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Subject: Mamdani's Win Has Put Buses in the Spotlight. Should They Be Free?

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NOTE:

- Fare free transit is an important equity tool.
- Mamdani is focused on fare free buses; fares will still be charged on fixed transit (subways, trains, etc.). Some reports and analyses have failed to make this clear.
- MTA is not allowing all-door boarding on NYC's new fare free routes, which is likely why service has slowed a bit. The article doesn't explain why MTA has not made this common sense change. After Olympia WA went fare free, for example, service coverage and speed improved, while ridership increased substantially.
- Fare collection with effective enforcement likely will cost more than the revenue collected from bus riders.
- Fare evaders can easily self-insure against penalties, as has been made clear in Sweden. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planka_nu)
- Fare collection and enforcement creates rider-on-operator violence, which impacts operator recruitment and evasion.

ARTICLE

Mamdani's Win Has Put Buses in the Spotlight. Should They Be Free?

The lowly New York City bus is getting new attention thanks to Zohran Mamdani's vow to make the service free for all. But can free also mean fast?

By **[Stefanos Chen](#)**

July 3, 2025

New York City buses are slow, often crowded and overshadowed by the subway. But thanks to a surprise role in the mayoral election campaign, the humble bus is suddenly in the spotlight.

Zohran Mamdani, the Queens assemblyman who in the Democratic primary last week roundly defeated a crowded field that included former Gov. Andrew Cuomo, has vowed to make the city's bus service — a network of 348 routes that carries 1.4 million passengers a day — free for all.

The promise marks an unlikely star turn for a branch of the transit system that generally serves passengers who are older and poorer than those riding the subway. At Mr. Mamdani's rallies about the high cost of rent and child care, the bus fare has become a symbol of the city's affordability crisis, especially for residents of neighborhoods with limited access to trains.

Nearly one in five New Yorkers said they [struggled to pay for subway and bus fare](#) in 2023, according to a report by Community Service Society of New York, an anti-poverty group. And the fare, currently \$2.90 for both buses and subways, is [expected to increase](#) to around \$3 early next year.

Mr. Mamdani is now among the most high-profile supporters of the idea, popular among some left-leaning transit advocates, that the bus system should be treated as a tax-funded service like public schools and law enforcement.

But the plan has split transit supporters who disagree on whether subsidizing the bus system is worth forgoing more than \$800 million a year in fare revenue from bus riders, at a time when federal funds for New York State could prove unreliable. And for passengers who have stood in a packed bus, the concern is simpler still: Can free also mean fast?

"This is absolutely a good idea," said Danny Pearlstein, a spokesman for Riders Alliance, a transit advocacy group. But, he added, the right policy must ensure that both affordability and speed are considered.

The plan is expected to be closely scrutinized before the general election in November, when Mr. Mamdani will face Eric Adams, the incumbent mayor who is running as an independent; Curtis Sliwa, the Republican nominee; Jim Walden, an independent, and possibly Mr. Cuomo, who could campaign as a third-party candidate.

And the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which runs the buses and the subway, is a state-controlled agency, which gives the policy little hope of becoming a reality without the support of Gov. Kathy Hochul. She has not said if she would back the plan.

Still, there is strong enthusiasm for free buses and reason to believe that the policy could be successful, said Charles Komanoff, an economist and expert on traffic modeling who supports the proposal.

Mr. Komanoff [projects that making buses free](#) could increase ridership citywide by 23 percent, an additional 170 million trips in a year, and increase the average bus speed — currently around eight m.p.h., nearly the slowest in the country — by an average of 12 percent. Despite the loss of transit revenue, he argues, the city would benefit economically because of the time and money that riders would save. Building more dedicated bus lanes and other service upgrades could improve speed and ridership numbers further, he said.

There is some evidence of the benefits of free bus routes.

In 2023, Mr. Mamdani and Michael Gianaris, a state senator, led a pilot program that made one bus route in each borough free. The M.T.A. found that weekday ridership jumped 30 percent on the free buses, in a period when there was a systemwide increase of 6 percent.

But waiving the fare did not make the buses faster, [the report](#) found. Average speeds fell slightly, in part because the buses spent more time boarding passengers.

Christina Soto, 42, a home health aide who rides the M116 in Manhattan, one of the bus lines that was temporarily free, said on a recent commute that she preferred to pay the fare, because the bus was “very chaotic” and slower when the fee was waived.

Mr. Komanoff argues that free buses could be much faster if the M.T.A. allowed passengers to board from all doors, including the rear.

No American city with nearly as large a bus system has gone entirely free, but several cities have started smaller programs with promising results.

In Boston, where three bus lines [have been free](#) since 2022, the city has reported a much faster increase in ridership on those lines, compared with the rest of the system, and the time spent picking up passengers on those buses has decreased, because riders can board from all doors.

But the M.T.A., which has not endorsed free buses, has other priorities. The authority is in the middle of a push to reduce fare evasion, which it associates with a growing [sense of disorder](#) in the transit system. In the first quarter, 44 percent of bus riders failed to pay; at the height of fare evasion in mid-2024, nearly 50 percent skipped the charge. By comparison, the subway, which generated \$2.8 billion in fare revenue last year, has [a fare evasion rate](#) of under 10 percent.

Janno Lieber, the chief executive of the authority, recently unveiled a major redesign of the bus network in Queens, the city’s most bus-dependent borough with over 800,000 daily riders. It includes a nearly \$35 million annual investment to increase bus service, paid for in part by fare revenue.

The M.T.A. has also supported a half-cost program called [fair fares](#), which has enrolled over 377,000 low-income riders, though critics say it does not reach as many New Yorkers as it should.

Elle Bisgaard-Church, Mr. Mamdani’s campaign manager and former chief of staff, said the cost of free buses, around \$600 million to \$800 million a year, is a relatively small investment — about half of a percent of New York City’s \$116 billion budget.

“It is eminently doable,” said Mr. Gianaris, who cosponsored the free bus pilot program, adding that several programs with similar price tags have recently been approved in the state budget.

But the free-bus proposal comes at an inopportune moment for New York State, which expects to lose billions of dollars in federal aid to Medicaid and other vital programs that would affect the city under President Trump’s budget bill currently being negotiated in Congress.

On Sunday, Gov. Hochul rode the M11 bus in Manhattan to mark the six-month anniversary this week of congestion pricing, the toll program designed to reduce gridlock and fund M.T.A. projects.

Ms. Hochul, who approved the free-bus pilot in 2023, would not say if she would endorse Mr. Mamdani’s plan, but noted that she is unwilling to raise taxes on high-income residents, which is one of the likeliest ways the bus program could be funded.

Gov. Kathy Hochul supported a smaller, pilot program for free buses in 2023 but has made it clear that she doesn’t back higher taxes on the wealthy, which would be a way to fund Mr. Mamdani’s free bus proposal.

"Listen," she said from a window seat in the back of the bus, "there's a difference between campaign promises and governing."

Mr. Mamdani's opponents have questioned his ability to pass the program. In a statement, Mayor Adams said he helped persuade Albany to pass the free-bus pilot in 2023 and criticized Mr. Mamdani for not getting the program extended beyond one year.

"There is something so cruel about promising New Yorkers things you cannot — and have not — delivered on, which is precisely what Zohran Mamdani's entire platform rests on," Mr. Adams said.

In response, Ms. Bisgaard-Church said in a statement that Mr. Mamdani and his team "have always sought to build the greatest coalition behind any of our policies to improve New Yorkers' lives, and that included Mayor Adams's last-minute support" for the 2023 bus pilot.

Still, there is a well of support for the policy that could clear a path for its passage, including from an unexpected source: bus drivers.

John Samuelson, the international president of the Transport Workers Union, which represents bus drivers, said free bus service is well worth the cost, in part because it has been shown to significantly reduce the number of assaults on transit workers.

Since 2021, the M.T.A. has recorded 599 assaults on transit workers, more than half of whom were bus drivers. (Mr. Samuelson said the number of assaults was significantly higher.) During the limited pilot, assaults on bus drivers on free routes dropped over 30 percent, according to the M.T.A.

Rene Joly, 47, a longtime bus driver, was stuck behind a fire truck on a recent afternoon and could feel the tension rising behind him, as passengers seethed.

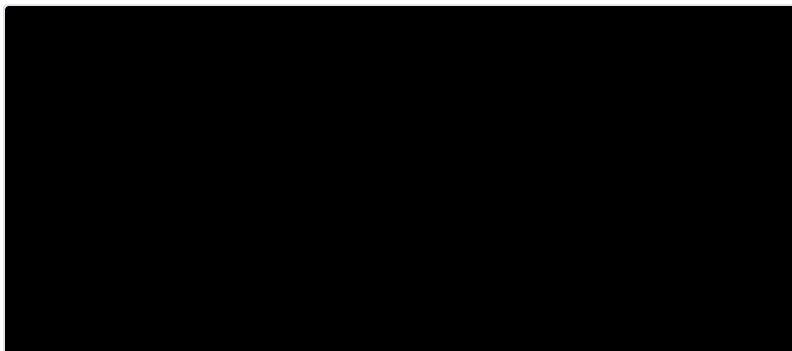
"If everybody's free, then you have nothing to worry about," he said, before asking if there was a petition he could sign to support the policy.

Sean Piccoli contributed reporting.

Stefanos Chen is a Times reporter covering New York City's transit system.

https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/03/nyregion/new-york-mamdani-free-bus.html?unlocked_article_code=1.WE8.yHAJ.inDQZ_hC05t8&smid=url-share

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Should They Be Free?

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