

San Francisco turns away from the left

In San Francisco, progressives are looking east with envy.

Progressives have steadily lost influence in famously liberal San Francisco, unlike their counterparts in New York City, where Zohran Mamdani is ascendant. | Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

By [Dustin Gardiner](#)

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SAN FRANCISCO — If Zohran Mamdani represents the rise of progressive politics in America, San Francisco is fast becoming the deflating counterpoint for the left.

It isn't just that liberal lion Nancy Pelosi is on her way out or that moderate Democrats, backed by wealthy tech investors, have trounced the left in election after election over the last five years. It's that San Francisco progressives who have been lost in a fog here — [paying the price](#) for voters' frustrations over street conditions, homelessness and a drug addiction epidemic — have seen liberals in another big city suddenly supplant them.

At a series of meetings organized by socialists and other progressive groups here in recent months, the contrast with New York [hung over the gatherings](#), stirring a sense of envy and anger. Many in San Francisco said it feels as if their city now belongs to the billionaire class.

“The takeover is classic: San Francisco is the jewel in the crown of the crypto and tech industries,” vented Aaron Peskin, a progressive former president of the Board of Supervisors who lost last year's mayoral election. “They want this to be the symbolic elite tech capital of the world.”

Zohran Mamdani, a democratic socialist, will be New York City's next mayor. He takes office Jan. 1. | Angela Weiss/AFP via Getty Images

It's a bicoastal split screen that speaks to a realignment of America's progressive power base. In New York, Mamdani, a democratic socialist who took office on Thursday, was swept into power on promises of free buses, childcare and widespread rent freezes. In San Francisco, Mayor Daniel Lurie, an heir to the billion-dollar Levi Strauss fortune, has focused on austerity measures, beefing up policing, reviving a hollowed-out downtown core and supporting the booming artificial-intelligence industry.

San Francisco, once an incubator to a host of modern progressive ideas from the LGBTQ+-rights movement to ethnic studies in classrooms and protections for undocumented immigrants, has changed. Even progressives acknowledge it isn't the liberal trendsetter of yesteryear.

That shift has already upended the national political narrative around the city. For decades a lefty caricature and punching bag for conservatives, pundits and politicians on the right are now [racing to make Mamdani the face of the Democratic Party](#) in the midterms. Meanwhile, moderates in San

San Francisco, while celebrating their victories, hold their city up as a warning sign for what they cast as the excesses of the left.

“The message is you can take things too far,” said Nancy Tung, chair of the San Francisco Democratic Party and a moderate who’s helped lead the city’s centrist shift. She added, “Don’t expect that voters won’t notice forever.”

Or as Chris Larsen, a billionaire crypto titan who has been pouring money into local elections, put it: “The cost issue was the overriding thing in New York. Whereas, in San Francisco, it was cleaning the mess that the far left created over the last decade ... It was safe, clean streets and getting back our reputation, which I think we largely have now.”

San Francisco progressives have a different assessment, arguing the Bay Area city’s changing politics are largely a testament to unfettered political spending by the ultra wealthy.

Tech investors have outsize influence in San Francisco, a city of less than 850,000 people where a few million dollars can blanket the local airwaves with ads. New York City is roughly 10 times larger — and the country’s most expensive media market. The Big Apple also has more working-class voters and people of color.

Silicon Valley interests have poured tens of millions of dollars into San Francisco elections over the last five years, often propelling messages about the city’s pandemic decline and blaming progressives for crime in the city.

“That branding problem has been really brutal,” said Jen Snyder, a veteran San Francisco consultant who volunteered on Mamdani’s campaign. “New York is so massive the left can survive and thrive despite hostile spending.”

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And Mamdani is hardly alone in New York. The city currently has nine democratic socialist state lawmakers and three city councilmembers in office.

The contrast in San Francisco is glaring: After years of progressives gaining power, voters in 2022 recalled progressive District Attorney Chesa Boudin and three school board members who had pushed to rename public schools even as classrooms remained empty during the pandemic. Moderates then won a majority on the city’s Board of Supervisors, including ousting socialist Supervisor Dean Preston in a district that includes the Haight Ashbury, one of the city’s liberal enclaves.

San Francisco Mayor Daniel Lurie, an heir to the billion-dollar Levi Strauss fortune, is a moderate Democrat. | Jeff Chiu/AP

Lurie, a former nonprofit executive, was [elected after pouring more than \\$9 million](#) of his familial wealth into the race and appealing to voters' anger over the city's sluggish post-pandemic recovery. He has since presided over a public-relations comeback, promoting the city's falling crime rates and lower number of tent encampments, trends that took root many months before his election.

Now even some Republicans are reassessing whether San Francisco is a useful punching bag. Former Fox News host Steve Hilton, a Republican candidate for governor, said he counts Lurie as well as San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan — [another moderate Democrat](#) from Silicon Valley — as friends.

“Mamdani is actually, in terms of policy, following in the footsteps of what we've seen here in California for years, with disastrous results,” Hilton said.

Then, in a remark that would once have been unthinkable coming from a Republican about a San Francisco mayor — and that would elicit groans from the left here — he added that Lurie and Mahan offer a new course by “taking a pragmatic, common sense approach to solving problems.”