Near-record low turnout in first round of Chicago municipal election

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Chicago completed the first round of municipal elections on Tuesday, with former federal prosecutor Lori Lightfoot and Democratic Party boss Toni Preckwinkle emerging from a 14-candidate field that attracted less than 541,000 voters, just a third of registered voters in the city. The two front-runners, both of whom are black women, ran campaigns based on identity politics in order to obscure their right-wing policies.

The near-record low turnout reflects widespread disgust with Democratic Party rule in the city, especially among youth, who largely abstained from voting. Among those who did vote, there were signs of a shift to the left, particularly in the defeats suffered by candidates for mayor and alderman who were regarded as stalwarts of the political establishment and the success of candidates tied to or endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) or the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

According to unofficial results from the Chicago Board of Elections, 540,784 people voted in the municipal primary, out of a total of 1,581,755 registered voters—a turnout of only 34.19 percent. The election only narrowly avoided the lowest turnout on record—33 percent, set in 2007, when Richard M. Daley faced two relatively weak challengers.

Breaking down the election results, it is clear that neither Lightfoot nor Preckwinkle was able to garner any genuine mass support. Lightfoot, who came in first, received only 93,580 votes, or 17.43 percent of the total. Preckwinkle won just 86,181, or 16.05 percent. Coming in third and failing to make the runoff was Bill Daley, who got 78,955 votes, or 14.7 percent.

The political establishment expected Daley, the son and younger brother of two former Chicago mayors, to advance. A section of the pseudo-left and trade union bureaucracy advocated a vote for Preckwinkle above other candidates in order to prevent Daley from reaching the second round, where his support among Chicago's wealthy, including the city's richest resident, right-wing billionaire Ken Griffin, would allow him to outspend his opponent and bank on his name recognition among older residents.

Young people largely declined to support any of the candidates, with the vote total for those aged 25-34 amounting to only 77,000, down from the 163,000 who voted in the fall midterm elections, a 53 percent drop. Those who voted comprise only a small fraction of the 352,000 registered voters in that age group, which is actually the single biggest age group of registered voters in the city. Even smaller than that total is the number of voters 18-24, which was under 10,000.

Throughout the day on Tuesday, the Chicago Board of Elections openly worried about the low turnout, and there was a massive push on regular and social media to shame non-voters into turning out. This effort only narrowly succeeded in bringing out a late surge of voters, who prevented the turnout from being the worst on record.

Lightfoot came in first largely due to her undeserved reputation as being a "clean" candidate, unsullied by the municipal corruption revealed by the indictment of long-time alderman Ed Burke, to whom Preckwinkle and many other Democrats have ties. In fact, this is precisely the role Lightfoot has been groomed to play by the Democratic Party, which brought her in under the Daley administration to deflect concerns over corruption in hiring practices. She was later utilized by Mayor Rahm Emanuel to defuse widespread anger at police violence in the wake of the Laquan McDonald shooting. Her support came largely from wards on the wealthier North Side of the city.

Preckwinkle, for her part, received most of her political support from the unions, particularly the CTU, which endorsed her in early December and gave her a platform and photo opportunities during the charter teachers' strikes at Acero and Chicago International Charter

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Schools. A large portion of her votes came from the South Side, and she came in first in the wards around Hyde Park and the University of Chicago, where her political base is centered.

Aside from the mayoral election, there were a number of candidates associated with the DSA and CTU who won alderman seats or are headed into runoffs on April 2. While much of their support came from genuine anger over the stunning growth of inequality as well as constant attacks on the working class by the city government, when the new City Council is seated they will constitute a bloc dedicated to providing a left cover for reactionary policies that will be pursued by whoever ends up as mayor.

DSA member Carlos Ramirez-Rosa was reelected after being endorsed by the Democratic Party ward organization, the DSA and the CTU, and he will be joined on the council by Daniel La Spata, another DSA member who won an alderman seat outright. Despite not being endorsed by the DSA, La Spata beat incumbent Proco "Joe" Moreno largely due to Moreno's association with gentrification in his Near North Side ward.

Maria Hadden, board member of Black Youth Project 100 and a candidate endorsed by the CTU, also won her election outright, unseating long-time alderman Joe Moore in the 49th ward on the Far North Side. Once considered an "independent" alderman for votes he took against the Daley administration, Moore's support had largely eroded as a result of his backing for Emanuel on the City Council.

Other DSA members who made it to the runoff are Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez, Byron Sigcho-Lopez and Andre Vasquez. Rodriguez-Sanchez won more votes in the first round than incumbent alderman Deb Mell, the daughter of long-time alderman Dick Mell, whom she replaced in 2013. Sigcho-Lopez also won a plurality in his race, which was for an open seat in the 25th ward. Vasquez came in second to Patrick O'Connor, Emanuel's floor leader on the City Council. He was not endorsed by the DSA, which endorsed another DSA member in the race, Ugo Okere.

While those who did end up voting were largely divided over which mayoral or even alderman candidates to support, several non-binding referenda received overwhelming support. In 18 precincts where the referendum question appeared on the ballot, voters supported lifting the Illinois state ban on rent control.

In 14 of the precincts where the referendum appeared on the ballot, voters supported using money from legalized marijuana for reinvestment in neighborhoods badly affected by the so-called war on drugs.

For each of two major projects—the Obama presidential library and El Paseo, a bike trail—the precincts to whom the question was put overwhelmingly approved the creation of community benefits agreements. Both projects are on the South Side and, as it is with other city projects, the benefits accrue to connected individuals and agencies rather than the ward or city at large.

Both the Lightfoot and Preckwinkle campaigns have begun to position themselves for the runoff election, with each trying to argue why it is the "progressive" alternative. Regardless of who wins, she can be expected to receive the support of the CTU and the pseudo-left, which will continue to stoke illusions in the Democratic Party.

CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), issued a statement following the election in which he said, "An African-American woman on the cusp of the mayor's seat is a monumental achievement." He added that struggles for equal access to health care, an end to charter school expansion, an elected school board and police accountability, among other things, were "no longer just dreams or grassroots conversations, but realities of a new day in Chicago and the hallmark of our fight going forward."

The election of either Preckwinkle or Lightfoot will be nothing of the sort. Both are creatures of the Democratic Party and will faithfully carry out the agenda of the financial aristocracy, though they are more likely to offer positions and lucrative opportunities to union and pseudo-left operatives like Sharkey.

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