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Towards Mass Governance in New York City: A Framework

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Editorial Note: This working paper was originally submitted as part of the Transition Team work in December of 2025. It draws from a memo of Sumathy Kumar's on Mass Governance, from August of 2025, which got the conversation started. We published a parallel version in January of 2025 in *Jacobin*, "Building 'Mass Governance' in Zohran Mamdani's New York City."¹ We also wish to acknowledge significant conversations with Cea Weaver, Aki Younge, Andrew Friedman, Nantina Vgontzas, and Tyson Patros. It also draws from many of our ongoing conversations with organizers and activists. But none of them have vetted this current version of the framework or necessarily agree with all our recommendations here.

The authors welcome feedback on this working paper. Please send all inquiries to: gb97@nyu.edu

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Urban Democracy Lab Working Papers are circulated for discussion and comment. They reflect ongoing research and analysis and may be revised. These papers emerge from discussion with community partners but have not gone through a process of community review as is our practice. This paper is part of a series that responds to a rare political opening: the chance to rebuild city governance around affordability, dignity, and democratic control. The papers are designed as practical tools for transition and early governing, with companion briefs for rapid circulation and working-paper versions that provide full rationale, evidence, and implementation detail. They reflect our Real Utopian orientation: feasible design of transformative institutions and policies that are egalitarian, durable, and sustainable.

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¹ <https://jacobin.com/2026/01/mamdani-municipal-governance-mass-democracy>

Executive Summary

This framework sets out a strategy for “mass governance” in New York City: treating New Yorkers not as stakeholders to be consulted, but as co-governors with real, binding power over budgets, buses, rents, services, and enforcement. It argues that the Mamdani administration’s success depends on governing the way it campaigned, channeling the energy of over 100,000 volunteers into structures that can: (1) mobilize and broaden the base, (2) develop working-class political capacity, and (3) deliver visible material gains in people’s lives. The memo proposes a common architecture built around three pillars: empowered participatory spaces (assemblies, upgraded community boards, issue forums), mass volunteerism as civic infrastructure, and “campaigning from government” as the default governing posture. It also outlines cross-cutting design principles and first-year priorities, including pilot assemblies and volunteer campaigns, and calls for a Mass Governance Working Group to align existing institutions, participatory budgeting, and high-profile policy fights with this approach.

Introduction

Zohran Mamdani has won a historic victory. The road ahead runs through inauguration and then four years of governing in a hostile environment: state constraints, potential federal antagonism, organized real estate and elite business opposition. The only durable way to confront these obstacles is to embrace the people so that attacks on the administration are felt as attacks on them, and they fight back accordingly.

The campaign already showed this is possible. Over 100,000 volunteers knocked doors, phonebanked, organized their buildings and political homes, and turned abstract demands: rent freeze, universal childcare funded by taxing the rich, fast/free transit, community groceries, into a successful campaign . Our core proposition is simple: we must govern the way we campaigned, through mass participation that delivers material wins and shared ownership. Even in face of delays or obstacles that arise, frustration can be mitigated if New Yorkers see themselves as participants in shaping the agenda. Participatory engagement also amplifies victories: a collectively designed social housing project with real community input reverberates far beyond the residents who move in.

There is already sharp thinking about “outside” strategy: movement building, electoral work, philanthropy. This memo focuses on the “inside” side: mass governance, how city government can be retooled so that hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers become part of the administration’s project as real participants, not spectators or occasional consultees. This policy memo discusses (1) Why Mass Governance, (2) Its Architecture, (3) Aligning Existing Institutions, (4) The First Year, and (5) Immediate Next Steps.

I. Why Mass Governance

We call *mass governance* an approach that treats New Yorkers not as “stakeholders” to be consulted, but as co-governors. **It means redesigning existing institutions and**

creating new ones so that large numbers of working-class people can meaningfully shape real decisions that are impactful to their communities. This means real, binding, participation on budgets, buses, rents, services. It is distinct from standard “co-governance” frames, which often collapse into a small table of nonprofit leaders and elected officials meeting regularly. It is also distinctive from bland “participatory democracy” processes that do not tie participation to significant outcomes.

In the recent history of progressive and leftist municipalism from Porto Alegre to Barcelona, Montevideo to Paris and Berlin, mass governance approaches have been shown to be able to do three things:

1. *Mobilize and broaden the base*

- Does this institution expand and activate the coalition behind the administration, especially for big fights in Albany and against real estate and finance?
- Do participants come out seeing the administration’s wins as *their* wins?

2. *Educate and develop working-class leadership*

- Does it build political capacity—people who understand the budget, know who represents them, can run a meeting, and can organize others?
- Do people leave with more knowledge, skills, and confidence than they came in with?

3. *Deliver material gains and better governance*

- Does it deliver material gains to the working people: does it make buses faster, rents more stable, buildings safer, services more reliable?
- Are there visible outputs: projects built, enforcement actions taken, dollars shifted?

II. A Common Framework for Mass Governance

Realizing these goals means two things at once: transforming existing institutions and creating a small number of new mechanisms for mass participation. The point is not to multiply meetings, but to build a coherent, legible architecture where people know: if I participate here, something real can change. That architecture has three main components:

1. *Empowered participatory spaces*
2. *Mass volunteerism as civic infrastructure*
3. *Campaigning from government as the default posture*

1. Empowered Participatory Spaces

The core of mass governance is a set of stable, legible forums where ordinary New Yorkers can shape real decisions: what gets built, where money goes, which problems move to the top of the queue. These are recurring assemblies and bodies with clear decision rights, defined scopes, and guaranteed responses.

At different scales, this means borough- and neighborhood-level assemblies tied to budget and policy cycles; community boards and other local bodies upgraded from advisory to partially binding on defined questions; and issue-specific spaces (transit, housing, childcare, food) where residents weigh trade-offs and rank priorities.

2. Mass Volunteerism

Mass governance also needs organized civic labor. The campaign showed that tens of thousands of people are willing to knock doors, table, translate, run childcare, and help neighbors navigate systems. Governing should deliberately keep that infrastructure alive, with structured roles that are visible, valued, and connected to real outcomes.

Volunteers can support data collection (surveys, mapping, reporting conditions), assembly logistics (outreach, facilitation support, translation, child watch), and neighborhood work (tenant outreach, mutual aid, park and school projects). When people regularly contribute in these ways, they start to see the city as theirs to fix and build, and see the administration as an ally rather than a distant authority. A strengthened NYC Service and agency-based participation teams can provide the backbone that links this civic labor to real governing decisions. **A structure like the “Democracy Corps” Mass Volunteerism proposal, which includes geographically-based organizers who can also support this at scale.**

3. Campaigning from Government

Finally, mass governance means treating governance itself as campaigning. The administration should use the same tools that won the election to organize people around governing fights: budgets, rent freezes, bus corridors, childcare expansion, food access.

“Campaigning from government” means:

- Every major policy plank has a public campaign attached to it, with clear messaging, timelines, and concrete asks;
- Assemblies and forums are anchored in those fights (state budget, city budget, RGB decisions, key legislation);
- The Mayor and agencies communicate constantly about what people decided, what the city is doing, and where help is needed next.

This connects participatory spaces and volunteer work to real political moments rather than leaving them as free-floating “engagement,” and makes clear that the administration’s power depends on an organized public’s power.

Cross-Cutting Design Principles

Across all three components, some design principles should be treated as non-negotiable:

1. **Reach the most vulnerable and make it welcoming.** Basic good outreach: childcare, food, language interpretation, disability access, and some “festival” elements like music, services like free flu/COVID shots, so people feel a sense of belonging and are not afraid of having the “wrong” politics.
2. **Build shared analysis through political education.** Maps, infographics, basic statistics, and a range of precedents from elsewhere, plus 1–2 experts in the room to answer questions, so that people can develop shared vocabulary and become less vulnerable to xenophobia, trans panic, and “safety = policing” frames.
3. **Pair immediate prototypes with bigger demands.** Each process should produce concrete pilots or quick wins *and* feed into demands for larger structural policies, not just one-off projects. Visioning exercises are tied to concrete demands.
4. **Tie to solidarity, not charity.** Wherever possible, link efforts to mutual aid, solidarity economy, and socialist frameworks that don’t just patch budget cuts but point toward a different model of provision.
5. **Always show the rest of the ecosystem.** Every process should end by telling people where to take needs that weren’t addressed, so engagement builds power rather than disillusionment.

Done well, this makes assemblies and campaigns more representative of the city (people working two jobs, parents, elders, shy or less politicized people), gets them imagining beyond voting/canvassing/charity, builds everyday muscle for mass governance, and helps generate pressure and support for ambitious policy goals, including those requiring state-level change.

III. Aligning Existing Institutions and Offices: How to Get There

New York already has extensive participatory infrastructure (see [our audit here](#)) made up of literally hundreds of spaces: 59 Community Boards, PB, School Leadership Teams, Community Education Councils, tenant associations, advisory councils, and the Civic Engagement Commission. But much of it is shallow, uncoordinated, fragmented, and symbolic. New Yorkers are rightly skeptical of consultations that go nowhere. An activist effort within the administration should identify these spaces, clarify their authority, dedicate resources, and revitalize them through popular participation. The goal is to maximize the power of participants to make binding decisions that materially matter to them in spaces that are easy to access. Rather than building everything from scratch, the administration should:

1. Audit and repurpose existing participatory bodies

- Working closely with organizers and organizations, identify which structures, boards and councils already work for particular communities and which do not. Identify successful elements of processes that are worth uplifting.
- Clarify mandates, decision rights, and budget envelopes for selected bodies (such as Community Boards), moving them up the ladder from “advisory” to “partially binding” wherever feasible.

2. Create citywide coordination and signal the centrality of engagement

- Charge the Chief Engagement Office, or the Mayor’s Office of Civic Engagement, or another such body, with coordinating the mass governance architecture: sharing common digital tools, cross-agency convenings, and training for board members and volunteers.
- Drawing on especially successful city agencies’ experiences winning resources via participatory budgeting, connect residents to campaigns as soon as they enter a client relationship with the city (as a library patron, files for a permit, etc.).

- Use existing participation teams in agencies as liaisons to city-wide efforts.
- Based on the audits, consider simplifying agency structure.

3. Embed transparency and timelines in everything

- Make it standard practice that any participatory process produces:
 - A public list of priorities;
 - A published response within a timeframe;
 - Implementation tracking on a dashboard.

The goal is to align and empower existing venues more than to create new meetings so that when people participate, they see tangible results.

To leverage existing strengths and amplify impact, we suggest that the Mayor make use of the 2018 Charter revision and binding allocations to participatory budgeting, and to replace standalone processes with a “PB +” model connected to the larger city budget. We outline our PB-specific recommendations elsewhere.

IV. Mass Governance in the Administration’s First Year

The first year will be decisive for establishing that the Mamdani administration can both deliver and share power. It will be difficult to restructure the city’s complicated engagement infrastructure while meeting the exigencies of first political fights and maintaining the energy of the campaign. The priority should be clear, visible pilots that use the architecture above, while visibly beginning to upgrade and align the existing engagement infrastructure.

1. Pilot Assemblies

In Year One, the administration should clearly prototype neighborhood and borough assemblies that meet the three tests—mobilize, educate, deliver—and are clearly tied to budget cycles and policy windows. We have already proposed a series of political education-oriented transition assemblies and digital assets that live as an internal document to the campaign.

- Borough Assemblies
 - Quarterly, tied to major moments, such as state budget, city budget, and key policy milestones (e.g., Rent Guidelines Board decisions).
 - Agenda: political education (how the system works), deliberation on priorities, ranked votes within defined envelopes, and clear next steps (what will be done and when).
- Issue Assemblies:
 - The administration can also convene issue-focused assemblies—on buses, housing enforcement, childcare siting, food access, or community safety—where residents develop concrete pilots (corridor improvements, targeted acquisitions, new childcare sites, restorative justice programs or B-HEARD-type crisis intervention teams) and link them to larger policy demands.
 - These should follow the same design principles and feed directly into agency plans and budget proposals.

2. Mass Volunteerism Campaigns

The administration should promote mass volunteerism campaigns connected to priority affordability planks, with clear roles and clear links to policy decisions:

- **Housing:** volunteer campaigns that support code enforcement and tenant outreach; partnerships with mutual-aid housing groups and tenants unions to

sustain participation beyond formal hearings; volunteer support for “How’s My Building?”-type reporting.

- **Transit:** participatory mapping of slow corridors and bottlenecks (“Map My Ride”), volunteer tabling at key bus stops, and support for riders’ assemblies.
- **Budget and political education:** citywide budget education drives that use canvassing, teach-ins, and assemblies to explain the “people’s pie” (state and city) and connect residents to specific revenue and spending fights.
- **Mass Worker Education:** Building on the proposal developed by colleagues, this is a popular model of worker-education and leadership training at worksites
- **Democracy Corps:** Building on the proposal developed by colleagues, this would include organizers in each of the city’s neighborhoods.

V. Next Steps

This memo offers a framework and near-term roadmap, not an exhaustive design. The next steps we suggest are:

1. Convene and sustain a Mass Governance Working Group inside the administration, with agency, movement, and technical representation to begin the engagement audit. Draw on local, national, and international examples.
2. Identify 2–3 pilot sites where elements of this architecture can be tested in 2026.
3. Pair a high-profile communications strategy with initial mass governance pilots so people can see what is different and how to plug in.
4. Integrate a mass governance lens into key high-profile policy areas: transition assemblies, next year’s budget, bus corridor upgrades, the Office of Tenant Protection, etc.