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# A Turning Point? How NYC's 2025 Mayoral Election Could Redefine Climate Justice and Inequality


BY David Sathuluri

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As New Yorkers prepare to elect their next mayor, climate justice is at the center of the political stage like never before. With nearly half the city's population living in designated environmental justice areas and neighborhoods historically burdened by pollution, heat, and underinvestment, this election could determine whether New York finally addresses its deep environmental inequities or continues to leave its most vulnerable residents behind.




## Climate Justice Takes Center Stage

For the first time, leading mayoral candidates are making climate justice a core campaign issue. This shift comes as data reveals the scale of the challenge. According to the NYC Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice EJNYC [Report](#) , 49% of New Yorkers live in environmental justice areas, which account for 44% of all city census tracts. These neighborhoods, predominantly home to low-income families and people of color, face disproportionate exposure to air pollution, extreme heat, and flooding risks.


The American Lung Association's 2024 "State of the Air" [report](#)  ranked the New York-Newark metro area the 13th worst in the nation for ozone pollution and the worst in the Northeast for all three measured pollutants: ozone, short-term particle pollution, and year-round particle pollution. This pollution burden is not distributed equally: neighborhoods like the South Bronx, Central Brooklyn, and Northern Manhattan experience higher rates of asthma and heat-related illness than wealthier, whiter areas.

## Heat and Health Disparities


Heat is a deadly and growing threat in New York City. According to the city's [2024 Heat-Related Mortality Report](#) , each summer, on average, an estimated 580 New Yorkers die prematurely because of hot weather in New York City. The New York City Health Department has found that Black New Yorkers experience heat-stress death rates that are twice as high as those of White New Yorkers (1.2 deaths per million compared to 0.5 deaths per million from 2013–2022). This disparity is rooted in structural racism, including the legacy of historic redlining, which has contributed to inequitable access to resources such as affordable, air-conditioned housing and green spaces. As a result, Black communities are more likely to live in hotter neighborhoods and have less access to adequate cooling, increasing their vulnerability to heat-related mortality. [Interactive Heat Vulnerability Index data](#) 

shows that neighborhoods with less tree cover and more concrete, often the same areas with the highest poverty rates, can experience hotter ground temperatures than wealthier, well-shaded neighborhoods. Additionally, national [studies](#)  reveal that low-income urban blocks have, on average, 15–26% less tree cover and are 1.5–4°C (2.7–7.2°F) hotter than high-income blocks, with disparities especially pronounced in Northeastern cities like New York. In New York City, field measurements have [documented](#)  temperature differences as stark as 31°F between treeless lots and shaded areas; for [example](#) , a treeless lot in East Harlem registered 115°F, while a shaded block near Central Park was 84°F

### Ambitious Laws, Uneven Progress


New York has passed some of the nation's most ambitious climate laws. The state's [Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act \(CLCPA\)](#)  requires a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 (from 1990 levels) and a goal of 40% of the benefits of clean energy investments accruing to disadvantaged communities. The CLCPA's climate justice provisions served as a model for the Biden Administration's Justice40 initiative, which aimed to direct 40% of the overall benefits of federal climate and clean energy investments to disadvantaged communities.

New York City's Local Law 97 ([LL97](#) ) targets the city's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, buildings, which account for nearly [70%](#)  of citywide emissions. LL97 requires most buildings over 25,000 square feet to reduce their emissions by 40% by 2030 and to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050, with phased compliance deadlines and financial penalties for noncompliance beginning in 2025. However, as of late 2023, city officials acknowledged that New York City was not on track to meet its LL97 emissions reduction deadlines.


In December 2024, New York State enacted the [Climate Change Superfund Act](#) , requiring major fossil fuel companies to pay \$75 billion over 25 years to fund climate resilience and adaptation projects across the state. The law mandates that at least 35%, with a goal of 40% of the program's benefits, directly support disadvantaged communities, ensuring that climate resilience efforts prioritize those most affected by climate change. These funds are expected to provide billions for flood protection, heat mitigation, and infrastructure upgrades in the neighborhoods most vulnerable to climate impacts.

## Candidates' Commitments: Climate and Inequality on the Ballot



As New York City's 2025 mayoral race intensifies, climate justice and inequality have emerged as defining issues for several leading Democratic candidates. At a series of high-profile forums, contenders including Brad Lander, Zohran Mamdani, Zellnor Myrie, Jessica Ramos, and Scott Stringer have pledged to make climate action central to their agendas, each outlining plans that address both the city's emissions and the disproportionate impacts of climate change on frontline communities.


**Brad Lander** has [released](#)  what he calls the only comprehensive climate plan in the mayoral field. His platform focuses on reducing New York City's carbon emissions, expanding access to clean, affordable energy, and preparing neighborhoods for the effects of global warming. Lander's plan includes making rooftop solar accessible to over 150,000 households, accelerating Local Law 97 compliance, and creating 13,000 green jobs. As Comptroller, Lander led the city's pension funds to fully divest from fossil fuels and adopt a net-zero emissions plan for 2040, positioning New York as a national leader in climate-conscious investing. He has also advocated for congestion pricing, resilient infrastructure, and air conditioning in all school classrooms, drawing on his experience mobilizing communities after Superstorm Sandy.

**Zohran Mamdani** has centered his campaign on affordability and climate, linking the two through proposals like his Green Schools plan, which would renovate 500 public schools, build 500 green schoolyards, and turn 50 schools into resilience hubs. Mamdani, who is polling in second place behind New York City mayoral candidate Andrew Cuomo, argues that "climate and quality of life are not two separate concerns." He has also championed public renewables, transit equity, and free or fast bus service, seeing schools as a nexus for climate and social policy.

**Zellnor Myrie** brings a personal [perspective](#)  to the climate debate, having grown up with asthma in Brooklyn due to poor air quality. Myrie's campaign promises include building one million homes in ten years, many of them affordable and sustainable,


expanding tenant protections, and investing in youth engagement for public safety. He has criticized City Hall's current leadership for being "incredibly distracted" and vows to restore opportunity for all New Yorkers, especially those in marginalized neighborhoods.

**Jessica Ramos** has [proposed](#)  a "One Good Job" public employment plan to establish a New York City Climate Corps, expand the Summer Youth Employment Program to a year-round initiative, and create career pipelines in green industries. Ramos's vision is to address climate change, mental health, infrastructure, and housing instability through coordinated public action. She also supports free tuition at CUNY for high-demand climate-related careers and opposes developments that do not align with her climate and equity goals. On June 6, Ramos [endorsed Cuomo](#)  despite having frequently criticized him.


**Scott Stringer** has a long track record of climate activism, [proposing](#)  what he describes as the boldest and most actionable Green New Deal for New York City. His platform includes increasing investment in career and technical education, expanding youth employment opportunities, and harnessing every lever of city government to advance local, national, and international climate solutions.

All the above five candidates have pledged to:

1. Enforce and strengthen Local Law 97, closing loopholes and accelerating compliance.
2. Oppose new fossil fuel infrastructure, such as the Iroquois pipeline.
3. Electrify city schools and public housing.
4. Direct climate investments to neighborhoods most affected by pollution and extreme weather.

In contrast, Mayor Eric Adams has faced criticism from both candidates and advocates for his perceived lack of urgency on climate action and for aligning with corporate and real estate interests. As Pete Sikora, a climate advocate and member of the Local Law 97 Advisory Board, [put](#)  it, Adams has "*done more to distract and delay than embrace real solutions to the climate crisis.*"

## Where Do Cuomo and Adrienne Adams Stand?

While this article highlights candidates with robust climate justice agendas, it is important to note the positions of other major contenders. Andrew Cuomo, the former governor and current front-runner in the Democratic primary, has not made climate justice or environmental equity a central campaign theme. Despite his endorsement by the New York League of Conservation Voters and his record of signing climate legislation as governor, a review of Cuomo's campaign materials reveals that neither climate change nor environmental justice is listed among his [top ten issues](#) .

Similarly, Adrienne Adams, City Council Speaker, and mayoral candidate has not foregrounded climate or environmental justice in her campaign messaging. Her platform has focused primarily on public safety, economic security, and government accountability, with limited attention to climate policy.

This contrast underscores a broader dynamic in the race. While several candidates have put forward detailed and ambitious plans to address climate change and inequality, some high-profile contenders have yet to articulate comprehensive strategies for tackling the city's most pressing environmental and social challenges.

## The Road Ahead

As New York City stands at a pivotal moment, the 2025 mayoral election will serve as a referendum on the city's commitment to climate justice and the fight against entrenched inequality. The stakes are unmistakably high as nearly half of all New Yorkers live in communities that have long borne the brunt of pollution, heat, and underinvestment, and the next administration will determine whether bold promises translate into transformative action.

The city's ambitious climate laws, such as the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, Local Law 97, and the new Climate Change Superfund Act, have set the stage for progress. However, implementation gaps and uneven political will remain persistent obstacles. The next mayor will inherit both the tools and the challenges: a robust legal framework, historic funding for resilience, and a more engaged public than ever, but also lagging emissions reductions and persistent disparities in health, housing, and infrastructure.

Candidates with comprehensive climate justice agendas have outlined plans to accelerate emissions cuts, invest in frontline neighborhoods, and create pathways to green jobs. Their commitments to enforce and strengthen Local Law 97, electrify public buildings, and direct resources to the most affected communities signal a new era of climate leadership if these pledges are backed by sustained action and accountability. Conversely, the reluctance of some front-runners to prioritize climate and equity issues highlights the risk that progress could stall if political momentum wanes.

Looking ahead, the outcome of this election will shape not just the city's climate trajectory but also the broader national conversation about environmental justice. New York's next mayor will have the opportunity and the responsibility to close the gap between policy and reality, ensuring that climate solutions reach those who most need them. For New Yorkers living on the front lines of climate change, the road ahead is not just about cleaner air or cooler streets but about building a fairer, more resilient city for future generations.

*David Sathuluri '25 is a master's student in the Climate School's Climate and Society program.*

*Views and opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Columbia Climate School, Earth Institute, or Columbia University.*

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