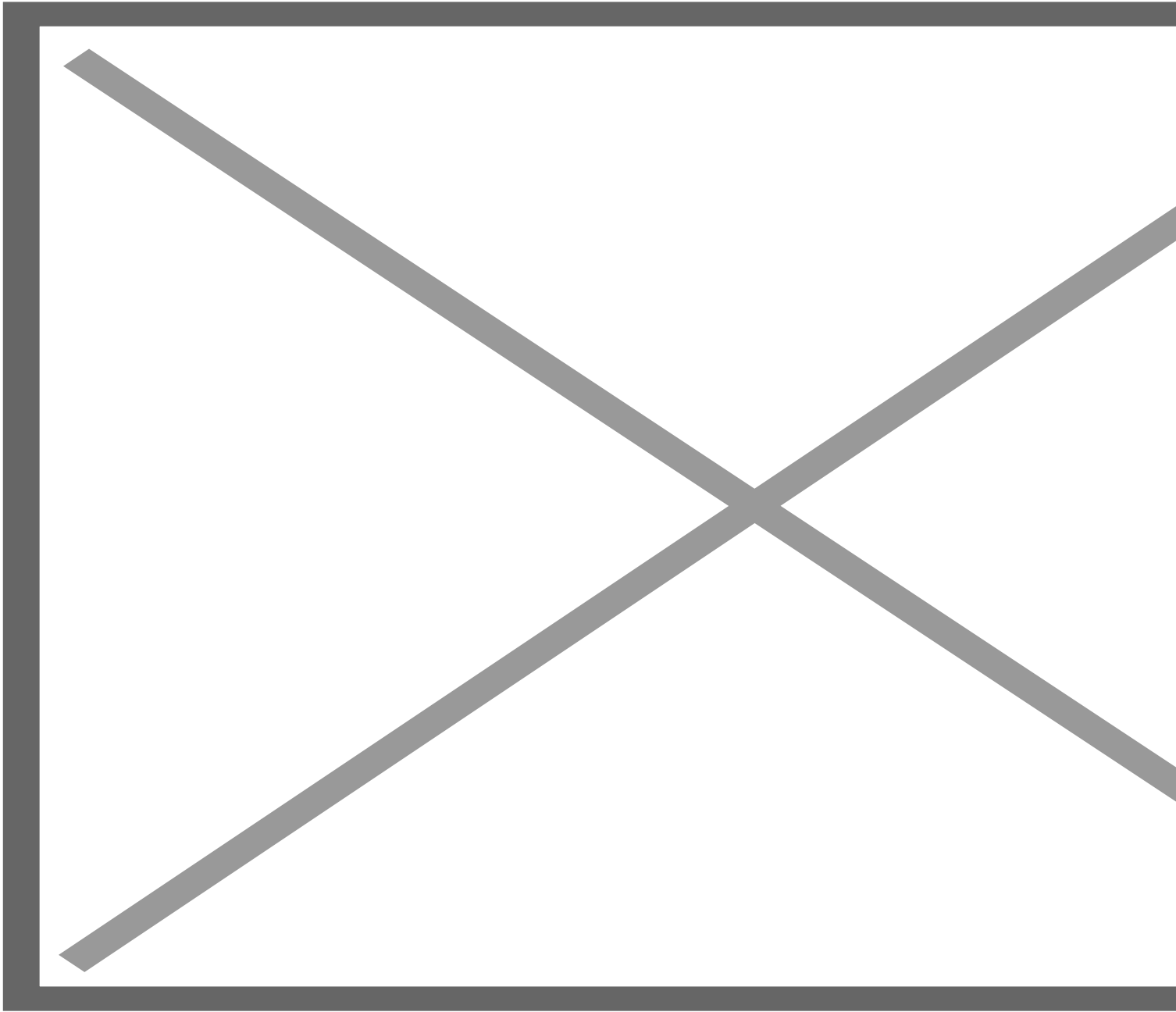


New York's Muslim mayor

The spotlight on Zohran Mamdani's campaign also illuminated a pervasive fear of the other in our political discourse.

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New York City mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani speaking in New York in 2024 (Source images: Bingjiefu He / Creative Commons and Getty)

Next month, New York City will have a new mayor, and along with being the first Democratic Socialist to hold the office, he'll be the first Muslim. Zohran Mamdani won the support of a wide swath of voters, and his electoral victory was decisive. But the spotlight on his campaign also illuminated a troubling wave of Islamophobia in our public discourse.

In 2017, the first year of the first Trump administration, 48 percent of Muslim adults said they had personally experienced discrimination from their fellow Americans—up from 43 percent just six years before, according to the Pew Research Center. Mamdani's mayoral race was haunted by anti-Muslim rhetoric, fueled by the politics of Christian nationalism and by conservative media coverage that often perpetuates harmful stereotypes. We may have believed at one point that Islamophobia and xenophobia had quieted in the years since 9/11. But it's clear today that the unbridled bigotry now seeding our political landscape has provided fertile ground for fear of the other to grow tall.

We can't underestimate the media's role in this—or the ways our consumption of media provokes our fears. Nor should we accept the normalization of harmful language that stokes further fear and division as a political strategy to scapegoat and vilify Muslims. The Center for the Study of Organized Hate analyzed rhetoric on X over the course of Mamdani's campaign. Toward the end of the race, posts branding him a terrorist (among other smears) increased by 450 percent.

Taking responsibility for the information we allow to shape our stories about others is more important than ever. Learning more about Islam would be a good place to start. Pew reports that more than half of Americans (52 percent) say they know little to nothing about Islam; a similar number (53 percent) say they don't personally know anyone who is Muslim. It's no wonder that, according to Pew, many Americans have negative views of Muslims and Islam.

New York is the most populous city in the United States and home to a wide variety of identities, faiths, and political persuasions. This is due in large part to its history as a city of welcome for immigrants and those fleeing persecution. Religious liberty was a bipartisan value woven into the fabric of the city and the nation. Today, those in power in Washington seem to define religious liberty as applying only to themselves and their supporters, and they are using every platform available to promote this idea.

It is fair to raise questions about the particulars of Mamdani's policy initiatives or approach to governance. But we cannot allow negative tropes about his Muslim heritage to seep into our civic discourse. The point is not to delegitimize the fears many New Yorkers have about his political ascendance; it's to embrace the deep American tradition of finding commonality along lines of difference. Nine years after 9/11, the century editorialized about Islamophobia and US Muslim identity. "*E pluribus unum*—out of many, one—is our nation's motto," we wrote. "The republic is stronger when the *pluribus* is respected as well as the *unum*."

One place we can see this commonality amid difference is in Mamdani's focus on affordability and quality of life for working-class people. It reflects something close to the heart of not just Islam but Christianity and other faiths as well: care for the most vulnerable among us.