



KENNESAW STATE
UNIVERSITY

COLES COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
*Bagwell Center for the Study of Markets
and Economic Opportunity*

COMMENTARY

Cuomo Says What!?

By Timothy Mathews

July 2025

The 2025 New York City Mayoral Election has attracted more national attention than anticipated. This is in large part because the winner of the June 24 Democratic Primary was Zohran Mamdani. Mamdani, who has served in the New York State Assembly since 2021, is a member of the Democratic Socialists of America. His policy positions are so far left of center – for example, fare-free city buses, city owned grocery stores, stricter price controls on rental housing, a \$30 minimum wage – that he has been criticized by numerous Democrats. For example, Andrew Cuomo (former New York Governor) and Eric Adams (current Mayor of New York City) have both said that many of his proposals for the city are too extreme. Josh Shapiro (current Governor of Pennsylvania) and Rahm Emmanuel (former member of the U.S. House and former Mayor of Chicago) have strongly criticized Mamdani’s anti-Israel positions and statements. Leading New York Democrats Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries have not yet endorsed Mamdani for Mayor in the upcoming general election.

Mamdani emerged victorious in the recent Democratic Primary from a field of 11 candidates. The Democratic Primary used a type of Ranked Choice Voting, in which voters are allowed to express ordinal preference over their five most preferred candidates. If a candidate were ranked first by over 50% of voters on all ballots, that candidate would be declared the winner. However, if no candidate receives such support across all ballots, then the candidates with the lowest vote totals are eliminated sequentially and vote totals are recalculated over only those candidates remaining on the ballot.¹ This process is repeated until a single candidate is ranked first among those still under consideration by more than 50% of the voters.

In the first round of tabulating votes, Mamdani got 43.8% support, Cuomo got 36.1% support, and all other candidates combined got 20.1% support (Brad Lander was in third place with 11.3% support). After eliminating “write-in votes” and then all other candidates below Cuomo (since their combined support would not eclipse that of Cuomo – see footnote 1), Mamdani defeated Cuomo by a tally of 56.4% to 43.6% and was declared the winner.

Looking ahead to the general election on November 4, Mamdani is the Democratic nominee. Curtis Sliwa (longtime political activist, radio talk show host, and founder of the Guardian Angels) is the Republican nominee. Additionally, incumbent Mayor Eric Adams, Democratic Primary runner-up Andrew Cuomo, and Jim Walden have declared that they will run as independent candidates, setting up a five-candidate race.

In contrast to the Democratic Primary, the general election does not use Ranked Choice Voting. Rather, the winner will simply be whichever candidate in this crowded field gets the most votes (i.e., plurality rule). Under such voting rules, it is easy to see how “vote splitting” could result in a candidate being elected who would not be able to defeat any of the other candidates head-to-head. For a very simple example, suppose there are only five types of voters in New York City, with ordinal preferences over these five candidates as summarized in Table 1. In a five-way race with plurality rule, Mamdani gets 40% of the vote and wins (over second place finisher Sliwa with 25% of the vote). However, in this contrived example, Mamdani is ranked last by all voters who do not have him ranked first. Therefore, in any head-to-head vote between Mamdani and any of the other four candidates, Mamdani would lose 60% to 40%.

¹ In many instances when Ranked Choice Voting is used, only one candidate (the one with the fewest votes) is eliminated in each round. However, under the specific rules used in the NYC primary, multiple candidates can be eliminated in a single round if the sum-total of their votes is less than the next highest candidate. This different procedural rule does not alter the eventual outcome of the process.

Table 1 – Example to Illustrate “Vote Splitting”

Voter Type	% of Electorate	1 st Choice	2 nd Choice	3 rd Choice	4 th Choice	5 th Choice
Type <i>i</i>	40%	Mamdani	Adams	Cuomo	Walden	Sliwa
Type <i>ii</i>	5%	Walden	Cuomo	Adams	Sliwa	Mamdani
Type <i>iii</i>	10%	Adams	Cuomo	Sliwa	Walden	Mamdani
Type <i>iv</i>	20%	Cuomo	Adams	Sliwa	Walden	Mamdani
Type <i>v</i>	25%	Sliwa	Walden	Cuomo	Adams	Mamdani

To prevent such vote splitting resulting in a candidate that is ranked last by a large swath of the electorate emerging victorious under plurality rule, Andrew Cuomo has proposed that whichever candidates are not polling in the “Top 2” by September should drop out of the race, to coalesce support around one single “non-Mamdani candidate.”²

However, the way to potentially defeat Mamdani might not be as straightforward as Cuomo says. Even if there were only three options, to defeat a polarizing candidate (i.e., a plurality winner who is in some sense also the “most unliked candidate”) it might be necessary to have the “second place option” drop out of the field. Moreover, a call to have all but the “Top 2” candidates drop out before the general election could very well backfire against Cuomo, forcing him to exit the race when he would be the one candidate who could defeat Mamdani. A simple example serves to illustrate this point.

Consider a vote over three candidates, generically denoted *S*, *D*, and *R* (perhaps for candidates that could best be described as Socialist, Democrat, and Republican). Suppose that voters have ordinal preferences as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 –Example to Illustrate the Potential Folly of Having Only “Top 2” Stay in the Race

Voter Type	% of Electorate	1 st Choice	2 nd Choice	3 rd Choice
Type <i>i</i>	19%	<i>S</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>R</i>
Type <i>ii</i>	18%	<i>S</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>D</i>
Type <i>iii</i>	14%	<i>D</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>R</i>
Type <i>iv</i>	16%	<i>D</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>S</i>
Type <i>v</i>	10%	<i>R</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>D</i>
Type <i>vi</i>	23%	<i>R</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>S</i>

Assume that all voters vote and vote truthfully (i.e., in-line with their actual preferences, given the candidates on the ballot). First recognize that in a three-way race/poll: *S* would get 37% support (from Voter Types *i* and *ii*), *R* would get 33% support (from Voter Types *v* and *vi*), and *D* would get 30% support (from Voter Types *iii* and *iv*). Thus, *S* would be the plurality winner in a three-way race.

However, if voters were instead asked which candidate is their least favorite, *S* would again emerge as the plurality answer to this question: 39% have *S* ranked last (Voter Types *iv* and *vi*),

² See the discussion starting around 4:30 into the July 16, 2025 video interview with Andrew Cuomo [here](#). Eric Adams and Curtis Sliwa have both rejected this proposal (Jim Walden has agreed).

33% have *R* ranked last (Voter Types *i* and *iii*), and 28% have *D* ranked last (Voter Types *ii* and *v*). Note that this plurality consensus of “never *S*” is the majority view of supporters of each of the other two candidates: of the 30% of the electorate that has *D* ranked first, 53.3% prefer *R* over *S*, and of the 33% of the electorate that has *R* ranked first, 69.7% prefer *D* over *S*.³ So, in this example, both a majority of *D* supporters and a majority of *R* supporters rank *S* last. These observations would seem to provide a compelling rationale for thinking that, for voters with these preferences, the “social choice” from plurality rule (i.e., *S* getting elected) is not ideal.⁴

What if candidates followed Cuomo’s proposal? That is, what if the third-place candidate dropped out of the race, so that the opposition to this “disliked plurality winner” could rally support around only one alternative? An astute reader might recognize that this would essentially mimic Ranked Choice Voting and therefore might be expected to circumvent the undesired outcome.

Given the levels of “first place support,” candidate *D* would drop out under what Cuomo says, resulting in a head-to-head election between *R* and *S*. With only *R* and *S* on the ballot, Type *iii* voters vote for *S* and Type *iv* voters vote for *R*. The outcome of this head-to-head race is a victory for *S* by a tally of 51% to 49%.

But what if *R* were to bow out ahead of the general election, setting up a head-to-head vote over just *D* and *S*? With only *D* and *S* on the ballot, Type *v* voters vote for *S* and Type *vi* voters vote for *D*. The outcome of this head-to-head race is a victory for *D* by a tally of 53% to 47%.

Therefore, given the voter preferences in this example, the way to avoid the outcome of vote splitting throwing the election to the significantly disliked candidate *S* is not by having the candidate polling last in the three-way race drop out, but rather by having the candidate polling second in the three-way race drop out.

In the New York City Mayoral race, Sliwa is an outlier by having the most conservative policy positions. Thus, with a crowded field of multiple candidates, he is likely to suffer the least from vote splitting. While voters in New York City with such conservative views are clearly a minority, with enough left-leaning candidates splitting the left-leaning vote, Sliwa could very well be polling in second place come September. In fact, a recent HarrisX poll shows that in a four-way race, Mamdani has 26% support, Cuomo has 23% support, Sliwa has 22% support, and Adams has 13% support.⁵ While not currently in second place, the difference between the top three candidates in this four-way race is within the margin of error of the poll. The candidates are currently close enough to each other, that by September Sliwa could very well be ahead of Cuomo. If this were to occur, then, according to Cuomo’s own proposal all candidates besides Mamdani and Sliwa should drop out. As the contrived example above illustrates, this might not be the most effective way to prevent Mamdani from winning the election and moving-in to Gracie Mansion.^{6,7}

³ These values are coming from $16 \div (14+16) \approx 53.3\%$ and $23 \div (10+23) \approx 69.7\%$.

⁴ The accepted thinking by mainstream academics who study these issues is that there is no best election mechanism. This position is informed by a famous result from Social Choice Theory known as Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem.

⁵ See the full poll results [here](#).

⁶ In the example, replace *S* with Mamdani, *D* with Cuomo, and *R* with Sliwa.

⁷ According to the [same HarrisX poll](#), in a head-to-head matchup between Cuomo and Mamdani, Cuomo has a 15-point advantage, 50% to 35%.