money. And the war, it's no good.

Person 14: The swing is because people want lower prices. They probably believe that Trump will give them that.

Person 15: Market prices going up...

Person 5: Energy, gas....

Person 8: Food....

Person 16: Most of these people are working families. They're working one to two or three jobs and rent is expensive. Foods are going up. Utility bills are up...

ZM: And that's your hope, to see a little bit more of an affordable life?

Person 17: Absolutely.

GG: I mean, these are things you never hear from cable news studios or from the political class in Washington, because they have completely different lives than the people that you watch Zohran talking to. This is a much longer video, at least like 10, 15 minutes. And it was the same sort of thing over and over. Some of them talked about immigration, felt resentment that people are coming to the country illegally and getting more benefits than they, even though they were born in the United States. Their families were here for generations. And these were not right-wing ideologues who were saying, oh, I hate liberals. These were people

who are talking about just the kinds of issues that ordinary people actually care about and vote on that became the centerpiece of Zohran's affordability campaign.

And when you watch people who aren't professional junkies or political junkies who speak, you realize this in a very visceral way, the breach between our national professional political discourse and what most people talk about. I'm not claiming to be in touch with it. I grew up in it but obviously my life is different now and I think you have to be humble about that and so when you see this, when you see polls, you can see the glaring disparity. And the only way you can see that is by going, like he did, to talk to people.

Remember, throughout 2024 the overwhelming predominant narrative of the Democratic Party about the economy was that the economy was doing extremely well. Joe Biden had enacted legislation that in so many ways had improved the material well-being of the working class and the poor but that they just didn't appreciate it enough because the Democratic party wasn't communicating it enough or these people just can't comprehend why their lives are better. And then, here, they're saying things like "we can't afford our rent, the rent keeps going up, we have to get two jobs, we can take care of our kids". And these two worlds are growing ever further apart. It really is the Versailles model, where the elite, the people who work inside the royal court in Washington live behind these walls. They look at the peasants because they want to keep them under control and manage them, but they have no connection to them.

I'm not saying going one day and holding a microphone in front of some people's face is some impressive act of political authenticity, but he did this a lot and he shaped his campaign not on the basis of the democratic socialists of America political agenda or some left-wing dogma or on Marx. He shaped it on the basis of things he was hearing from New Yorkers about their everyday lives in a way that you don't – and again, he could be the biggest fraud in the world, but the campaign itself was unusual and remarkable in how it did this.

I think one of the things that really amazed people, and that for me was one of the best ads I've seen in a while, is when Zohran, despite being a socialist, made an entire video on the struggles of small business owners to try and make profit given the realities of the economy in New York. And he did so by focusing on what every New Yorker sees all the time, especially working-class New Yorkers who are street vendors, especially people selling halal in food trucks and looking at the economic realities that these people who work extremely hard are facing. You go to these food trucks, those people get there very early in the morning to accommodate people who are working early or they get there at lunch hour and work all throughout the night, and these people sit in these trucks and they prepare food all day. It is hard, back-breaking work. Good, honest, real work. And he wanted to understand the mechanics of why they're struggling so much as a window into understanding why New Yorkers, in general, are struggling so economically. Just the kind of thing that our politics should so obviously focus on, and yet listen to national political discourse – how much do you ever hear of things like this?

ZM: New York is suffering from a crisis, and it's called halal- flation. Today, we're going to get to the bottom of this. How much does a plate of halal cost right now from this truck?

Street vendors: Ten dollars.

Street vendors: Ten dollars.

Street vendors: Chicken over rice, lamb over rice, ten dollars.

ZM: Ten dollars?

Street vendors: Yes.

ZM: When you're a street vendor, you have to pay for the food, the plates. How much do you have to pay for your permit?

Street vendors: Before it was 22.000.

Street vendors: 20.000.

Street vendors: 17.000.

ZM: How much does the license cost if you get it from the city?

Street vendors: I think \$400.

ZM: And who are you paying?

Street vendors: The permit owner.

ZM: You're not paying the city.

Street vendors: No, no, no.

ZM: You pay the permit owner \$22,000 just so you can sell this food?

Street vendors: Yes.

ZM: And who is this?

Street vendors: A random guy.

ZM: Have you ever applied for a permit?

Street vendors: Yeah, I've applied and nothing came of it.

Street vendors: It's a long wait. I'm number 3.800-something.

ZM: After two years, you're number 3.800?

Street vendors: Yes.

ZM: These are the four bills that are sitting in the City Council right now, which would give these vendors their own permits and make your halal more affordable. But Eric Adams hasn't said a single word about them. If you own the permit, then how much would you charge for the plate?

Street vendors: \$7.

Street vendors: \$8.

Street vendors: \$8.

ZM: Would you rather pay \$10 for a plate of halal or \$8?

New Yorkers: \$8.

New Yorkers: \$8.

New Yorkers: I think \$8 is the way to go.

ZM: If I was the mayor, I'd be working with the city council from day one to make halal \$8 bucks again.

Street vendors: So, how does it taste?

ZM: Tastes like ten bucks but it should be eight.

GG: You know, I would almost describe that as libertarian. It's kind of a grievance about the suffocating nature of utterly inefficient and pointless city government bureaucracy, the need to wait four years to get a vendor license and in the process have to pay exorbitant fees that in turn result in an increase of price for the kind of food that working class people eat. And it all explains why New York City is so expensive and offers very practical solutions. You know, one of the reasons I always said that it was impossible – let's go back to Obama just to make it kind of less partisan – but one of reasons why it was so difficult to demonize Barack Obama is because people would watch him with their own eyes and ears and brains and he seemed to them, no matter what was being said about him, like the opposite of some threatening radical.

And so it's very difficult to maintain this demonization of somebody who doesn't really seem scary to most people. Unlike with, say, Hillary Clinton, where the attacks on her about being corrupt and kind of just hungry and thirsty for power and ambition in a way that would make her do anything, that did seem to resonate with how people perceive her. That's the difference between a good politician and a bad one. And one of the reasons why it was so hard to demonize Trump as Hitler, as a dictator, whatever else Democrats were trying to depict him as, is because people have seen Trump for years, even before he was in politics, and that has never been their experience of him. Doesn't even mean that that perception is right. People can be very evil and create a facade of someone likable, but if someone is likable you cannot demonize them unless it corresponds to how they're perceived.

Anyone who watched all of that, Zohran going around and talking to food vendors about the difficulties of government inefficiency in very detailed ways, seemingly trivial ways, but that are important to working class people, you think they were going to listen to histrionic claims from Zionist groups that he's some sort of jihadist, ready to murder Jews on the street, ready to send gunmen into synagogues and gun everybody down and to put women into burkas? There's a gigantic cognitive dissonance between who he clearly is and how he's perceived on the one hand and the attempt to demonize him on the other. That's why it failed so astoundingly.

Now, it doesn't mean that those attempts weren't made right up until the end and continue to be made. There's obviously a huge panic about the fact that he just won an election, both in the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, despite breaking so many of the rules that they had assumed were unbreakable, beginning with the fact that he's an unapologetic critic of Israel. He promised during the campaign multiple times to arrest Benjamin Netanyahu if he came to New York. To say that that position had always been unthinkable for somebody who wanted to win a city race in New York City is to wildly underestimate the case. And this is all part and parcel of so many other things that we've been over so many times, showing the unraveling of not just support for Israel, but the entire propagandistic understanding that has been fed to Americans about foreign policy and what our role in the world should be, that it's just fueling the panic even more. But when things are driven by panic, they become less effective because they're not based in rationality, they're just based in this frantic emotion.

END

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