

From One Percent to Victory: A Study on Social Media Marketing in Zohran's Mayoral Campaign

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Abstract— This study explores the role of social media marketing in the surprising or unexpected win of young New York city mayor elect Zohran Mamdani. In the beginning which seemed impossible to achieve with less than 2 percent polling support, Zohran's strategy of using social media campaign and engagements to become more visible in New York which eventually led to getting him attention all over the globe. Through a qualitative study supported by quantitative analysis of social media engagement and public interest trends. This paper examines marketing principles audience segmentation and community driven messaging applied in a political setting. This research focuses on the effects of social media engagement and trends which also leads to a positive volunteer turnout between digital marketing actions and campaign momentum.

Key words: voter mobilization, digital engagement, political campaigning.

1. INTRODUCTION

All In 2024, when New York city politics were dominated by traditional politics and old school political leaders, a young and lesser known public servant named Zohran Kwame Mamdani launched his campaign for mayor's position and many dismissed his campaign with having zero percent chance of winning. Born in Kampala, Uganda to a South Asian Muslim father Mahmood Mamdani, a respected academic and scholar of African politics and postcolonial studies and mother Mira Nair, the internationally renowned Indian filmmaker known for works such as "Salaam Bombay!" and "The Namesake". Zohran from an early age was raised in an environment of global storytelling, narratives centered around migration and community centered activism. His personality was shaped through local activism and youth-led movements.

By 2020, he was elected to the New York State Assembly representing Astoria, where he gained visibility for standing up for progressive issues such as affordable housing, immigrant rights, police accountability and economic issues. However, despite his success in the legislation, Mamdani remained unknown to the major part of New York City electorate. He did not have national recognition, or historic vote share which is typically required to run a citywide campaign.

In 2024, when he announced his mayoral campaign early polling placed him at just 1 percent and his virtual presence was minimal no viral content and very limited attention. But what unfolded between 2024 and 2025 would become one of the most unexpected political rises in modern urban history.

Mamdani was having a hard time challenging large political powers with their established political structures, Zohran choose to work on his social media and digital presence as their primary source of visibility and voter engagement. Instead of competing with traditional media narrative, the campaign chooses a digital first approach.

By mid-2025, Mamdani's social media presence had transformed from having minimal presence to one of the fastest-growing political accounts in the United States, crossing 10.9 million Instagram followers after election week. His online persona being approachable, humorous and culturally aware resonated with young voters, first time voters and immigrant communities.

What began as a campaign with 1 percentage support evolved into a city-wide movement, and Mamdani winning the 2025 New York City mayoral election, becoming the city's first Muslim and first South Asian mayor. His victory was just not any ordinary political outcome, but a revolution in digital space one that showed how social media marketing and narrative framing can reshape political legitimacy in the modern era.

This paper analyses that transformation.

Through analysis of polling trajectories, digital engagement metrics, and campaign communication strategies the study demonstrates how Mamdani's social media-led political marketing played a crucial role in creating a positive political wave, and ultimately converting online momentum into real electoral success.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Political Marketing and the digital-first Campaign

Political Marketing applies marketing ideas such as branding, segmentation and relationship building to electoral politics. In this digital era, campaigns rely on social media because it reduces dependency on traditional media and they can control narrative how they want and allow candidates to directly communicate with voters. A recent literature review on political social media marketing concludes that political candidates use platform-based strategies (content design, engagement loops) to influence voters and build support, and that this trend will continue to grow as social media becomes central to campaign communication.

This change could also be seen through the concept of hybrid media system which argues that political parties now depends on how effectively candidates integrate “old media” and “new media” logics. Candidates who successfully mix the two together traditional coverage with viral digital visibility can reshape public attention faster than those using only conventional media strategies.

2.2 Platform architecture and how it shapes political communication

Social media platforms are not neutral, each platform’s structure shapes how political messages spread. Bossetta’s work on the “digital architecture of social media” shows that platform like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter (now X) reward different types of campaigning behaviours because their features (feeds, hashtags, sharing) influence what content performs well. Similarly, research on election campaigning demonstrates that candidates adapt messaging styles to fit platform affordances and audience expectations, making campaign success partly dependent on choosing and optimizing the right platforms.

2.3 Authenticity, “outsider” positioning, and trust on social media

A repeated finding in political communication research is that social media often increases and creates perceptions of candidate ‘authenticity. Enli’s study of the 2016 U.S. election describes Twitter as an arena where politicians can present themselves “authentic outsiders,” even when campaigns are strategically managed, because platform norms reward informal tone, spontaneity, and personal voice. Related work on trust finds that audiences frequently perceive politicians as more honest or authentic in social media contexts compared to more traditional formats like talk shows or scripted news interviews.

2.4 Social Media and political participation

A major topic of discussion in political communication is whether social media engagement translates into meaningful participation or just remains as an expression nothing substantial. Boulianne’s highly cited meta-analysis across dozens of studies finds a positive relationship between social media use and political participation, suggesting online engagement can support participation rather than replace it.

Vaccari and Valenzuela further examine how political expression online relates to political action, arguing that lower-threshold engagement on social media (likes, shares, discussion) is often associated with higher-threshold participation rather than distracting from it. This supports the “digital-to-offline mobilization” argument: campaigns can convert digital enthusiasm into real-world volunteering, canvassing, and turnout

2.5 The underdog effect and the marketing of disadvantage

Marketing research on the underdog effect shows that audiences often respond positively to narratives of disadvantage combined with determination. The “underdog brand biography” framework argues that consumers identify with underdog stories and reward them with stronger support.

This plays a major role for campaigns starting with low polling, underdog positioning can become part of the brand story “a small campaign taking on a big system” which can motivate supporters to share content, donate, and volunteer.

2.6 Community-driven content, “fandom,” and influencer-style political marketing

Recent campaign reporting suggests political campaigns increasingly behave like cultural movements, where supporters create and remix content similar to online fandom communities.

Mamdani’s campaign argues that online fandom practices (creative remixes, fan-style promotion) can produce momentum by making participation feel social and identity-based, not only ideological. Academic research also points toward the growing importance of influencer-style communication in politics, indicating that creator networks and influencer collaborations are becoming a meaningful campaign tool.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative case study research design supported by descriptive quantitative analysis. The case study approach is appropriate because the research focuses on an in-depth analysis of a single political campaign Zohran Mamdani’s mayoral campaign to understand how social media marketing contributed to its success. Case study research allows detailed analysis of real-world events and is commonly used in political communication and marketing research.

3.2 Nature of the Study

The study is analytical and exploratory in nature. It seeks to explore the relationship between social media presence and political success rather than establish direct causality. The research analyses observable trends in polling data, social media growth, and campaign communication patterns to understand how digital marketing strategies influenced public perception and voter engagement.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

This research is based entirely on secondary data, collected from publicly available and credible sources. No primary data such as surveys or interviews were conducted.

The data sources include:

- Polling data from publicly reported early-stage and late-stage election surveys to track changes in voter support.
- Social media analytics, particularly Instagram follower counts and growth trends, collected from publicly visible platform data and analytics tools.
- Media reports and news articles that documented the campaign's digital strategy, public reception, and political momentum.
- Academic literature on political marketing, social media campaigning, authenticity, and voter mobilization, used to build the theoretical framework.

3.4 Variables considered

For the purpose of analysis, the following variables were considered:

- Independent Variable- Social media marketing efforts, including frequency of posts, follower growth, engagement visibility, and digital storytelling strategies.
- Dependent Variable- Political support and campaign success, measured through polling trends, public visibility, and final electoral outcome.

3.5 Methods of analysis

The collected data were analysed using the following methods:

- Trend Analysis: Polling data and social media follower growth were analysed to identify patterns and changes over time.
- Content and Narrative analysis: Campaign's message and media coverage were examined to understand the tone, themes, and storytelling techniques used in digital communication.
- Comparative analysis: Early campaign stages (low visibility and 1 percentage support) were compared with later stages (high digital presence and increased support) to observe the impact of social media growth.

3.6 Scope of Study

The scope of study is limited to:

- Zohran Mamdani's mayoral campaign period from 2024 to 2025
- Analysis of social media platforms, with primary focus on Instagram
- Publicly available data and documented campaign activities the study does not examine internal campaign data or voter-level behavioral data.

3.7 Limitations of the Study

This study has certain limitations:

- The research lies on secondary data, which may not capture internal campaign strategies.
- Social media growth is correlated with political success but does not prove direct causation.
- The analysis focuses on a single case, which may limit generalization to all political campaigns. Despite these limitations, the methodology is appropriate for understanding the role of social media marketing in a modern political campaign.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Since the study uses only publicly available data and does not involve human participants, surveys, or interviews, there are no ethical risks related to privacy or consent. All sources used are properly cited to maintain academic integrity.

4. Analysis and Findings

This section analyses the relationship between Zohran Mamdani's social media growth and his political rise by integrating descriptive quantitative evidence with qualitative interpretation. Publicly available polling data, social media analytics, and media reporting are examined to understand how digital visibility evolved during the campaign period.

4.1 Initial Polling Position and Political Standing

At the start of mayor campaign in 2024, Zohran Mamdani was positioned as someone destined to lose the election Early Public Polling had placed his support at approximately 1 percentage, considering limited citywide recognition and low voter awareness. At this stage Mamdani didn't had enough institutional backing, donor networks, and traditional media exposure typically associated with competitive mayoral candidates.

Change in Political Support: Polling to Election Outcome

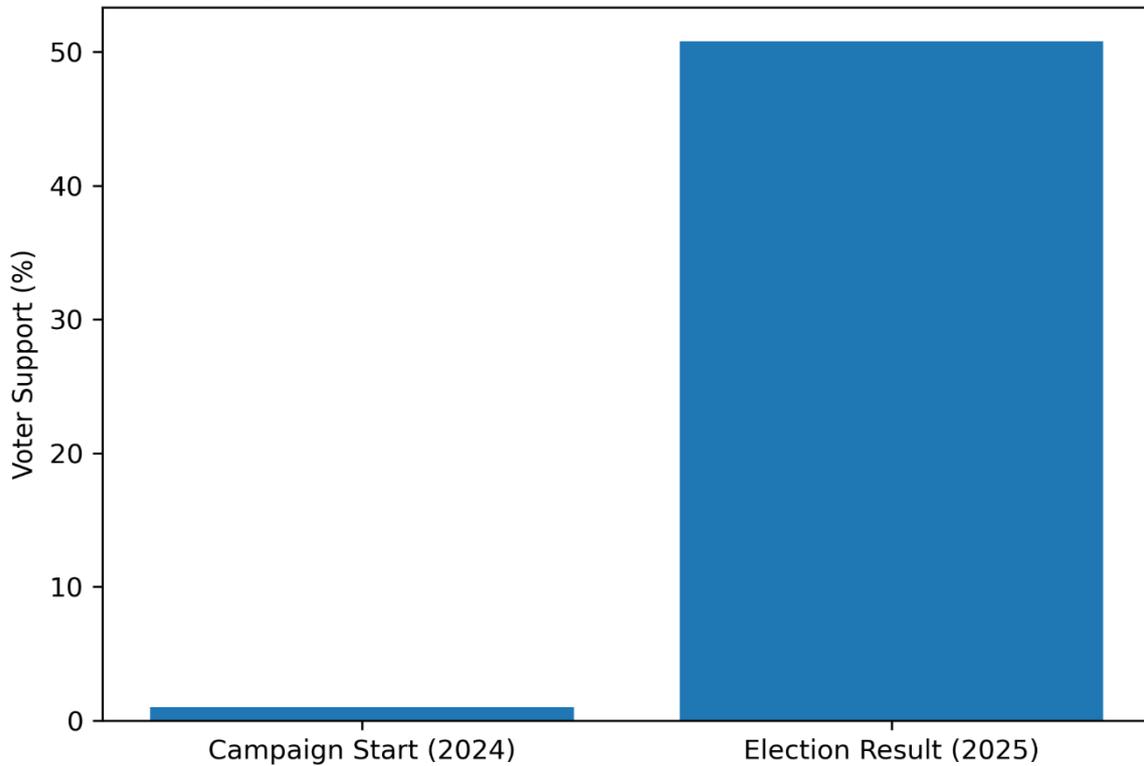


Fig.1

This low initial polling position highlights that the early challenge faced by the campaign was primarily related to visibility rather than ideological positioning or policy experience. Such conditions often prevent candidates from gaining traction through conventional campaign strategies alone. Figure 1 visually illustrates the contrast between Mamdani’s early polling position and his final election outcome, highlighting the scale of change in political support over the campaign period.

4.2 Growth of Social Media Presence

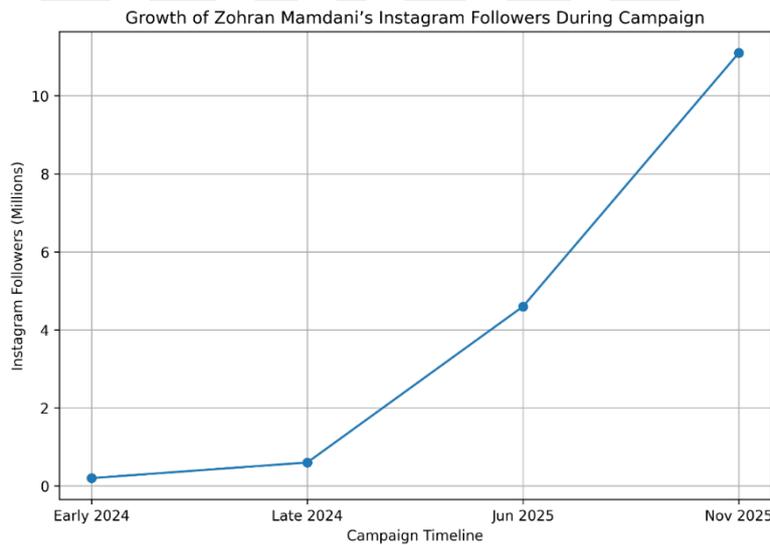


Fig. 2

A significant transformation in the campaign can be observed through Mamdani’s Instagram growth trajectory. As shown in Figure 2, his follower base increased steadily across the campaign timeline, with particularly sharp growth during 2025. The chart demonstrates a transition from relatively modest digital reach in early stages to mass visibility by the election period.

The continuous upward trend suggest that social media became a central platform for expanding campaign reach, use of regional language content to influence the immigrants, getting celebrity endorsements his campaign looked approachable. The timing of this growth aligns closely with intensified campaign activity, increased posting frequency, and heightened public attention.

Figure 2 presents a clear visual representation of this digital expansion, showing how social media visibility evolved alongside the campaign.

4.3 Relationship Between Digital Visibility and Political Support

When examined together, Figures 1 and 2 reveal a parallel pattern between increasing social media visibility and rising political support. While this study does not claim direct causation, the temporal alignment between digital growth and improved electoral standing suggests a strong association between the two.

As Mamdani's online presence expanded, public awareness and engagement also increased. Which did lead to having him greater recognition among undecided and young voters. Social media platforms provided a space where campaign messages could be shared rapidly, allowing supporters to amplify content organically. This finding is consistent with existing political communication research that highlights the role of social media in lowering entry barriers for underdog candidates and accelerating visibility through network effects

4.4 Digital Campaign Strategy and Content Activity

Beyond follower growth, the campaign's digital strategy emphasized consistency and intensity of content output. Public analytics indicate a notable increase in posting frequency during the active campaign period, reflecting a deliberate effort to maintain algorithmic visibility and audience engagement.

The use of short-form content, direct messaging, and culturally resonant content helped present Mamdani as accessible and relatable. This approach reduced the perceived distance between the candidate and voters, strengthening audience connection and encouraging engagement through likes, comments, and shares.

4.5 Interpretation in Light of Political Commentary

Political analyst and commentators have emphasized that Mamdani's success cannot be understood solely through traditional campaign metrics. Commentary in major U.S. media outlets has noted that his campaign demonstrated how digital-first political communication and grassroots storytelling can reshape electoral dynamics, particularly in large urban elections where younger and digitally active voters play a significant role. Rather than focusing and being dependent on elite endorsements or mass television advertising, the campaign leveraged social media as a primary channel for narrative building and mobilization. This aligns with broader observations, by political communication scholars that modern campaigns increasingly operate within a hybrid media environment, where online visibility can translate into offline political momentum.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the role of social media marketing in Zohran Mamdani's mayoral campaign, focusing on how digital visibility evolved alongside political support. Beginning with minimal recognition and approximately one percent polling support, Mamdani's campaign represented a clear underdog position within New York City politics. Over the entire course of campaign, a significant rise in social media presence particularly on Instagram was observed, aligned with increased public attention and campaign momentum.

The descriptive quantitative analysis highlighted a steady continuous rise in social media followers, engagement levels, and content activity during key phases of the campaign. These digital trends occurred in accordance with steady improvement in Mamdani's Political Standing, suggesting that social media functioned as an important platform for increasing visibility and connecting with a wider audience.

The findings also suggest that social media marketing allowed the campaign to bypass traditional gatekeeping mechanisms of political communication. Through consistent content creation, narrative-driven messaging, and direct engagement with voters, the campaign was able to cultivate an image of accessibility and authenticity. This approach appears particularly relevant in large urban elections, where younger and digitally active voters play a significant role in shaping political discourse.

Overall, the case of Zohran Mamdani demonstrates how social media marketing can support political campaigns by enhancing reach, engagement, and narrative control. For future candidates, especially those with limited resources or initial visibility, digital platforms offer an effective complementary tool to traditional campaign strategies. Future research may build on this study by examining multiple campaigns or incorporating primary data to further explore the relationship between digital engagement and electoral outcomes

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