

## DISCURSIVELY CONSTITUTING DEMOCRATIC POWER: A SOCIO-COGNITIVE CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ZOHRAN MAMDANI'S VICTORY SPEECH

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### Abstract

*This research examines how political authority, legitimacy, and collective identity are discursively constructed during moments of democratic transition by analyzing Zohran Mamdani's victory speech following his electoral success in New York City. Rather than treating electoral victory as a procedural outcome, the research highlights the role of victory speeches in transforming electoral success into morally justified and collectively owned political power. The research aims to explore how Mamdani's discourse reframes political authority as emerging from shared working-class experience, collective struggle, and counter-hegemonic ideology. The research adopts a qualitative approach, employing textual analysis within a Critical Discourse Analysis framework grounded in Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory. Mamdani's victory speech serves as the data and is analyzed to identify ideological meanings, group representations, mental models, and argumentative strategies that legitimize political authority. The findings show that the speech constructs "the people" as a legitimate political subject through representations of embodied labor, shared hardship, and collective agency. Ideological polarization, structured through van Dijk's Ideological Square, contrasts an inclusive working-class in-group with elite political and economic out-groups. Narrative exemplars and affective metaphors function as mental models that translate ideology into lived experience, while argumentation frames governance as an ethical necessity. The research underscores the importance of victory speeches as sites where democratic power is discursively constituted and normalized. By applying a socio-cognitive CDA to post-electoral discourse, the research contributes to political discourse studies and offers insights for future research on ideological legitimization and democratic participation.*

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Political Discourse. Victory Speech, Ideology, Socio-Cognitive Approach, Collective Identity

### 1. Introduction

Political discourse is widely recognized as a central mechanism through which social realities, power relations, and collective identities are constructed and contested. Discourse analysts have consistently emphasized that language does not merely describe political events but actively shapes social meanings, legitimizes authority, and organizes political action (Gee, 2014; Taylor, 2001; Tannen et al., 2015). Political discourse constitutes a form of social practice through which political actors seek to define problems, allocate responsibility, and establish moral frameworks for governance (Fairclough, 1995; van Leeuwen, 2008).

Within democratic systems, political speeches occupy a particularly influential position, as they provide moments in which political authority is discursively enacted and normalized. Scholars of political discourse have shown that speeches are key sites for the construction of ideological meanings, primarily through the representation of social groups, the articulation of values, and the legitimization of power (Chilton, 2004; Fairclough, 1995). Among these genres, victory speeches are especially significant because they mark a transition from

electoral competition to institutional authority, requiring speakers to reinterpret political struggle as a democratic mandate and collective will (Charteris-Black, 2011).

This article aims to examine Zohran Mamdani's victory speech following his electoral success in New York City, focusing on how political authority, legitimacy, and collective identity are discursively constructed at a moment of democratic transition. The speech foregrounds working-class experience, collective struggle, and the redefinition of political power as something reclaimed by "the people," framing political change as the outcome of shared injustice, agency, and hope rather than individual achievement. Aligning with counter-hegemonic political discourse that challenges dominant narratives of power and authority (Wodak, 2009; Charteris-Black, 2011), the research adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective grounded in Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to examine how ideological meanings, group representations, and cognitive structures are mobilized to legitimize political power and reframe democratic participation (van Dijk, 2008).

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Electoral victory is often treated in political analysis as a procedural outcome, obscuring the discursive and cognitive processes through which political authority, legitimacy, and collective identity are constructed at moments of democratic transition. Consequently, how electoral success is transformed into morally justified and collectively owned power remains inadequately understood. This problem is particularly evident in social democratic and counter-hegemonic victories, where authority is claimed through appeals to shared experience, collective struggle, and ideological realignment rather than elite continuity, without focused discourse-analytic attention to victory speeches, progressive political discourse risks being misinterpreted as symbolic rhetoric instead of being recognized as a key mechanism through which democratic power is constituted and normalized.

### 2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship on democratic socialism in the United States underscores the central role of discourse in shaping political ideology, public engagement, and collective identity. Accetti (2025) identifies class, democracy, socialism, and revolution as the core ideas structuring contemporary democratic socialist thought, arguing that these concepts organize ongoing political debates and movements. Within this framework, democratic socialist discourse operates not only as an ideological articulation but also as a mechanism for mobilizing publics around shared material concerns and social identities.

Empirical studies demonstrate that democratic socialist discourse has gained prominence in response to economic inequality and structural fragmentation. Chuanshua and Yangfang (2017) analyzed Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign and revealed that his self-identification as a socialist resonated particularly with younger voters because his rhetoric addressed everyday economic insecurity and systemic injustice. Their findings suggest that democratic socialist discourse is persuasive when ideological claims closely align with lived social realities.

The strategic deployment of language has also been examined in studies of democratic socialist communication practices. Barnes (2020) highlighted the role of social media in promoting democratic socialism, noting the repeated use of class-based terminology, moral appeals, and anti-elite framing to distinguish social democratic actors from mainstream liberal politics. Such repetition reinforces ideological positioning and sustains political visibility.

Identity construction through discourse constitutes another key theme. Cezayirlioğlu (2023) demonstrated that Bernie Sanders' repeated invocation of "the people" functions to construct a collective political subject positioned against corporate and political elites. By emphasizing shared struggles and grievances, this left-populist discourse frames "the people" as a unified

agent of political change, illustrating how identity-based appeals are used to mobilize support for transformative agendas.

Comparable strategies are evident in the rhetoric of other U.S. social democratic figures. Aiello (2022), combining sociolinguistic tools with Critical Discourse Analysis, shows how Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez employs inclusive, explanatory, and metaphorical language to construct political identity and enhance accessibility, particularly for marginalized groups. Such discourse translates progressive values and policy goals into relatable narratives.

More broadly, Critical Discourse Analysis has been widely applied to American political discourse to examine how language shapes ideology, identity, and power. Fairclough (2015) emphasized CDA's capacity to uncover ideological assumptions embedded in political and policy discourse, while studies by Mustafa (2023) and Awawdeh and Al-Abbas (2023) illustrate how linguistic choices in presidential speeches, such as modality, pronouns, and evaluative language, legitimize authority, inspire collective action, and manage crisis narratives. CDA has also been applied to high-stakes political debates; Ahmed (2016–2017), drawing on Fairclough's and van Dijk's frameworks, demonstrates how discursive strategies in the Trump–Clinton debates function to assert power, promote ideology, and persuade voters. Zubair et al. (2025) argued that language functions as symbolic capital through which marginalized groups negotiate power and survival.

Political discourse in the United States has been widely studied, but victory speeches remain overlooked mainly as sites of ideological legitimization. Beyond political discourse, linguistic studies have applied formal analytical frameworks to long-form non-fiction narratives (Zubair et al., 2025a, 2025b). Research on democratic socialism emphasizes mobilization and identity but rarely examines how political authority is discursively constructed during electoral transitions. Moreover, socio-cognitive approaches have seldom been applied to social democratic victory discourse, limiting understanding of how electoral success becomes collectively legitimate political power.

### 3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research design to examine ideological meanings and representations embedded in political discourse. Guided by McKee's (2003) textual analysis as the method of analysis, the analysis treats discourse as a site of socially and culturally situated meaning-making. The victory speech delivered by Zohran Mamdani was selected as the data source and transcribed verbatim to enable close textual examination. The analysis focuses on how language constructs social actors, mobilizes ideology, and frames political authority and legitimacy, allowing for an in-depth understanding of discourse as a mechanism of political meaning and persuasion. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach is the theoretical framework of this research.

#### 3.1 Theoretical Framework

This research adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective grounded in Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to ideology and discourse, which conceptualizes political discourse as a form of social practice mediated by shared group beliefs. Van Dijk (1998) explicitly argues that "the relations between society and discourse are necessarily indirect, and mediated by shared mental representations of social actors as group members" (p. 18). This perspective is particularly suited to the analysis of a Mamdani's victory speech, where ideological meanings are not usually stated explicitly but are embedded in representations of groups, events, and moral evaluations.

Central to this framework is van Dijk's (2006) definition of ideology as social cognition. He (2006) defined ideologies as "the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members" (p. 6) and further explained that ideologies "organize social group attitudes consisting of schematically organized general opinions about relevant social issues" (van Dijk, 1998, p. 8). In the present

research, Mamdani's victory speech is approached as a discursive site where such group-based ideological beliefs are articulated, reinforced, and made socially meaningful.

A key concept guiding the analysis is ideological polarization, which van Dijk (1998) identified as a defining structural feature of ideological discourse. He noted (1998) that ideologies typically "show a polarizing structure between US and THEM" (p. 9). This polarization is not merely rhetorical but reflects underlying cognitive structures that organize group identity and intergroup relations (van Dijk, 1998). Victory speeches, in particular, are moments in which this polarization becomes highly visible, as speakers symbolically affirm the moral legitimacy of the in-group while delegitimizing political opponents or entrenched power structures.

This research operationalizes ideological polarization through van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square, one of his most influential analytical tools. He (1998) formulated the ideological square as a set of discursive strategies that involve: "emphasizing our good things, emphasizing their bad things, de-emphasizing our bad things, and de-emphasizing their good things." (p. 33).

The Ideological Square provides a precise framework for analyzing how Mamdani's victory speech constructs positive representations of his supporters and political movement while negatively representing opposing political actors and systems. Rather than treating such representations as stylistic choices, this framework understands them as ideologically driven strategies rooted in shared group beliefs.

Another core concept employed in this framework is mental models, which explain how ideology becomes discursively actionable. Van Dijk (1998) stated that "these personal cognitions, represented in mental models of concrete events and situations (including communicative situations), in turn control discourse" (p. 10). Mental models allow speakers to translate abstract ideological principles into concrete narratives about specific events. In the context of Mamdani's victory speech, mental models shape how the election outcome is framed as a collective achievement, how political struggle is narrated, and how future governance is envisioned.

The framework further draws on van Dijk's (1998) conception of argumentation as an ideological practice. He (1998) emphasized that ideologies are not neutral systems of belief but are often mobilized in discourse to justify political positions, noting that "ideologies may be used to legitimate or oppose power and dominance" (p. 20). In victory speeches, argumentation functions to legitimize the speaker's authority and to present political goals as morally necessary and socially justified. Therefore, this research examines how argumentative patterns in Mamdani's speech are structured by ideological assumptions embedded in group cognition.

Finally, the framework incorporates van Dijk's (1998) concept of group representation, which is central to political discourse. He argues that "ideologies are the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group" (van Dijk, 1998, p. 8). Through discourse, political actors define who belongs to the in-group, articulate shared values, and construct a collective political identity. In Mamdani's victory speech, this process is especially significant, as the speech symbolically constitutes a political community and reaffirms solidarity among supporters.

#### 4. Data Analysis

This section presents the analysis of the data.

##### 4.1 Ideology as Social Cognition and the Construction of "the People."

From a socio-cognitive perspective, the opening of Mamdani's victory speech performs foundational ideological work by constructing a shared understanding of who "the people" are, what they have experienced historically, and why they are morally entitled to political

power. In van Dijk's (2006) framework, ideology functions as social cognition, defined as "the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members" that organize how social groups perceive themselves, others, and social reality (p. 6). These shared beliefs provide the cognitive basis through which discourse becomes meaningful and persuasive (van Dijk, 1998). The speech does not begin with institutional authority or policy detail; instead, it situates the political moment itself within a morally charged historical frame: "The sun may have set over our city this evening... I can see the dawn of a better day for humanity." This metaphor establishes a collective mental model in which the election is interpreted as a transition from darkness to renewal, encoding the victory as a historical rupture rather than a routine electoral outcome (van Dijk, 1998).

This ideological framing is anchored in a clear definition of the in-group. Mamdani explicitly identifies "the working people of New York" as the central political subject of the speech, positioning them as both historically marginalized and morally authoritative. According to van Dijk (1998), ideologies organize group identity by defining "who we are" and "what we stand for," often in relation to power and inequality. Mamdani's representation of the in-group relies on vivid corporeal imagery, "Fingers bruised from lifting boxes on the warehouse floor, palms calloused from delivery bike handlebars, knuckles scarred with kitchen burns," which grounds political legitimacy in lived, embodied experience. Such descriptions function ideologically by reinforcing shared beliefs about labor, suffering, and entitlement to power.

The statement "these are not hands that have been allowed to hold power" explicitly frames exclusion as structural rather than accidental. In van Dijk's (1998) terms, this constructs a shared belief about injustice that organizes group attitudes toward political institutions and elites. Power is represented as something systematically withheld from the working class, reinforcing an ideological understanding of politics as unequal and exclusionary. However, the speech immediately reconfigures this belief by narrating collective agency: "over the last 12 months, you have dared to reach for something greater." The attribution of courage to the in-group reflects what van Dijk (2006) described as the positive self-representation characteristic of ideological discourse.

This ideological reversal culminates in the declaration, "Tonight, against all odds, we have grasped it. The future is in our hands." The repetition of "hands" is symbolically significant: the same hands once denied power are now represented as actively holding it. From a socio-cognitive perspective, this marks the formation of a new shared mental representation in which the in-group understands itself as empowered and historically consequential (van Dijk, 1998). Ideology here functions to restructure how the group interprets its position within the social order.

Crucially, Mamdani resists framing this transformation as an individual achievement. When referencing his inauguration, "On 1 January, I will be sworn in as the mayor of New York City," he immediately attributes causality to collective action: "And that is because of you." This reflects van Dijk's (1998) argument that ideological discourse often emphasizes collective agency in order to legitimize leadership and authority. Political power is represented as emerging from the group rather than residing inherently in the individual leader.

The construction of "the people" is further expanded through explicit recognition of ethnically and culturally diverse communities. Mamdani thanks "those so often forgotten by the politics of our city," before naming "Yemeni bodega owners and Mexican abuelas... Senegalese taxi drivers and Uzbek nurses... Trinidadian line cooks and Ethiopian aunties." This enumeration functions as what van Dijk (1998) terms group representation, a discursive practice through which ideologies define group membership and social inclusion. The

declaration “this city is your city, and this democracy is yours too” frames democracy as a form of ownership, reinforcing the ideological belief that political power properly belongs to those historically excluded from it.

#### 4.2 Ideological Polarization and the Ideological Square

In van Dijk’s (1998) socio-cognitive approach, ideological discourse is characteristically organized around polarization between in-groups and out-groups, a structure that enables speakers to evaluate social actors in moral terms and to legitimize power relations. Mamdani’s victory speech makes this polarization explicit and systematic, constructing a clear opposition between “the many” and “the few,” and thereby activating what van Dijk (1998) conceptualizes as the Ideological Square.

The out-group is initially introduced in abstract but ideologically loaded terms as “the wealthy and the well-connected,” a formulation that collapses economic power and political influence into a single antagonistic category. According to van Dijk (1998), ideological polarization often begins with categorical distinctions that allow complex power relations to be cognitively simplified into morally evaluable groups. Mamdani attributes to this out-group a defining action: they have told working people “that power does not belong in their hands.” In this formulation, exclusion is not accidental or neutral but discursively enforced by those who already possess power. This aligns with van Dijk’s (1998) observation that ideological discourse typically represents out-groups as agents responsible for inequality and injustice.

The polarization intensifies with the declaration, “My friends, we have toppled a political dynasty.” The term “dynasty” is ideologically significant, as it invokes hereditary power, permanence, and illegitimacy within a democratic context. By framing his opponent in dynastic terms, Mamdani positions the electoral victory as a rupture with entrenched elite rule rather than a mere partisan shift. This corresponds to what van Dijk (1998) identified as negative other-presentation, in which out-groups are associated with domination and the abuse of power.

At the same time, Mamdani carefully manages the degree of personalization within this polarization. His statement, “I wish Andrew Cuomo only the best in private life,” is immediately followed by a decisive discursive closure: “let tonight be the final time I utter his name, as we turn the page on a politics that abandons the many and answers only to the few.” This move shifts the focus from an individual opponent to a broader political system. In terms of the Ideological Square, this allows Mamdani to minimize overt personal hostility while still strongly emphasizing the moral failure of the political order associated with the out-group (van Dijk, 1998).

The phrase “a politics that abandons the many and answers only to the few” crystallizes the ideological opposition at the heart of the speech. The numerical contrast between “many” and “few” functions as a powerful cognitive shorthand, reinforcing what van Dijk (2006) described as the ideological tendency to reduce social complexity to morally charged binaries. The in-group is implicitly associated with democratic legitimacy and moral worth, while the out-group is associated with neglect, self-interest, and exclusion. This contrast is reinforced through repetition and parallelism, as Mamdani declares that New York has delivered “a mandate for change... a mandate for a new kind of politics... a mandate for a city we can afford.” The repetition amplifies positive self-presentation, portraying the in-group as purposeful, unified, and future-oriented.

As the speech progresses, ideological polarization becomes more explicit and confrontational. Mamdani directly names elite manipulation when he states that “the billionaire class has sought to convince those making \$30 an hour that their enemies are those earning \$20 an hour.” This sentence exemplifies what van Dijk (1998) identified as ideological demystification: exposing how dominant groups use discourse to redirect resentment and

maintain power. By revealing this mechanism, Mamdani strengthens in-group cohesion while delegitimizing elite narratives that seek to divide working people against one another.

The personalization of the out-group reaches its peak in Mamdani's direct address to Donald Trump: "So, Donald Trump, since I know you're watching...." Trump functions here not merely as an individual political figure but as a symbolic condensation of oligarchy, corruption, and authoritarianism. The subsequent references to "We will hold bad landlords to account because the Donald Trumps of our city have grown far too comfortable taking advantage of their tenants" further generalize this figure, transforming it into a recurring type of exploitative elite actor. This strategy aligns closely with van Dijk's (1998) description of ideological discourse, which emphasizes "Their bad things" while generalizing negative traits across the out-group.

Throughout this polarization, Mamdani consistently emphasizes positive self-representation of the in-group. Supporters are described as hopeful, resilient, and collectively robust: "you eroded the cynicism that has come to define our politics," and "we chose hope together." Negative aspects of the in-group, such as internal disagreement, electoral uncertainty, or past failures, are notably absent, reflecting what van Dijk (1998) identified as the strategic de-emphasis of "Our bad things" within the Ideological Square.

#### 4.3 Mental Models and the Narrative Legitimation of Political Power

Within van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework, mental models play a crucial role in explaining how ideology becomes discursively actionable. Van Dijk (1998) argued that ideological beliefs do not directly control discourse; rather, they influence discourse through subjective representations of specific events and situations, which he terms mental models. These models allow speakers to translate abstract group ideologies into concrete, emotionally resonant narratives. In Mamdani's victory speech, mental models are systematically constructed through personal stories, affective metaphors, and shared experiences that legitimize political power as both necessary and deserved.

One of the most salient features of the speech is the use of narrative exemplars to anchor ideological claims in lived reality. Mamdani explicitly frames the campaign as "about people like Wesley," whom he describes as "an 1199 organizer... who commutes two hours each way from Pennsylvania because rent is too expensive in this city." This narrative constructs a mental model in which housing unaffordability is not an abstract policy issue but a daily, exhausting reality endured by essential workers. According to van Dijk (1998), such representations shape how audiences cognitively interpret social problems by linking them to familiar human experiences. The injustice of long commutes becomes emblematic of a broader structural failure that demands political redress.

Similarly, the account of "the woman I met on the Bx33 years ago" who states, "I used to love New York, but now it's just where I live," introduces an affective dimension to the mental model of urban inequality. This narrative shifts the focus from material deprivation alone to emotional alienation. In van Dijk's (2006) terms, mental models do not merely represent events; they also encode evaluations and emotions that shape group attitudes. The loss of love for the city becomes a shared symbolic experience that legitimizes the need for political transformation.

The story of Richard, "the taxi driver I went on a 15-day hunger strike with outside of City Hall," further intensifies the moral force of these mental models. Hunger striking is a form of extreme protest that signals desperation and moral urgency. Mamdani's observation that Richard "still has to drive his cab seven days a week" reinforces the idea that sacrifice alone has not been sufficient under the existing political order. The declaration "My brother, we are in City Hall now" marks a decisive cognitive shift: the site of protest is transformed into a

site of power. This narrative constructs a mental model of transition from exclusion to access, reinforcing the legitimacy of the speaker's new authority (van Dijk, 1998).

This cognitive reconfiguration of political experience is made explicit when Mamdani asserts that "no longer would politics be something that is done to us. Now, it is something that we do." From a socio-cognitive perspective, this statement performs a decisive transformation of the group's mental model of politics itself. Politics is no longer represented as an external force imposed upon passive subjects by elites, but as a collective practice enacted by the in-group. In van Dijk's (1998) terms, this shift restructures shared ideological beliefs about agency and participation, redefining the people as active political agents rather than objects of governance. The binary opposition between "done to us" and "we do" simultaneously reinforces ideological polarization while legitimizing the speaker's authority as an extension of collective action rather than individual ambition.

Beyond individual stories, Mamdani extends mental-model construction to the collective through repeated references to volunteers and shared effort. The description of "the more than 100,000 volunteers who built this campaign into an unstoppable force" situates political change within a framework of collective labor. By listing actions such as "every door knocked, every petition signature earned, and every hard-earned conversation," the speech constructs a cognitive representation of democracy as something actively produced rather than passively received. Van Dijk (1998) noted that such representations strengthen group cohesion by aligning ideological beliefs with everyday practices.

Affective metaphors further consolidate these mental models. The repeated invocation of breath, "breathe this moment in," "we have held our breath for longer than we know," and "we are breathing in the air of a city that has been reborn," creates a shared emotional script. In socio-cognitive terms, these metaphors synchronize bodily sensation with political meaning, encouraging listeners to experience the election as collective release and renewal. This emotional alignment enhances the persuasive force of the ideological message by embedding it in shared feeling rather than abstract reasoning (van Dijk, 2006).

Hope is similarly reframed as an active, collective practice rather than a passive emotion. Mamdani asserts that "hope is a decision," one made repeatedly, "volunteer shift after volunteer shift." This framing constructs a mental model in which hope is linked to discipline, endurance, and political agency. The contrastive sequence, "Hope over tyranny. Hope over big money and small ideas. Hope over despair," further organizes evaluative meaning by clearly associating hope with the in-group and oppression with the out-group. Such evaluative structuring is characteristic of ideological mental models, which guide how groups interpret both past struggle and future possibility (van Dijk, 1998).

#### **4.4 Argumentation, Group Representation, and Collective Ownership of Power**

In the final stage of Mamdani's victory speech, ideological work culminates in the argumentative legitimization of authority and the symbolic transfer of power to the collective. In van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework, argumentation is not merely a logical structure but an ideological practice through which political actors justify actions, policies, and power relations (van Dijk, 1998).

Mamdani's argumentation is grounded in necessity and inevitability. The repeated framing of the present moment as "this new age" positions future governance as the only morally acceptable response to historical injustice. When he states that "this will be an age where New Yorkers expect from their leaders a bold vision... rather than a list of excuses for what we are too timid to attempt," timidity itself is ideologically delegitimized. In van Dijk's (1998) terms, such evaluative contrasts function to legitimize one course of action while implicitly discrediting alternatives. Governance is framed not as a matter of preference or ideology, but as an ethical obligation.

Policy proposals are therefore presented as logical extensions of shared values rather than partisan demands. Measures such as “freeze the rents for more than 2 million rent-stabilized tenants, make buses fast and free, and deliver universal childcare” are framed as necessary responses to the lived realities previously constructed through narrative mental models. This linkage exemplifies van Dijk’s (2006) observation that ideological discourse often presents preferred policies as the natural outcome of shared beliefs and collective experience. By grounding policy in moral reasoning and social necessity, Mamdani strengthens the legitimacy of his future authority.

At the same time, Mamdani explicitly redefines the role of the state. Claims such as “there is no problem too large for government to solve, and no concern too small for it to care about” directly challenge dominant neoliberal representations of government as inefficient or intrusive. In van Dijk’s (1998) framework, this constitutes counter-ideological discourse, in which alternative social representations are offered to contest hegemonic beliefs. The state is reimagined as both competent and compassionate, capable of delivering justice without sacrificing effectiveness.

Group representation remains central to this legitimating process. Mamdani explicitly constructs an inclusive political community that encompasses immigrants, religious minorities, and marginalized identities: “whether you are an immigrant, a member of the trans community... or anyone else with their back against the wall.” Such formulations align with van Dijk’s (1998) claim that ideologies define group membership and belonging through discourse. By repeatedly affirming inclusion, “this city is your city, and this democracy is yours too,” the speech constructs political authority as representative of a broad and diverse collective.

The speech also maintains ideological boundaries by identifying forces that threaten this collective. Mamdani denounces “those who traffic in division and hate” and declares, “No more will New York be a city where you can traffic in Islamophobia and win an election.” These statements function as boundary-setting mechanisms, distinguishing legitimate political participation from ideologies deemed incompatible with democratic values. According to van Dijk (1998), such boundary work is essential to ideological discourse, as it delineates who belongs within the moral community and who does not.

The confrontation with Donald Trump represents the most explicit articulation of ideological opposition. Trump is framed as a symbol of oligarchy, corruption, and authoritarianism: “the Donald Trumps of our city.” This personalization serves to condense abstract systems of power into recognizable figures, reinforcing negative other-representation within the Ideological Square. At the same time, Mamdani reframes vulnerability as collective strength: “to get to any of us, you will have to get through all of us.” This statement constructs a shared mental model of solidarity as defense, reinforcing group cohesion in the face of perceived threat (van Dijk, 2006).

Mamdani completes the ideological trajectory of the speech by explicitly transferring ownership of power to the collective. The repeated use of “together” culminates in the declaration: “this power, it’s yours. This city belongs to you.” From a van Dijkian perspective, this represents the ultimate form of positive self-presentation, in which the in-group is portrayed as unified, legitimate, and entitled to govern (van Dijk, 1998). Authority is not centralized in the leader but distributed across the collective, reinforcing the ideological claim that democracy is something “we do,” not something done to us.

#### 4.5 Discussion

The findings of this research extend existing scholarship on social democratic and counter-hegemonic political discourse by demonstrating how electoral victory is discursively transformed into legitimate political authority. Consistent with analyses of Bernie Sanders’

rhetoric ( Chuanshu & Yangfang, 2017; Cezayirlioglu, 2023), Mamdani's victory speech frames political power as collectively reclaimed through shared struggle rather than inherited through elite continuity. This research advances prior research by showing that such discursive strategies are not confined to campaign mobilization but remain central in the post-electoral moment, where authority must be morally justified and democratically normalized. The findings further align with Barnes (2020) and Aiello (2022), who emphasized the role of inclusive language, moral appeals, and identity construction in contemporary social democratic discourse. Mamdani's sustained focus on working-class experiences, immigrant identities, and marginalized communities reflects similar strategies observed in the rhetoric of Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez. However, adopting a socio-cognitive perspective shows how these discursive patterns operate through shared mental models that translate structural inequality into emotionally resonant narratives, thereby strengthening collective identification and political legitimacy.

In line with Fairclough's (2015) argument that political discourse functions to legitimize authority and policy orientations, Mamdani's evaluative framing presents governance as an ethical imperative rather than a technocratic exercise. These findings resonate with CDA-based analyses of presidential discourse (Mustafa, 2023; Awawdeh & Al-Abbas, 2023), which highlight the strategic use of language to inspire unity and justify governance. Yet, Mamdani's discourse is distinct in its explicit rejection of elite dominance and its foregrounding of inclusion as a foundational democratic value.

## 5. Conclusion

This research demonstrated that Zohran Mamdani's victory speech functions as a discursive site in which electoral success is transformed into a collectively legitimate form of political authority. Rather than treating victory as a procedural outcome, the speech constructs political power as reclaimed by "the people" through narratives of working-class experience, shared struggle, and moral entitlement. By foregrounding embodied labor, marginalization, and collective agency, Mamdani discursively redefines democratic legitimacy as grounded in social experience rather than elite continuity.

The findings further showed that ideological polarization is central to this process, as the speech systematically contrasts an inclusive in-group with elite political and economic actors, thereby consolidating a moral distinction between "the many" and "the few." Through narrative exemplars, affective metaphors, and evaluative framing, the speech builds shared mental models that cognitively organize political change as both necessary and deserved. In doing so, political authority is legitimized not through institutional position alone but through collective identification and moral alignment.

By utilizing a socio-cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis to victory discourse, this research contributed to a growing body of research on social democratic rhetoric in the United States while addressing the relative neglect of post-electoral moments in discourse studies. The findings underscored the importance of victory speeches as moments in which democratic power is not merely announced but actively constituted, normalized, and transferred to a collective political subject. Future research may extend this approach through comparative analyses of victory speeches across ideological traditions or by tracing how such discursive constructions evolve once governance begins.

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