

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

New York City stands as one of the most influential metropolises in the world, functioning as a global center of finance, culture, and innovation. Yet beneath this image of prosperity lies a deepening problem of socioeconomic inequality. Recent economic data show that income inequality in New York State rose further in 2024, even as national inequality declined, driven largely by strong wage growth among the highest earners while wages for working- and middle-class households stagnated (Fiscal Policy Institute, 2025). Housing and care costs have followed a similar trajectory: the average cost of childcare for infants and toddlers in family-based care rose by as much as 79 percent between 2019 and 2024, far outpacing wage growth over the same period, while housing affordability continued to worsen for lower-income households (New York City Office of the Comptroller, 2025). For a growing share of the city's working-class and low-income residents, these compounding pressures, such as expensive housing, costly childcare, and stagnant incomes, have made New York increasingly difficult to sustain a livelihood in. These challenges do not exist in isolation; rather, they are interconnected symptoms of a city in which wealth is increasingly concentrated among a narrow elite while the majority struggle to meet basic needs. It is precisely this widening gap between the city's global reputation and the lived reality of its residents that created fertile ground for a new kind of political discourse to emerge.

The new discourse found its clearest expression in the 2025 New York City mayoral election, in which Zohran Kwame Mamdani, a 34-year-old democratic socialist and member of the New York State Assembly, ran a campaign built on affordability. Having begun the race polling at just one percent, Mamdani built his candidacy on a platform of a rent freeze for the city's roughly one million rent-stabilized apartments, free public buses, universal childcare, and higher taxes on the wealthy, proposals framed less as discrete policy items than as a moral claim about who the city is meant to serve (NBC News, 2025). His campaign was

propelled by an unprecedented grassroots field operation of more than 104,000 volunteers, making it the largest mobilization in the city's mayoral history (Democracy Now!, 2025). On November 4, 2025, Mamdani defeated former Governor Andrew Cuomo, who ran as an independent after losing the Democratic primary, and Republican nominee Curtis Sliwa. The victory made him New York City's first Muslim mayor, its first mayor of South Asian descent, and its first mayor born on the African continent. In his victory address, Mamdani framed the result explicitly as a mandate against oligarchy and authoritarianism and directly challenged President Donald Trump, who had endorsed his opponent. The election was widely read as a repudiation of establishment politics and a mandate for progressive, class-based governance in one of the world's most closely watched cities (NBC News, 2025).

However, once in office, the nature of Mamdani's political discourse began to shift. As mayor, he was no longer speaking as a challenger seeking power, but as a leader responsible for exercising it. While his administration made early progress on several fronts in the early 2026, some of his most prominent campaign promises faced significant institutional resistance and proved more difficult to deliver than his campaign rhetoric had suggested (BBC, 2026). This tension between the bold, moralized language of the campaign trail and the more constrained, negotiated language of governance is a well-documented feature of political discourse (Fairclough, 2000).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach to the study of language that examines not only how meaning is constructed in texts, but how language reflects, reproduces, and at times challenges existing power structures and ideological formations (Fairclough, 1995). As Fairclough & Wodak (1997) argue, political language is never ideologically neutral: every choice of word, metaphor, or rhetorical structure reflects and reproduces a particular view of the social world. CDA therefore offers a rigorous theoretical and methodological apparatus for interrogating not only what politicians say, but how they say it and what social work their language performs. Applied to Mamdani's political speeches, this means examining how socioeconomic issues are represented through specific linguistic choices, how different social actors, such as the working class, landlords, and

political elites are positioned within these representations, and how discourse contributes to the construction, negotiation, and legitimation of political authority across the different stages of his political trajectory. Among the frameworks available within CDA, Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model is particularly well suited to the analysis of political speech. The model examines discourse at three interrelated levels: the textual dimension, which addresses the linguistic and rhetorical features of the speech itself; the discursive practice dimension, which concerns how the text is produced, distributed, and received within its specific institutional context; and the social practice dimension, which situates the text within its broader ideological and social conditions (Fairclough, 1995).

The scholarly application of CDA to political speech has produced a substantial and growing body of recent literature that consistently demonstrates the framework's sensitivity to shifts across political contexts. In the American context, Atmawijaya (2024) applied Fairclough's model to Donald Trump's 2024 Super Tuesday campaign speech, identifying a problem–solution rhetorical structure, built through pronoun use and repetition, designed to consolidate voter loyalty. Studies of inaugural discourse have been similarly productive: Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2023) applied Fairclough's model to Joe Biden's 2021 inaugural address and identified intertextuality, metaphor, and strategic indirectness as the dominant persuasive strategies used to foreground unity and democratic legitimacy, while Zhou (2024), working from Halliday's systemic functional grammar within a CDA perspective, found that Biden's inaugural speech relied on patterns of transitivity and modality to construct and consolidate presidential authority.

In the context of comparative campaign discourse, Hamed and Alqurashi (2025) used Fairclough's model to contrast Donald Trump's "Impact Leadership" rhetoric, built on urgency, nationalism, and fear-based appeals, with Kamala Harris's "Visionary Progressivism," built on inclusivity and systemic reform, during the 2024 presidential election. This finding is particularly relevant to the present study, since it demonstrates that ideological positioning measurably shapes political language even within a single national campaign.

Beyond the American context, Hariati and Purwarno (2025) applied a CDA-informed rhetorical framework to Prabowo Subianto's first inauguration speech as

President of Indonesia, finding that his rhetoric balanced ethos and pathos with a heavier reliance on logos to construct a legitimating narrative of national sovereignty, justice, and unity, a pattern directly relevant to how newly inaugurated leaders construct legitimacy in their own inaugural addresses. More broadly, Shamim et al. (2025), in a review synthesizing 45 studies of political speech published between 2000 and 2024, found that repetition, metaphor, presupposition, and pronoun usage are the most consistently identified discursive strategies across political speech corpora worldwide, and confirmed that Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model remains among the most widely applied frameworks in the field.

Closer to the subject of the present study, a small but rapidly growing body of scholarship has begun to examine Mamdani's political discourse directly. Nurfazri et al. (2026) applied Fairclough's framework to Mamdani's victory speech, finding that at the textual level, Mamdani used lexical, modal, and metaphorical choices to delegitimize political elites and normalize demands for structural change; at the discursive level, the speech drew on historical intertextuality to position itself within an ongoing narrative of working-class struggle; and at the social practice level, the discourse functioned as an ideological intervention asserting democratic socialism as a direct response to inequality. Aqdas et al. (2025) examined Mamdani's inaugural address through Van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework, finding that the speech constructed "the people" as a morally legitimate collective and legitimized Mamdani's authority through implicit us-versus-them polarization grounded in shared experience and moral responsibility rather than explicit ideological statement. These studies represent valuable and timely contributions to the emerging literature on Mamdani's discourse, yet each examines a single speech event in isolation, and neither trace how his discourse changes as he moves across the different institutional positions of candidate and officeholder.

This leaves open a more fundamental question that the existing literature, taken as a whole, has not yet addressed: how the representation of socioeconomic issues in Mamdani's discourse evolves as he moves from seeking political authority to exercising it. As Fairclough (2000) notes, the discursive shifts that occur as a political figure moves from candidate to governing official are among the most

ideologically revealing moments in political language, which makes this transition an especially significant gap for the present study to address. Accordingly, this study sets out to trace, through Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model, how the representation of socioeconomic issues in Mamdani's speeches shifts across four phases of his political trajectory (campaign, victory address, inaugural address, and early governance) and what these shifts reveal about the relationship between discourse, power, and ideology.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study investigates the core issues focusing on two specific research questions:

1. How are socioeconomic issues represented in Zohran Mamdani's political speeches across different phases of his political trajectory?
2. What do these patterns of representation across Mamdani's political speeches reveal about the relationship between language, ideology, and power?

1.3 Research Objective

In accordance with the research questions stated above, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To analyze how socioeconomic issues are represented in Zohran Mamdani's political speeches across the different phases of his political trajectory (Campaign, Victory, Inauguration, and Governing).
2. To examine the patterns of representation across Mamdani's political speeches and to interpret what these patterns reveal about the relationship between language, ideology, and power

1.4 Research Significance

This study offers contributions at both the theoretical and practical levels. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a framework for examining the representation of socioeconomic

issues in contemporary political discourse, particularly within the context of democratic socialist urban politics. By applying Fairclough's Model across the different phases of Zohran Mamdani's political trajectory, the study demonstrates how discourse evolves as political actors move from campaigning to governing, and what these patterns of representation reveal about the relationship between language, ideology, and power. Furthermore, this study contributes to the emerging body of scholarship on Mamdani's political discourse to a more comprehensive and methodologically integrated analysis.

Practically, this study is of value to several audiences. For students and scholars of linguistics and discourse studies, it provides a worked example of how CDA can be applied systematically to a clearly bounded corpus of contemporary political texts. For students of political science and communication, it offers critical insight into how rhetorical strategies function differently across different political contexts. More broadly, the study contributes to a critical public literacy around political speech, encouraging readers to look beyond what politicians say.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout the study, the following key terms are defined as they are used in this research:

- a. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) refers to an approach to discourse analysis that examines the relationship between language, power, and ideology, investigating how language use reflects, reproduces, and sometimes challenges existing structures of social inequality and power (Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 2001).
- b. Political Speech refers to a formal spoken address delivered by a political figure in a specific institutional or public context, intended to communicate a political message, define a political agenda, or perform a political act such as claiming electoral victory, taking an oath of office, or reporting on the progress of governance (Chilton, 2004a)
- c. Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model refers to the analytical framework developed by Norman Fairclough for the critical analysis of discourse, consisting of three interrelated dimensions: text, discursive practice, and

social practice, enabling researchers to examine linguistic features within a text, the processes through which discourse is produced and interpreted, and the broader social and ideological contexts in which discourse operates (Fairclough, 1995).

- d. Representation refers to the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged through language, such that events, groups, and social realities do not carry meaning on their own but are given meaning through the concepts and signs a culture makes available (Hall, 1997).
- e. Socioeconomic Issues refer to social conditions and problems that arise at the intersection of economic structures and social life, encompassing the distribution of material resources, access to essential services, and the disparities in life chances that result from a population's position within economic and social hierarchies (Giddens, 2017).
- f. Discursive Shift refers to changes in the ways issues, identities, relationships, and social realities are represented across different discourse contexts (Fairclough, 2003).
- g. Ideology refers to systems of belief, value, and worldview that come to be treated as natural or common sense within a society, often in ways that serve and sustain the interests of dominant groups (van Dijk, 1998).
- h. Power refers to the capacity of social actors to control or influence the actions, beliefs, and discourse of others, whether through direct coercion or through less visible means such as the shaping of consent and common sense (Fairclough, 1989).