

# Progressives see promise in more aggressive labeling

Local successes spur desire to test message at the national level

Michael Collins  
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — In her campaign to become the next mayor of the nation's capital, Janeese Lewis George drew in voters with promises of affordable housing, universal child care, lower utility bills and a willingness to stand up to President Donald Trump.

It's a winning message, progressive organizers argue, one that already has catapulted democratic socialists to the front of mayoral races around the country over the past year.

Voters in Washington liked what they heard. Lewis George easily won the Democratic primary over a more centrist candidate, putting her on the pathway to becoming the city's first new mayor in a dozen years — and the first-ever democratic socialist to run the city.

"When they're struggling every day, working two jobs, and still can't make it, [people] don't want to hear about what government can't do," she told reporters at a post-election news conference at a popular bookstore. "They want to know what government can do."

Progressives see the success of democratic socialist candidates as a recipe to win over voters across the country. But political analysts caution Democrats should not view the mayoral candidates' victories as the playbook for toss-up states where voters are more moderate — or as a strategy for winning the White House.

Democratic socialists have proven they can win in some of the biggest, bluest cities.

Zohran Mamdani was elected mayor of New York City last year with a message of fighting inequality, protecting the rights of immigrants and making life more affordable in one of the world's most expensive cities. On the other side of the country, Katie Wilson, a political newcomer who advocated higher taxes on the wealthy, ousted incumbent Bruce Harrell to win the mayoral contest in Seattle.

In Los Angeles, Nithya Raman, who campaigned as an alternative to the status quo, earned a spot in June in the November runoff and will take on Democratic incumbent Mayor Karen Bass.

Lewis George also will be on the ballot in November, when she'll face little-known Green Party candidate Robert Gross. But her primary win in the heavily Democratic city virtually guarantees she'll become Washington's next mayor.

In congressional races, three candidates tied to the democratic socialist movement in New York — Darializa Avila Chevalier, Claire Valdez and Brad Lander — stunned the Democratic establishment by winning primaries for House seats on June 23. All three were backed by Mamdani.

Progressives view those victories as a sign of widespread voter frustration with a system in which they are struggling to make ends meet at a time the wealthiest of the wealthy, like Elon Musk, are getting even richer.

"People are feeling like they have to work way harder to get by," said Ashik Siddique, cochairman of the national political committee of the Democratic Socialists of America. "People can't pay rent. They can't afford groceries. They're having to work multiple jobs or longer hours to make ends meet."

Democrats in other races should take their cue from the successful mayoral candidates and focus on economic policies that help the working class while pushing back against Trump and his hard stance on immigration and other issues, he said.

"If Democrats want to win, and most importantly to serve the interests of working people, then this is the best path to win," Siddique said.

But what works in the nation's bluest cities won't work in Republican red or purple toss-up states, said Jim Kessler, executive vice president for policy at Third Way, a center-left think tank that pushes for moderate policy and political ideas.

Voters want change, Kessler agreed, and they want a fighter. But fighters don't have to come from the far left to win, he said, pointing to last year's victories by Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger and New Jersey Gov. Mikie Sherrill. Both are regarded as centrist Democrats.

To progressives, that sounds like more of the same politics voters are rejecting.

"People are looking beyond the status quo of the party because the status quo of the party is delivering garbage," said Corbin Trent, who has helped elect progressive candidates and is director of A Fight Worth Having, a super PAC.



Zohran Mamdani, who was elected mayor of New York City last year, has often used the "democratic socialist" label to describe his beliefs. EDUARDO MUNOZ/REUTERS FILE



Janeese Lewis George campaigned on a progressive agenda before winning the DC mayoral primary. ELIZABETH FRANTZ/REUTERS FILE

## 'Rupture' in motion

A little over a decade ago, the Democratic Socialists of America had just a few thousand members and was dismissed by many as a fringe group for leftists. But membership soared after Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders' first run for president in 2016 and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's shocking victory two years later over Rep. Joe Crowley, a powerful Democrat who had been regarded as an eventual successor to then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Today, the organization boasts more than 100,000 members. The victories in mayoral contests and other elections are the result of years of grassroots organizing, Siddique said.

Though big-city mayoral contests have gotten the most attention, democratic socialists have won races in other cities with lesser-known candidates.

On the same night Lewis George won the mayoral primary in DC, Mathewos Samson, a community organizer and democratic socialist, won the primary for a Georgia state House seat in Atlanta. In May, progressive Chris Rabb easily won the Democratic primary for a congressional seat in Philadelphia. Democratic socialists also hold city council seats in places such as Minneapolis and Louisville.

Trent, who once worked for the two most well-known democratic socialists in Congress, Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez, regards the successes as the beginning of a political shift that Democrats would be foolish to ignore.

"These mayors, even if they're mayors of massive cities, aren't going to be able to take on the challenges that their cities face by themselves," he said. "We feel them locally, experience them locally. But the solutions to these problems are national solutions. People are beginning to see that."

Many of the progressive wins have been fueled by the hard work of young voters who have organized, knocked on doors and worked to get out the vote on behalf of their candidate. In New York, for example, Mamdani captured 78% of voters under 30 and 66% of those ages 30 to 44, according to one exit poll.

"I'm delighted to see 20- and 30-year-olds getting really active. That's the future of the party," said Howard Dean, a former Vermont governor who served as chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

Trent, however, said it would be a mistake to think all progressive voters are young. The movement is driven by a wide range of people who "want a different America in a different party," he said.

Siddique described what's happening as a "rupture" in motion.

"Many millions of people are kind of just de-aligning with the Democratic Party because they don't see it meeting their needs or speaking credibly about

what's happening in this country and the world today," he said.

In Washington, democratic socialist volunteers knocked on thousands of doors and talked to voters across the district to promote Lewis George's candidacy. The results: She was the top vote-getter in seven of the city's eight wards, or districts.

## Looking beyond big, blue cities

Can democratic socialists win on the national level?

With polls showing Democrats are heavy favorites heading into this fall's midterms, the party is pushing hard to turn some red and purple states blue.

But "these far-left candidates don't have a chance of doing that," Kessler said. "If you're looking for a majority in the House or the Senate, and eventually winning the presidency in 2028, you're going to need a candidate that can win the middle in parts of the country where the ideas of the far left are way out of bounds."

Since Trump's entrée into politics and ascent to the presidency twice, some Democrats have argued the way for their party to return to power is to go back to the centrist policies that got Bill Clinton elected to the White House more than three decades ago. Like some of today's progressives who are challenging the status quo, Clinton positioned himself as an agent of change after 12 years of Republican rule under Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

Trent said Democratic candidates

should look to a different president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, as their model for how to win.

"I don't think most people want the Democratic Party of Bill Clinton," he said. "They want the Democratic Party of FDR. And one of the things that FDR had going for him is he had a strong socialist left flank that pulled him in the direction that really created a lot of positive things."

The far left's appeal is limited to certain parts of the country, Dean said.

"The democratic socialists are not going to help us take back Texas, because there aren't enough of them there," he said.

Kessler said the numbers show the challenge democratic socialists face. To win a national election, a Democrat needs to win at least 60% of moderate voters because, exit polls have shown, nationwide there are three conservative voters for every two liberals — though moderates were the largest ideological group overall.

That's not the case in places like New York, where Mamdani won roughly 36% of moderate voters — enough for him to take 51% of the overall vote and win the mayoral race. Sherrill won 62% of moderate voters in the New Jersey governor's race, and Spanberger took 69% in Virginia. In the past presidential election, then-Vice President Kamala Harris won 58% of moderate voters and lost to Trump.

Getting 60% of moderates will be difficult for a far-left candidate in a national race, Kessler said. Several centrist Democrats, like Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro, Michigan Sen. Elissa Slotkin, Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear and Arizona Sen. Mark Kelly, could easily hit that threshold and help Democrats take back the presidency in two years, he said.

Kessler agrees with progressives that voters are hungry for change.

"But you can have change from the left, right or center," he said. "Trump voters wanted change as well. But they wanted change from the far right."

What's going to change the Democratic Party, Dean said, is not necessarily electing democratic socialist mayors in liberal cities like New York and Washington.

"What's going to change the Democratic Party," he said, "is sending a message that it's time for a new generation who actually wants to deliver."

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