

# *How Brandon Johnson Made Up Ground and Won Chicago's Mayoral Race*

Mr. Johnson, a progressive county commissioner, won over liberal voters across the city after finishing second in a first round of balloting.



Figure 1 Brandon Johnson, the mayor-elect of Chicago, appeared with Senator Bernie Sanders in the days before Chicago's election. Credit...Jim Vondruska/Getty Images



By [Julie Bosman](#) and [Mitch Smith](#)

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CHICAGO — In the final days of the mayoral campaign in Chicago, Brandon Johnson drew more than 4,000 people to a jubilant rally featuring Senator Bernie Sanders, who endorsed him. He crisscrossed the South and West Sides, visiting six churches in a single Sunday. In a last push on Election Day, an army of volunteers for Mr. Johnson knocked on 46,000 doors across the city, whipping up enthusiasm and encouraging last-minute voters to get to the polls.

The coalition that Mr. Johnson needed — young people, Black voters on the South and West Sides, a sizable number of Latino voters, white progressives on the North Side and along the lakefront — was coming together.

On Tuesday, Mr. Johnson, a Democratic county commissioner who was unknown to many Chicagoans a few months ago, came from behind to defeat Paul Vallas, a more conservative Democrat and a former school executive who entered the runoff campaign with a significantly larger base of support. Mr. Vallas, 69, was the favorite of many moderate and conservative voters, running on a law-and-order platform in which he promised to expand the police force and crack down on crime.



*Figure 2* On Tuesday, Mr. Johnson, a county commissioner who was unknown to many Chicagoans a few months ago, came from behind to defeat Paul Vallas. Credit...Evan Cobb for The New York Times

But even though large numbers of Chicagoans had said in polls that they considered public safety to be the most important issue in the election, it was Mr. Johnson, 47, who captured the slim majority of votes in Tuesday's election. He tapped into the vast network of progressive groups in liberal Chicago — from the powerful teachers' union to smaller, ward-based political organizations — who focused on field work to rally voters. Mr. Johnson pitched voters on a public safety plan that went beyond policing but distanced himself from past support for defunding of law enforcement.

Mr. Johnson took advantage of widespread [doubts](#) among Democratic voters over Mr. Vallas's party identification, ever since the emergence of a television [interview](#) from 2009 in which Mr. Vallas called himself "more of a Republican than a Democrat."

And Mr. Johnson capitalized on key endorsements to bolster his credibility among voters who did not know him well, especially those from Senator Sanders and Representative Jesús G. García, a progressive congressman with a base of support in mostly Hispanic neighborhoods on the West Side.

“You walk into a runoff with a certain base, but then you’ve got to expand your base beyond that,” Andre Vasquez, a City Council member who organized for Mr. Johnson, said on Wednesday. “The Latino community did better for Brandon than expected. The North Side performed well. It feels like a coalition of everything.”

Still, Mr. Johnson will take charge of a deeply divided Chicago. Mr. Vallas, who was once in charge of the city’s public school system, won nearly 49 percent of the vote to Mr. Johnson’s 51 percent, with thousands of mail-in ballots yet to be counted. In the first round of voting in February, Mr. Vallas received the most votes.



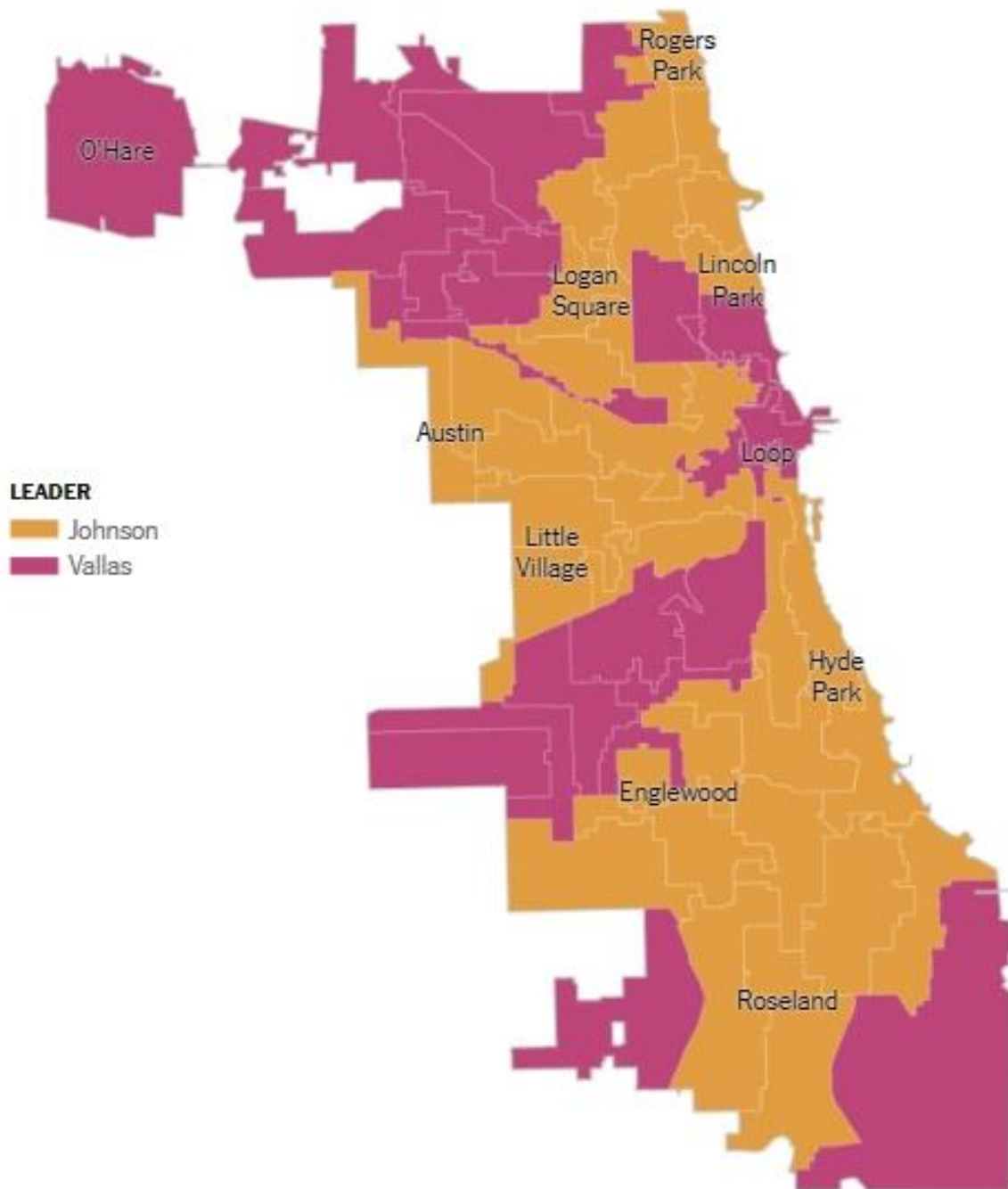
*Figure 3* Large numbers of Chicagoans said in polls that they considered public safety to be the most important issue in the election. Credit...Mustafa Hussain for The New York Times

Ahead of the runoff, Mr. Johnson worked to increase turnout among young voters and broaden his support among Hispanic residents.

“That’s one thing that really caught my attention about Brandon: He’s out here with my people, my Hispanic community, advocating for himself,” said Lily Cruz, 22, a college student from the Southwest Side who voted for Mr. Johnson. “I feel like he has put more effort than I’ve seen any other politician that wants to run for office,” she added.

Mr. Johnson performed well in some largely white neighborhoods near Lake Michigan and in predominantly Hispanic areas northwest of downtown, just as he had in a first round of voting in February. But unlike then, Mr. Johnson, who is Black, dominated on Tuesday in wards with Black majorities, winning 80 percent of the vote in some of those areas on the South and West Sides.

## Chicago Mayor Runoff Election Results



Results as of April 5, 5:48 p.m. E.T. with 92% of votes in. • Source: The Associated Press. • By The New York Times

In both rounds of the election, Mr. Vallas, who is white, ran up huge margins around downtown and on the Northwest and Southwest Sides in largely white neighborhoods that are home to many city workers. In the runoff, Mr. Vallas made notable inroads with Hispanic voters



southwest of downtown, but he failed to win over many Black voters after having emphasized endorsements from well-known Black politicians, including [Jesse White, who was Illinois's longest-serving secretary of state](#).

Chicago has roughly equal numbers of Black, white and Hispanic residents, and race has long played a role in the city's politics. Mr. Johnson will take over next month from Mayor Lori Lightfoot, who failed to qualify for the runoff after serving one term. Ms. Lightfoot, the first Black woman and the first openly gay person to lead Chicago, carried all 50 wards in the 2019 runoff, but her support eroded amid labor battles, rising crime and the pandemic.

Anthony Quezada, a Cook County commissioner from the Northwest Side, credited a blitz of support from neighborhood progressive groups for spreading the word about Mr. Johnson and persuading undecided voters to embrace his public safety plan over Mr. Vallas's.

"We just spent, as organizers, a lot of dedicated time talking to people, listening to people's real concerns and meeting them where they're at and really saying, 'Look, let's give this a chance,'" Mr. Quezada said.

Mr. Quezada said that when he had knocked on doors to collect petition signatures for Mr. Johnson last fall, at a time when the fledgling campaign was just starting to print literature, many voters had never heard of Mr. Johnson. When Mr. Quezada canvassed again last Saturday, he said, after a rally with two members of Congress, every voter he met knew about Mr. Johnson.



*Figure 4* Mr. Vallas came in first in an earlier round of voting but lost the election on Tuesday. Credit

The result on Tuesday, Mr. Quezada said, was a "huge, huge rebuke" of the sort of tough-on-crime policies pitched by Mr. Vallas.

"What the people of Chicago just said is, 'We want to be invested in,'" Mr. Quezada said. "'We don't want to just be punished.'"

In one Far South Side ward that Ms. Lightfoot had carried by a large margin in February, Mr. Johnson was leading this time with more than 80 percent of the vote. Ronnie

Mosley, a progressive Democrat who was ahead in that ward's City Council race, said that Mr.

Johnson had been able to win over voters through church visits, union endorsements and the support of neighborhood groups.

“The excitement about what’s possible under this administration, I think, really drove it home,” said Mr. Mosley, who added that he saw parallels between the multicultural coalition that elected Mr. Johnson and the one that propelled Chicago’s first Black mayor, Harold Washington, to office 40 years ago. “Folks were able to again feel that they could be heard, seen, felt, and action would actually come about on the issues that were important to them.”

Before the first round of voting, Paul Rosenfeld said, progressives in his North Side ward split their votes between Mr. Johnson and Mr. García, who finished fourth citywide. But ahead of the runoff, Mr. Rosenfeld, the Democratic Party committee person in his ward, said that liberal voters had coalesced behind Mr. Johnson, with canvassers from United Working Families and labor groups going on a door-knocking blitz.

“Progressive Democratic voters were able to really focus on just two candidates and see the stark difference between the two,” he said. “That made all the difference.”

Tom Bowen, a Democratic strategist who worked for Rahm Emanuel and for Ms. Lightfoot, said that Mr. Johnson had prevailed, in large part, by appealing to liberals with the closest identification to the Democratic Party.

“He ran a great race, but it is also true that this is an 80 percent Democratic town,” he said. “He had a low bar to clear by being the Democrat with most ties to Democratic voters.”

Now, Mr. Bowen said, the mayor-elect is about to meet the reality of governing, but with a sizable coalition of Chicago voters.

“He has the support of the progressive North Siders and the Black wards on the South Side,” he said, “which is the most enduring coalition in Chicago politics.”

### **Thanks for reading The Times.**

Michael Gerstein contributed reporting.

Julie Bosman is the Chicago bureau chief of The Times, reporting on the Midwest. She has written on the coronavirus pandemic, education, politics, law enforcement and literature. [@juliebosman](#)

Mitch Smith covers the Midwest and the Great Plains. Since joining The Times in 2014, he has written extensively about gun violence, oil pipelines, state-level politics and the national debate over police tactics. He is based in Chicago. [@mitchsmith](#)