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USA

Chicago Mayoral Election Will Be a Battle Between Left and Right

- IV Online magazine - 2023 - IV578 - March 2023 -

Publication date: Monday 13 March 2023

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Carl Sandburg, writing his famous poem “Chicago” in 1913, called it “City of the Big Shoulders” because it was then and remains today a city of industry and the working class. It is a center of manufacturing, a hub of the national transportation system from which railroads, highways, and airlines radiate and today also a center of technology, health care, and education. Almost three million people live in the city and ten million in the metropolitan area. So, who governs matters both for Chicago and the country. And following an indecisive Democratic Party primary, an epic battle between left and right is shaping up in the election for mayor of the windy city.

In Chicago, the Republican Party is virtually non-existent, so the Democratic primary, held this year on February 24, would have decided who will be mayor, had someone won a majority. But no one did. The incumbent mayor Lori Lightfoot, a former government prosecuting attorney, a Chicago Police Department administrator, and an openly gay Black woman, ran and won the office as a progressive in 2019, but this year she went down to defeat with only 17% of the vote. Some voters were angry at the stringent restrictions she imposed during the COVID pandemic, others were rankled by her failure to stop the looting that accompanied the Black Lives Matter protests over the killing of George Floyd in 2020, others were most concerned about the city’s 836 homicides in 2021. (The murder rate in Chicago is 18.26 per 100,000, ranking 28th in the nation.)

The two highest vote-getters were former Chicago Schools Superintendent Paul Vallas with 33% and former Chicago Teachers Union organizer and county commissioner Brandon Johnson, with 21%, and they will now go into a run-off election to be held on April 4. The two candidates could hardly be more different. Vallas, who is white and backed by the police union, is running principally on law and order: more police, tougher charges, longer sentences. Johnson, who is black and backed by the city’s public employee unions, is running on a pro-labor platform calling for improvements in education, housing, and health care. He has voted in the past to redirect some of the police budget to social services, such as mental health.

Chicago has a significant left presence. Five members of the Democratic Socialists of America sit on the 50-member Chicago city council, together with a number of other progressives. The Chicago Teachers Union, led by reformers since 2010, conducted militant strikes in 2012 and 2019 to improve the teachers’ situation, but also to defend public education and improve education for the city’s low-income and working class population. There are also progressive community organizations in the Black and Latino communities with long histories of struggles over housing and health care.

Race will definitely be a factor in this election given the city’s long history of racism and of racial tension. Chicago is 35% white, 29% Black, 29% Latino, and 7% Asian. Congressman Chuy García, a Mexican immigrant and longtime progressive who supported Bernie Sanders, came in fourth in the mayoral race with 14% of the vote, so he will not be in the runoff.

To win, Johnson will need to pick up most of Lori Lightfoot’s votes from the Black community and the Chuy García votes from the Latinos. Blacks and Latinos (most of whom are of Mexican descent) often have tensions, though they frequently unite in union, community, and political coalitions. White progressives will certainly vote for Johnson. Vallas could win many votes from Blacks who are perhaps more concerned with crime than whites because many of the homicides occur in their communities,

Chicago’s bankers and manufacturers, who have historically been the power behind the throne, might prefer Vallas,

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though they have not weighed in. Even if they do back, Vallas, Johnson could still win. Then we'll see if he can and will carry out his progressive platform.

5 March 2023

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