

Chicago's 2023 Mayoral Race: A Progressive Victory Amidst Shocking Low Turnout by Black and Latino Voters

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Introduction

Brandon Johnson's election as Chicago's new mayor has been hailed across the country as an electrifying victory by the progressive movement over both the Democratic Party's centrist wing and Republicans who favored Johnson's opponent Paul Vallas. It especially represented a stinging defeat for the city's real estate and financial elite, which largely backed Vallas, a former public schools chief who made combating crime the centerpiece of his campaign, and who was the only white candidate in the original field of nine mayoral hopefuls.

Johnson, on the other hand, was virtually unknown when the race began. A Black teacher, union organizer, and Cook County commissioner, he advocated a radical shift of city resources toward greater equity and inclusion of the city's marginalized communities, and he surprised most experts by finishing second in the February general election, even ahead of incumbent mayor Lori Lightfoot. Polls before the April 4th runoff showed Vallas leading Johnson.¹ Nonetheless, Johnson's supporters confidently predicted that his grassroots coalition, much of it powered by several powerful labor unions, would deliver a multi-racial victory in the vein of Harold Washington's historic 1983 race. Johnson's slim vote margin of 52-to-48 percent appeared to vindicate that narrative, at least according to all post-election analyses.²

Changes in Racial and Ethnic Voting Patterns Found

Our examination of the actual vote results, however, reveals significant shifts in how the city's main racial and ethnic groups voted in this contest, especially when compared to that racially polarized election of Washington forty years ago. Those shifts have garnered virtually no attention in the five months since the election, even though they raise vital questions about the depth of the progressive victory.

We found, in addition, that white residents participated in this election at dramatically higher rates than did Black or Latino residents even though key planks of Johnson's campaign were aimed at the city's marginalized groups. Anyone concerned about the viability of the new mayor's multi-racial coalition may want to review the voting patterns we identify below, to consider what they portend for the future of Chicago politics, and perhaps to suggest how the new administration might adjust its policies and its outreach.

Methodology

Given that no exit polling was conducted for this election, we rely on estimation techniques to calculate voting trends for racial and ethnic groups. Most post-election media reports chose to infer such patterns by simply tracking how the candidates fared in their vote totals for each of the city's 50 wards. But using ward-level data results is a crude and inexact method because even in wards that are composed largely of one racial or ethnic group significant proportions of other groups also reside there.

We utilize instead an ecological regression approach to estimate three outcomes, 1) vote shares for Brandon Johnson, 2) voter turnout, and 3) the share of the adult population that voted by race and ethnicity. We use precinct-level data from the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners of vote tallies for each candidate, the total number of ballots cast, and the number of registered voters. We link count data of the population aged 18 and over by race and ethnicity at the block level from the 2020 U.S. Census to Chicago's 1,291 voting precincts to estimate the racial and ethnic makeup of voters for the three outcomes of interest. The ecological regression approach utilizes the racial and ethnic makeup of each precinct and voting outcomes to generate citywide estimates of the three outcomes of interest by each respective racial and ethnic group.³

Patterns Revealed by the Data

The main conclusions we reached offer a valuable glimpse into what occurred in the April runoff (see [Table 1](#)):

- **Johnson captured 88 percent support from Black Chicago voters – a far higher rate than any polls had predicted.⁴**
- **Vallas won the clear support of most white voters – we estimate it at 66 percent.**
- **Latinos broke for Vallas citywide, giving him an estimated 54.4 percent of their votes.**
- **62.3 percent of the city's registered voters did not participate in this election at all.**
- **A startling gap in voter turnout continues to persist along racial and ethnic lines. We estimate that 61.1 percent of Chicago's registered white voters cast a ballot, while only 29 percent of registered Black people and 20.5 percent of Latinos did.**

Table 1: Estimates of percent vote for Brandon Johnson, voter turnout, and the percent of adult population that voted

	Hispanic or Latino	Black (non-Hispanic or Latino)	White (non-Hispanic or Latino)	Citywide Total ⁵
Percent vote for Brandon Johnson	45.6%	88.0%	34.0%	52.0%
Percent registered voter turnout	20.5%	29.0%	61.1%	38.7%
Percent of the population aged 18 and over that voted	11.3%	24.5%	52.7%	28.0%

Data Sources: Authors' analysis of Chicago Board of Election Commissioners 2023 Municipal Runoff Election Results and 2020 U.S. Census data

Since the ecological regression approach does not allow us to easily estimate statistics for the Asian population, we also examine precincts that were over 80 percent of a single racial and ethnic group to see how predominantly Asian precincts compare to others. This allows us to compare figures from [Table 2](#) how racial/ethnic groups voted in highly residentially segregated precincts to the citywide totals in [Table 1](#) and to detect voting differences. [Table 2](#) illustrates that:

- Precincts that were over 80 percent Asian-American cast more than 77.8 percent of their votes for Vallas – higher than any other racial or ethnic group.
- Precincts that were 80 percent white cast just 25.8 percent of their vote for Brandon Johnson compared to our estimation of 34 percent citywide, meaning that white voters in more residentially segregated white areas were less likely to vote for Brandon Johnson.

Table 2: Estimates of percent vote for Brandon Johnson, voter turnout, and percent of the adult population that voted for precincts that were 80 percent or more of a single racial/ethnic group

	Hispanic or Latino	Black (non-Hispanic or Latino)	White (non-Hispanic or Latino)	Asian (non-Hispanic or Latino)
Percent vote for Brandon Johnson	42.9%	81.5%	25.8%	22.2%
Percent registered voter turnout	22.4%	29.3%	55.4%	43.3%
Percent of the population aged 18 and over that voted	12.1%	23.5%	43.8%	19.9%
Percent of the population aged 18 and over that was registered to vote	53.8%	80.2%	79.0%	45.9%

Data Sources: Authors' analysis of Chicago Board of Election Commissioners 2023 Municipal Runoffs and 2020 U.S. Census data

Comparing the 2023 and 1983 Mayoral Results

- Johnson captured an estimated 88 percent support from Black Chicago voters despite the endorsement of Vallas by several of the losing Black mayoral candidates in the general election (Sophia King, Ja'mal Green, Willie Wilson and Roderick Sawyer), and even though Vallas prominently featured several major Black political figures in many of his campaign commercials. That said, Black support for Johnson was not nearly as deep as Washington enjoyed forty years earlier. Back then, as much as 97 percent of Black Chicagoans voted for Washington.⁶
- Vallas garnered the clear support of most white voters – we estimate 66 percent among this group – but Johnson nonetheless registered a bigger share of the white vote than some polls had predicted.⁷ Moreover, he performed about three times better among white Chicagoans than Harold Washington did in 1983. That year, Washington won just 12 percent support among whites.⁸
- Precincts that were over 80 percent Asian-American cast 77.8 percent of their votes for Vallas – higher than any other neighborhood dominated by a single racial or ethnic group. While the city's overall Asian population is still relatively small – it was 7 percent in 2020 – it nonetheless remains Chicago's fastest-growing group and will exercise increasing political influence in years to come.
- Latinos broke for Vallas citywide, giving him an estimated 54.4 percent of their votes, despite many of the city's top Latino political leaders, including its two Latino members of congress, Jesús “Chuy” Garcia and Delia Ramirez, endorsing Johnson. This represents a substantial shift for the Latino community from 1983, when Washington garnered the backing of 75 percent of that community's voters in that year's general election.⁹ Still, Johnson did manage to capture a higher percentage of Latino voters than he did of white or Asian voters. Back in 1983, however, the city's Latino population was just 14 percent, while it has zoomed today to nearly 30 percent. How this sector continues to evolve is bound to dramatically alter municipal politics in the near future.
- More than 60 percent of registered voters did not participate in the 2023 election at all, an indication that the contest never animated most of the city's electorate. True, this year's 38.6 percent turnout was slightly higher than in recent decades for a mayoral race, and younger voters did participate more than usual, especially in support of Johnson, but overall turnout still represented *less than half of the historic 82 percent level that occurred back in 1983*.¹⁰ Admittedly, voter participation has plummeted in most municipal elections the past few decades, even in the face of major reforms like mail-in balloting, drop boxes, and early voting that make participation easier than ever.

Those reforms have led to higher voting levels in national elections but not in local ones.¹¹ That said, it is worth noting that Chicago performed far better this year than have many other big cities of late. New York City's 2021 general election for mayoral, for example, produced an abysmal turnout rate of 23 percent, the lowest there in seventy years. Similarly, Philadelphia's Democratic mayoral primary this year achieved just a 27 percent turnout. Last year's Los Angeles election, which saw Karen Bass become the city's first Black female mayor, produced a healthier 43 percent turnout of registered voters, but the higher participation there was no doubt driven by major statewide contests for governor, attorney general and U.S. senator that were also on the ballot.

- A startling gap in voter turnout continues to persist along racial and ethnic lines. We estimate that 61.1 percent of Chicago's registered white voters cast a ballot in the runoff, far higher than the citywide rate of 38.7 percent. A majority of white voters, in other words, flocked to the polls. But the same was not true for Black people and Latinos, who produced far lower-than-average turnout rates of 29 percent and 20.5 percent, respectively. Participation by Black voters, in fact, was barely a third of the more than 85 percent rate Harold Washington achieved in the Black community in 1983.¹² It was even more abysmal this year among Latinos, with slightly more than 2-of-10 who are registered even casting a ballot. That picture looks even more dreadful when you consider that significant portions of the city's Latino adult population are non-citizens – either legal permanent residents or undocumented immigrants – and are thus ineligible to vote even though they are deeply affected by policies that emanate from City Hall. As an additional measure to analyze the extent of this Latino disenfranchisement, we examined registration figures for precincts where Latinos make up more than 80 percent of voting-age residents. There are 101 such precincts spread across the city. In those precincts, only 53.8 percent are even registered to vote! In contrast, 79 percent are registered in the 62 precincts that are 80 percent or more white, while 80.2 percent are registered in the 239 precincts that are 80 percent or more Black.¹³ Moreover, just 10 percent of adult residents cast ballots in a smaller subset of precincts that are virtually all-Latino (90 percent or more of the voting-age population). Citywide, just 11.3 percent of Latinos aged 18 and over participated in Chicago's mayoral election in 2023 – hardly the picture of a community on the road to equity and inclusion in city politics.

Closer Look at the Latino Vote

The biggest shift in voting racial/ethnic voting patterns this year, especially when compared to 1983, clearly occurred among Latinos. Back then, 75 percent of Latino voters backed Harold Washington even though virtually no Hispanics held elected office. This suggests that Johnson's effort this year to woo Latino voters to his progressive message was considerably

less effective than Washington's, or that class and racial dynamics over the past few decades within the fast-growing growing Latino community have resulted in a more complex and amorphous electoral group.

But it is also worth recalling that back in 1983, 87 percent of Latino voters did not initially support Washington in that year's first round of voting, the February Democratic mayoral primary. The majority voted instead for incumbent Mayor Jane Byrne, and the rest for Richard M. Daley, the other top contender in that primary, with many Latinos being swayed by overt anti-Black racial rhetoric from Washington's opponents. Between the primary and the general election, however, a dramatic shift took place. Washington recruited key young community activists such as labor leader Rudy Lozano, Linda Coronado, Chuy Garcia and Young Lords leader Jose "Cha Cha" Jimenez, who spearheaded a grassroots campaign that dramatically turned the Latino vote in his favor.¹⁴

This year, despite there being more than two dozen Latino elected officials in the city, many of them progressive backers of Johnson, his opponent Vallas still managed to secure a majority of the Hispanic vote, though the percentages varied sharply in different Latino neighborhoods of the city. A handful of Latino-majority wards in the South and far Southwest sides racked up far bigger margins for Vallas, while those in near Southwest and Northside favored Johnson. Take the 13th Ward in Garfield Ridge and Clearing, for example, a majority-Latino ward that is also home to many city police and firefighters. Vallas racked up 70 percent of the vote in precincts that were more than 80 percent Latino, while he did even better in the mostly white precincts of the same ward.

Johnson received a majority, on the other hand, in the older majority-Latino wards in the northwest neighborhoods of the city, areas with extensive community organizations that are generally represented by more progressive elected officials. Yet even in some of these wards, vote tallies at the precinct level reveal distinctly different patterns among white and Latino residents.

In the 26th Ward in Humboldt Park, for example (see [Table 3](#)), where Latinos make up 65 percent of the voting-age population, Johnson amassed a landslide 65.4 percent of votes, but a disproportionate segment of his margin came from white voters in the ward's rapidly gentrified areas. The data show that ten precincts within the 26th Ward where Latinos make up 80 percent or more of the population split their vote 49.5-to-50.5 percent between Johnson and Vallas, while the only three precincts where whites make up a majority of the population – all located at the ward's eastern end – gave Johnson 72.6 percent of their votes.

Table 3: 26th Ward voting, population, and turnout for 80 percent and over Latino and majority white precincts

Ward	Precinct	Percent Brandon Johnson	Percent Paul Vallas	Total Population (age 18+)	Percent Hispanic or Latino (age 18+)	Percent White (non-Hispanic or Latino) (age 18+)	Percent Black (non-Hispanic or Latino) (age 18+)	Registered voters as a percent of the population 18+	Percent Turnout
26	18	40.0%	60.0%	1536	91.5%	5.2%	2.0%	57.7%	18.6%
26	15	44.4%	55.6%	1614	90.8%	3.2%	3.7%	60.6%	18.2%
26	1	33.0%	67.0%	1465	89.8%	5.5%	2.9%	63.1%	21.3%
26	4	39.2%	60.8%	2616	88.8%	5.6%	3.6%	51.6%	19.3%
26	14	54.8%	45.2%	1370	88.0%	3.5%	7.5%	60.2%	16.4%
26	21	50.6%	49.4%	1599	87.7%	6.9%	4.3%	56.5%	18.6%
26	22	52.8%	47.2%	1624	83.6%	4.1%	10.3%	59.7%	20.1%
26	31	58.6%	41.4%	1855	82.2%	7.8%	7.9%	63.3%	20.4%
26	8	62.8%	37.2%	1461	82.1%	11.2%	3.7%	68.8%	25.7%
26	24	58.0%	42.0%	1460	81.7%	8.8%	7.5%	57.1%	18.8%
Total (Precincts over 80% Latino)		49.5%	50.5%	16600	86.7%	6.1%	5.3%	59.3%	19.8%
26	17	70.5%	29.5%	1041	34.5%	53.5%	5.2%	86.5%	44.8%
26	20	72.6%	27.4%	1566	33.5%	50.8%	7.9%	79.6%	36.2%
26	19	74.5%	25.5%	1340	32.2%	55.4%	5.5%	77.7%	45.1%
Total (Majority white precincts)		72.6%	27.4%	3947	33.3%	53.1%	6.4%	80.8%	41.6%
26th Ward Total		65.4%	34.6%	45052	63.9%	24.0%	7.7%	70.1%	30.4%

Data Sources: Authors' analysis of Chicago Board of Election Commissioners 2023 Municipal Runoffs and 2020 U.S. Census data

Possible Lessons

So, what can we learn from this data?

First, it seems clear that racial polarization in Chicago, especially when considered in black-white terms, has diminished significantly over the past few decades as the city's population has evolved, and as young educated white professionals have become a bigger proportion of its residents. This is reflected by the fact that, in a classic contest that pitted a conservative white candidate against a left-progressive Black candidate, a substantial minority of white voters backed Johnson, while a small but not inconsequential percentage of Black voters opted for Vallas.

Second, the city's Latino voters have become more politically diffuse and unpredictable since the days of Harold Washington and the Rainbow Coalition era, even as the Latino population has zoomed in size to 29 percent of the population. But even more noteworthy is how isolated the overwhelming number of Latino adults are from local politics, with a startling nine out of ten adults not even voting. While those who did cast a ballot certainly provided a bigger percentage of their votes to Johnson than did white or Asian voters, the majority still preferred Vallas in this election. Whether that means that sharpening class and racial divisions within the community are producing a more conservative Latino electorate, or that Johnson and his Latino surrogates simply were not as effective in their outreach as Washington was decades ago, or both, is not immediately clear.

Third, the enormous voter turnout gap in local elections, between white residents on the one hand and Black people and Latinos on the other, has yet to be solved despite decades of reforms to the voting process and despite some laudable progress in equal representation of elected officials. Whether that gap is due to growing disillusion by Black and Latino voters with the broken promises of those they put in office previously, or to the failure of the mass media to sufficiently report on and promote local contests, or to the belief that in a one-party town like Chicago voting does not lead to fundamental change, is also not clear. Yet the results are undeniable. Quite simply, the city's minority of white residents continues to exercise a vastly disproportionate say in the election of our local officials.

Endnotes

1 A Northwestern University poll of likely voters released a week before the runoff, for example, showed Vallas with majority support among whites (51-to-42 percent), Johnson with a substantially bigger majority among Black voters (55-to-28 percent), but Vallas with a plurality of the Latino vote (46-to-35 percent). Given that a large percentage of Black and Latino voters were still undecided, the Northwestern poll indicated that the city's growing Latino electorate might play a decisive role, while it also found that one-third of Latinos erroneously believed Vallas was Latino.

2 See Brookings Institution, "What we learned from the Chicago Mayoral Results," <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2023/04/05/what-we-learned-from-the-chicago-mayoral-results/>; also "Why Did Latino Voters Split on Election Day? 'The Biggest Lesson is Outreach,' Experts say," Block Club Chicago, <https://blockclubchicago.org/2023/04/19/why-did-chicagos-latino-voters-split-on-election-day-the-biggest-lesson-is-outreach-experts-say/>. Also Barbara Ransby, "Chicago's Rich Organizing Tradition Paid Off, Delivering Victory for Brandon Johnson," *The Nation*, April 13, 2023, <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/brandon-johnson-movement-organizing-chicago/> provides an excellent summary of grassroots efforts that produced Johnson's triumph.

3 Specifically, we use OLS regression with each outcome of interest as a dependent variable with the share of white (non-Hispanic or Latino), Black (non-Hispanic or Latino), Hispanic or Latino, and other population. Results for the other population for estimates of vote share for Brandon Johnson were omitted from the model due to collinearity so are omitted from the results presented here. Following Gelman et al. (2001), we omit precincts that had a larger number of registered voters than total population (90 precincts), precincts that had fewer than 100 votes (10 precincts), and one precinct that fit both the aforementioned criteria. As a robustness check, we examined more than a third of Chicago's precincts that were populated overwhelmingly by a single racial or ethnic group, white, Black, Latino, or Asian, as reported by 2020 U.S. Census data, and examined candidate vote share, voter turnout, and share of the adult population that voted for those precincts. We aggregated the numbers for each group on a citywide basis and found that estimates from this strategy were similar to results from the ecological regression approach.

4 A Victory Research Poll from March 20-23 showed Johnson with 71.8 percent support among Black voters, while a Northwestern University Poll from March 15-23rd, showed him with a 55-28 percent advantage among Black voters, with 17 percent still undecided. See: <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000187-0e31-dd77-a1cf-7f35f3c40000> and <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2023/03/new-poll-shows-dead-heat-between-chicago-mayoral-candidates/?fj=1>.

5 Total figures come from actual Chicago Board of Election Commissioners 2023 Municipal Runoff Election Results rather than regression estimates since the total figures are actually observed.

6 See Michael B. Preston, "The Election of Harold Washington: Black Voting Patterns in the 1983 Chicago Mayoral Race," *Political Science*, Vol. 16 No. 3 (Summer, 1983), p. 487. Also, Paul M. Green, "Chicago Elections: The Numbers and the Implications," *Illinois Issues*, (August, 1983), at <https://www.lib.niu.edu/1983/ii830813.html>.

Endnotes

- 7 The Victory and Northwestern polls diverged sharply on how white voters were leaning, with Victory reporting 71.7 percent favoring Vallas, while Northwestern's poll showed Vallas leading by just 51-to-42 percent among whites, with 9 percent undecided.
- 8 Gordan Mantler, *The Multiracial Promise: Harold Washington's Chicago and the Democratic Struggle in Reagan's America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023), p. 160. Also, Teresa Cordova, "Harold Washington and the Rise of Latino Electoral Politics in Chicago, 1982-1987," in *Chicago Politics and Society in the Late Twentieth Century*, David Montejano, editor, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), p.39.
- 9 Jaime Sanchez Jr., "'What Are We?' Latino Politics, Identity and Memory in the 1983 Chicago Mayoral Race," *Modern American History* (2021) 4, p. 281, at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/8CC4645BE89B591A17DFC00EDDA35768/S2515045621000213a.pdf/what-are-we-latino-politics-identity-and-memory-in-the-1983-chicago-mayoral-election.pdf>. Preston, p. 487-488, asserts that only 50 percent of Latinos voted for Washington but cites no sources for his claim, while Sanchez' account is based on exit polls conducted that year by the Midwest Voter Registration and Education Project.
- 10 Green, "Chicago Election..." at <https://www.lib.niu.edu/1983/ii830813.html>.
- 11 See Daniel J. Hopkins, "Declining Turnout in Big City Elections: A Growing Problem for Democratic Accountability," Manhattan Institute Issue Brief, May 18, 2021, at: <https://manhattan.institute/article/declining-turnout-in-big-city-elections-a-growing-problem-for-democratic-accountability>; also Daniel Denvir, "Voter Turnout in U.S. Mayoral Elections is Pathetic, But It Wasn't Always This Way," *Bloomberg News*, May 22, 2015, at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-05-22/voter-turnout-in-u-s-mayoral-elections-is-pathetic-but-it-wasn-t-always-this-way>.
- 12 Mantler, *The Multiracial Promise*, p. 159.
- 13 These figures omit the precincts that had a larger number of registered voters than total population (90 precincts), precincts that had fewer than 100 votes (10 precincts), and one precinct that fit both the aforementioned criteria.
- 14 For a detailed account of how that campaign managed to transform 87 percent Latino opposition to Washington in the primary into 75 percent support for him just a few weeks later in General Election, see Sanchez, "What Are We?" pp. 275-281; also Cordova, "Harold Washington..." pp. 37-40.

