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Opinion: What Mamdani's Election Reveals About New York's Civic Capacity

BY NA'ILAH AMARU | DECEMBER 17, 2025



"Policy succeeds or fails in the space between City Hall and neighborhoods. When civic infrastructure is strong, communities know where to get information, can organize around priorities, and maintain trust through complex policy transitions. When it is weak, even good ideas falter."





Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani addressing the media on Election Day. (Shutterstock/Ron Adar)

When New Yorkers elected Zohran Mamdani as mayor in 2025, they did more than choose a political direction. They issued a mandate for structural change on housing, transit, affordability, and safety. Early voting check-ins reached historic levels, according to the [NYC Board of Elections](#), and more than two million ballots were cast in the mayoral election, the highest turnout in at least 50 years. Voters showed that when they see meaningful choices and bold ideas, they engage.

But a political mandate is not enough. The question now is whether New York has the civic infrastructure needed to translate this historic energy into lasting change. Today, the answer is unclear.

Public mood entering the 2025 election was conflicted. On one hand, turnout surged. On the other, confidence in the systems that shape daily life remained low. Only 34 percent of New Yorkers rated overall quality of life as excellent or good, according to the [Citizens Budget Commission's 2025 Resident Survey](#). Meanwhile, the [Five Borough NYC People's Pulse](#) found that

residents feel deeply rooted in their neighborhoods but remain worried about affordability, mental health and safety, and are skeptical that institutions can respond.

This mix of local attachment and institutional doubt reveals a deeper problem. New Yorkers care about their communities. They are showing up. But they do not trust that public systems can keep pace with the scale of their expectations.

Civic infrastructure is the set of systems, relationships, and communication channels that allow residents to understand public decisions, participate in shaping them, and hold institutions accountable. It is not abstract. It is the backbone of democratic practice, and it determines whether big visions can be implemented.

New York's civic infrastructure has two essential layers.

The first is community civic infrastructure. These are the civic intermediaries, tenant associations, youth leadership networks, advocacy coalitions, and trusted messengers that connect policy to everyday life. Yet their funding is inconsistent and often short term. The uneven civic capacity across neighborhoods shows up in voter participation. The NYC Campaign Finance Board's analysis of demographic turnout data, available [here](#), found that voters aged 18 to 29 participated at less than half the rate of older voters, and turnout in lower income districts lagged far behind wealthier ones. These disparities reflect differences in civic networks, not differences in interest.

The second layer is institutional civic infrastructure. This includes public facing information systems, multilingual communication channels, participatory platforms, engagement staff, and the citywide architecture that helps residents follow government action. The Civic Engagement Commission's People's Money participatory budgeting initiative, which engaged more than 100,000 New Yorkers, shows what is possible when an institutional structure supports large scale participation.

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But across agencies, communication remains inconsistent. Public information is scattered. Many residents do not know where to find updates or how to engage between elections. This fragmentation makes government harder to trust and slows policy implementation.

Three trends reveal the city's civic capacity problem:

First, participation gaps persist. High turnout in one election does not automatically become sustained engagement. Without strong civic infrastructure, participation spikes and then drops. That means residents are present at the moment of a mandate but not during the long process of designing and implementing the policies that mandate requires.

Second, trust in institutions is low. Even when people participate, they stay engaged only if they believe government will listen. The CBC's survey shows declining confidence in responsiveness and transparency. The People's Pulse survey reinforces this skepticism. Trust is not a side issue. It is infrastructure. Without it, every step of implementation becomes slower and harder.

Third, civic intermediaries lack stable support. National research is clear. [Brookings](#) [Metro](#) describes civic intermediaries as part of the invisible civic infrastructure needed for inclusive growth, and warns that cities systematically underinvest in them. [The Aspen Institute](#) similarly argues that building civic intermediaries requires long term investment rather than short funding cycles. Together, these trends show a civic ecosystem that is not built to the scale of the city's ambition.

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Consider two recent examples. The Civic Engagement Commission's participatory budgeting process worked because a system existed to support it. By contrast, the city's effort to build

engagement. A Columbia University **analysis** found that the citywide organics capture rate in Fiscal Year 2024 was only 3.7 percent, with food scraps at just 1.2 percent. The Independent Budget Office also found wide disparities in participation across districts, reflecting uneven civic networks and outreach capacity.

These differences show that bold ideas succeed where civic infrastructure is strong and stall where it is thin. To honor the 2025 election's mandate, the administration must treat civic infrastructure as essential public infrastructure.

First, stabilize and scale civic intermediaries. Provide multi-year support for the organizations that translate policy into community action and sustain engagement between election cycles.

Second, modernize public communication and engagement systems. Create a cross-agency civic dashboard with clear progress updates and engagement opportunities. Standardize multilingual communication. Strengthen the role of the Civic Engagement Commission in coordinating engagement across city government.

Third, set citywide standards for civic engagement. All agencies should follow consistent practices for outreach, plain language materials, multilingual access, timely updates, and transparent opportunities for community input.

Voters delivered a historic mandate because they wanted a city willing to think in bold strokes. That mandate produced a vision. Now, New York must build the infrastructure to carry it.

The city has civic assets in its neighborhoods, community organizations, and engaged residents. What it lacks is a civic foundation built to the scale of this political moment. If New York wants the promise of 2025 to become lasting change, civic infrastructure must be treated as essential to the work ahead.

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