

Jane Byrne: Chicagoans Elect First Black Female Mayor

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The late Harold Washington was Chicago's first Black mayor, elected in 1983, serving until his premature death at age-65 on November 25, 1987, the day before the Thanksgiving holiday that year.

No one before or since was like him, affectionately called Harold by admirers, his time in office Chicago's finest hour.

Of the 14 Dem aspirants competing in the February 26 primary, six were Black, two winning more voter support than others.

On April 2, Lori Lightfoot (Chicago's first openly gay mayoral candidate) and Toni Preckwinkle met in the runoff election, the winner becoming Chicago's first Black female mayor, Jane Byrne the only other woman to hold the city's highest office, serving from April 1979 - April 1983.

With nearly all votes counted, Lightfoot won a landslide victory with 74% of the vote.

"Today, you did more than make history," she told supporters. "You created a movement for change." The proof will be in her performance.

She was a federal prosecutor, earlier involved in investigating Chicago corruption. She formerly served as chief administrator of the city's Department of Professional Standards, a defunct police oversight group.

Most recently, she serving as a senior equity partner in the Litigation and Conflict Resolution Group at Mayer Brown LLP, providing services for the firm's clients. Her responsibilities included involvement on its Diversity and Inclusion Committee.

Preckwinkle is president of the Cook Count Board of Commissioners, a former Chicago City Council member and alderman, an advocate of affordable housing, a living wage, and other social issues, a strong opponent of notorious city police brutality and use of excessive force against least advantaged residents.

According to University of Illinois-Chicago (UIC) Political Science Professor Dick Simpson, Preckwinkle's self-declared progressiveness is dubious, calling her part of the infamous Dem-dominated Chicago machine.

Closely tied to longtime Chicago pol Edward Burke, aged-75, the machine got him reelected despite facing an ongoing FBI probe into his activities.

In January, an unsealed federal criminal complaint charged him with attempted extortion for allegedly using his position as alderman to try steering business to his private law firm from a company seeking to renovate a fast-food restaurant in his ward.

If convicted, he faces up to 20 years in prison. The complaint also alleged he asked one of the company's officials in December 2017 to attend a fundraiser for Preckwinkle, a cross she bore for close association with Burke.

Earlier, she supported former Cook County Democratic Chairman Joe Berrios, responsible for discriminatory property tax assessments during his time in office.

Supporters praised Preckwinkle's involvement in working with community organizations. Ties to the Chicago machine defeated her.

Lightfoot is machine connected as well, but less so than Preckwinkle. Supporters consider her a disruptor of the status quo, not seen in Chicago since Harold Washington's time in office.

Promising police and public safety reforms, some activists consider Lightfoot's time as a federal prosecutor a matter of concern, questioning whether she'll follow through on pledges made.

Her ties to city criminal justice and police operations make her suspect. She can dispel concerns by changing status quo politics in city hall.

When serving as chief administrator of the city's Department of Professional Standards, she acted against few complaints of police abuse.

She called for increased prosecutions of gun-related violence as a way to reduce it, targeting Black youths, a way to increase incarcerations instead of reducing them.

According to the Citizens Police Data Project, as Office of Professional Standards head from 2002 - 2004, only 1.8% of complaints made by civilians against police were sustained - the city infamously known as the police repression capital of the nation.

If elected, she said on day one, she'd call Chicago Police Superintendent Eddie Johnson to support his "mission to serve and protect," notably to reduce gun violence.

The most effective way is by increasing city social services, including affordable housing, improved public schools, and police respect for all Chicagoans, especially its most disadvantaged residents, polar opposite how things are today.

Will Lightfoot make a difference as city mayor? It's long overdue. She's got a lot of proving to do. Corporate interests backing her campaign made her suspect.

She's beholden to what got her elected. Grassroots Collaborative and Grassroots Illinois Action executive director Amisha Patel expressed concern, saying:

She failed to clearly articulate a progressive vision for city governance, believing she's "deeply flawed," adding:

Corporate and similar "(c)ontributions tell a pretty clear story" about who she's beholden to.

They sent “a pretty clear message about where business thinks they’ve got their best shot of maintaining an agenda that puts them at the center and the rest of us on the margins.”

It’s the way it’s mostly been throughout city history, notably under father and son Daley for 40 years and outgoing mayor Rahm Emanuel.

Still, Dick Simpson hopes for “a new day in (city) politics.” Any positive change from the dismal status quo will improve things.

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