United States | Mayors of America, unite!

City-hall socialists try to make populism pragmatic

Can leftist mayors be both radicals and realists?



Socialism with a smile Photograph: Getty Images

Oct 22nd 2026|LOS ANGELES AND NEW YORK|5 min read

ON A SWELTERING October Sunday in Los Angeles Nithya Raman, a city-council member running for mayor, laid out her vision for America's second-largest city. Ms Raman (pictured) is affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Yet the dream she described to Angelenos was not of "ending capitalist oligarchy", part of the DSA's platform, but of competence. "City government has made solving problems look impossible for so long, people are starting to believe it is impossible," she lamented, before rhapsodising about homelessness audits and cutting red tape. Her slogan, far from being revolutionary, is simply: "A city that works".

Donald Trump has long derided cities run by Democrats as crime-ridden hellscapes; it would seem a political gift that a growing number are either already led, or will soon be led, by Democratic Socialists, whom the president calls "crazed lunatics and radicals". But even as Republicans try to use socialism to undermine Democrats' appeal, a new crop of pragmatic city socialists insist they will do the opposite.

Zohran Mamdani of New York is the most famous of this group—even Mr Trump has proved unable to resist the magnetic mayor, holding a chummy press conference with him in September that enraged Republican strategists. But along with Mr Mamdani there is Katie Wilson, elected last year to be mayor of Seattle, as well as Janeese Lewis George, the Democratic nominee all but sure to be the mayor of Washington, DC. In LA Ms Raman is in a fierce campaign against the incumbent Democratic mayor, Karen Bass. These four are all millennials either aligned with, or members of, the DSA. All four have also, either of their own volition or pushed by external factors, inched to the centre.

A pragmatic socialist may seem like an oxymoron, but America has a tradition of them. Mr Mamdani and Ms Wilson have spoken admiringly of the "sewer socialists" of 20th-century Milwaukee, who downplayed revolutionary rhetoric while trying to improve sanitation and parks. Today's leftists have rebranded this strategy as "sidewalk socialism" or "pothole politics". Ms Raman, for example, is fixated on repairing broken streetlights, a symbol of LA's dysfunction. Unlike DSA members in Congress, who specialise in bold, inconsequential positions, socialist mayors must contend with their cities' problems.

This does not mean abandoning populism. Mr Mamdani is rolling out a tax on pieds-à-terre—earlier this year he posted a video celebrating the prospect of a new levy on the $238m penthouse of Ken Griffin, a hedge fund boss. But more basic concerns are the priority.

Take public safety. Even progressive voters doubt the logic of abolishing the police, as the DSA has suggested. Ms Lewis George once wanted to cut police funding; now she highlights her career as a prosecutor and promises to "support law enforcement". Mr Mamdani kept his predecessor's competent police commissioner, Jessica Tisch, and continues to stand by her despite her status as a DSA *bête noire.* "He knows that allowing crime and disorder to spiral out of control would take New Yorkers' focus away from his affordability message," explains John Ketcham of the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think-tank.

On housing, the four speak as ardently about slashing red tape as they do about squeezing landlords. Mr Mamdani's efforts have earned the praise of local developers. In LA Ms Raman is an urban planner who embraced the YIMBY movement while serving on the city council. She wants to reform a "mansion tax" she once championed, as it has helped depress development. Her about-face impressed Dave Rand, a land-use lawyer who represents developers. "I don't want an ideologue," he notes. "I want someone who's going to adjust to the facts on the ground."

In Seattle, Ms Wilson campaigned on new taxes on capital gains and vacant properties. But her proposed budget would plug the deficit, cut city jobs and increase police spending. The business lobby cheered. Democratic socialists "may have values that are anti-capitalist", says Joe Nguyen, of the Seattle Metro Chamber, "but they exist in a capitalist regime". Ms Wilson is forthright about her evolution from activist to politician. "I've had to do a lot of work this year building relationships with the business community that I didn't necessarily need to have, or cultivate, as an organiser," she admits. "As the mayor, everyone's problems are my problems."

A less charitable interpretation is that leftist mayoral candidates are better at promising than governing. Mr Mamdani made fast, free buses a centre of his campaign. One year on, he's focusing on the fast. Ms Lewis George's ambitious plans for Washington are running into the reality of the city's dismal finances, flagging economy and limits under federal law.

If these shifts come as a relief to business leaders, they can outrage the base. This month *The Stranger,* a newspaper in Seattle, asked: "Is mayor Katie Wilson still a socialist?" Israel and Palestine have little to do

with municipal governance, but Mr Mamdani's criticisms of the war in Gaza energised progressive voters during his campaign. When he attended a vigil for the Israeli victims of the October 7th attacks, protesters heckled the mayor and called him a "traitor".

Some members of the DSA's chapter in LA reckon Ms Raman is insufficiently anti-Israel, too, and are suspicious of her support for market-rate housing. During a recent meeting at a church in Hollywood, every other DSA candidate on the ballot got louder cheers. A young woman next to *The Economist* placed a blank canvassing sign-up form under her pew. "I'm not interested in campaigning for Democrats," she explained. A century ago Milwaukee's sewer socialists were derided by other leftists for their "bourgeois" worries. But the concerns were real. And those other leftists remained on the fringe.■

Stay on top of American politics with The US in brief, our daily newsletter with fast analysis of the most important political news, and Checks and Balance, a weekly note that examines the state of American democracy and the issues that matter to voters.