

Not Quite There Yet: Racial/Ethnic Voting Patterns and the 2019 Chicago Mayoral Election

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Introduction

The election of Barack Obama first as United States senator and soon thereafter as president created hope in many for a post-racial political environment, in part because he managed to win a national election for president at all, and in part because he won both the senate and presidential races with so many white and Hispanic votes. Soon thereafter, in 2013, the Supreme Court in *Shelby County v. Holder* struck down Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act, the coverage formula for Section 5 federal preclearance of changes to election procedures in places with histories of voting rights violations, essentially opining that the trial court lacked sufficient evidence of persistent voting rights violations against racial/ethnic minorities, seeming to signal that the Court also thought race was no longer a significant factor in voting. With the statewide election of Obama and Carol Mosely Braun to the U.S. Senate, Roland Burris and Kwame Raoul as Attorney General, Jesse White as Secretary of State and Susana Mendoza as Comptroller, and the election of African Americans and Hispanics to Congress and the state legislature in several majority white districts, many may feel that we have achieved a post-racial political environment in Illinois.

The media portrayed the 2019 Chicago mayoral election in terms of whether or not voters were voting for “change” or “reform”, a reasonable hypothesis given the allegations against leading City Council members made public in the months prior to the race, Lori Lightfoot’s work on police reform, and because going back decades every mayor had been deeply embedded in Democratic party organizations, including Harold Washington, and at a national level, Rahm Emanuel.¹ However, to the extent that was true, this research argues that racial and ethnic considerations continue to shape the choices of many voters.

The following report analyzes likely mayoral preferences of Chicago’s African Americans, Hispanics and whites, finding that in spite of the April runoff election pitting two African-American candidates, Lori Lightfoot and Toni Preckwinkle, against one another, there is strong evidence from voting patterns that large numbers of voters took race into account in their choices. In the February primary election, precinct-level voting results aligned closely to the racial/ethnic composition of precincts. While we cannot dismiss the possibility that voters were voting for “reform” or for other policy positions when they overwhelmingly elected Lightfoot, the data shows that potential voters were more likely to sit out the April election in precincts with large numbers of Hispanic or white voters, than they were in African American precincts. The decision not to vote at all could be a result of racial/ethnic identity for some citizens as much as would be the choice to vote for one or another candidate all or in part because of race, particularly given that in the 2019 mayoral general election the only two candidates were members of the same racial group.

¹ See, for instance among numerous articles and publications, Mary Mitchell, “Lori Lightfoot rides desire for change to historic victory” Chicago Sun Times, April 2, 2019.

Preferences of African American, White and Hispanic Voters

The February primary had an unusually high number of candidates, which provides an opportunity to consider racial preferences more than is the case in most elections. In many elections, the small number of candidates can make it difficult to determine whether a voter was choosing a candidate based on their racial/ethnic identification, their background, or their political positions. However, in 2019, there were multiple candidates who were African American, white, and Hispanic with widely varying backgrounds and experience.

Clustering of February primary candidates by race/ethnicity

To begin our understanding of the role of race/ethnicity in the election, we begin by presenting a formal factor analysis, which is a statistical means of identifying precincts whose voters voted in similar ways, which is to say the procedure reveals common “factors”. A factor score can range from plus one to minus one. The closer to one a score is the more strongly it defines the factor. The closer to minus one a score is, the more its absence defines the factor. The results were clear: In the February primary, voters and precincts organized themselves around the racial/ethnic identity of the candidates.

The factor analysis could have produced any number of relevant factors, or none at all. The analysis revealed three statistically significant factors defining precinct voting preferences in February, each of which clearly had some racial/ethnic basis. Chicago had a large set of precincts that voted mostly for the African American candidates in various combinations, but little for the others, a large set of precincts where voters voted for the white candidates in various combinations, but rarely for others, and a third set of precincts where voters voted for the Hispanic candidates and a mixture of the other candidates. The “African American” factor was notable for correlating with very low support for Joyce (a negative score of - .345) and the “White” factor for its very low support for Wilson (a negative score of - .309). The “Hispanic” factor featured very high support for Mendoza and Chico, and unusually low support for Wilson, Ford and Preckwinkle.

Table 1. Statistically Meaningful Precinct Voting Factors and Scores

“African American Factor”	Score	“White Factor”	Score	“Hispanic Factor”	Score
Enyia	.866	Vallas	.850	Mendoza	.879
Lightfoot	.864	Daley	.725	Wilson	-.794
Preckwinkle	.799	McCarthy	.679	Chico	.752
Sales	.476	Joyce	.617	Ford	-.631
Joyce	-.345	Fioretti	.483	McCarthy	.470
		Kozlar	.435	Preckwinkle	-.339
		Wilson	-.309		

The factor scores of precincts were highly correlated with the estimated race/ethnicity of Chicago’s precincts. Precincts with high “African American” factor scores also had high numbers of African American residents; precincts with high “White” factor scores had predominantly white populations, and high “Hispanic” factor scores corresponded to higher Hispanic population.

Correlation of precinct race/ethnicity with race/ethnicity of February candidates

Another way of presenting the same finding is to do simple correlations between the percentage race/ethnic voting age population (VAP) of precincts and the percentage vote for the aggregated candidates by race/ethnicity. A correlation measures association of two items with a scores ranging from 1 to -1 with scores near “1” indicating strong association, around “0” indicating no association, and around “- 1” a negative association. The table below shows that the highest correlations were white VAP with white candidate vote (.689), African American VAP with African American candidate vote (.794), and Hispanic VAP with Hispanic candidate vote (.881). Higher African American VAP corresponded to a lower vote for white candidates (-.668) In other words, as a group’s share of a precinct’s population rises, that precinct becomes more likely to vote for a candidate of that group, and vice versa.

Table 2. Correlation of Race VAP with Voting Percentage by Race of February Candidates

	Percent for White Candidates	Percent for African American Candidates	Percent for Hispanic Candidates
White VAP	.689	-.516	.037
African American VAP	-.668	.794	-.601
Hispanic VAP	.102	-.532	.881

Estimating the race/ethnicity of April voters, non-voters, and who they voted for

Because the race or ethnicity of voters and who they voted for is not in any way recorded when they cast a ballot, analysts must use inferential statistical methods to estimate how members of different racial/ethnic groups likely voted. The strongest method for making these estimates in places where the racial/ethnic composition of precincts is mixed is ecological regression, a statistical process that estimates the effect of one or more predictor variables (here the percent of VAP of a race/ethnicity) on an outcome variable (here the percent of all VAP a candidate received).

Our estimates for the April runoff election in Table 3 show that voters in the three largest racial/ethnic groups strongly supported Lightfoot, with her strongest proportional vote coming among whites and Hispanics.

Table 3. Ecological Regression Estimates of Results by Voter Race for February Election²

	Lightfoot	Preckwinkle
African American Voters	66%	34%
White Voters	83%	17%
Hispanic Voters	81%	19%

The other commonly used method for identifying voter race/ethnicity is utilization of homogenous precincts. This method identifies precincts that are almost exclusively composed of members of a single racial/ethnic group and compiles election results in those precincts. This can be determinative of how members of a particular racial/ethnic group vote, because members of that group were the only, or close to the only, voters in that precinct.³

The homogenous precinct analysis validates the ecological regressions with similar results. Table 4 shows that in the February primary voters in Chicago’s 90% white precincts cast 63% of their votes for the white candidates, voters in Chicago’s 90% African American precincts cast 80% of their votes for the African American candidates, and voters in Chicago’s 90% Hispanic precincts cast 49% of their votes for the two Hispanic candidates.

In the April runoff election, while not necessarily voting for a same-race candidate, whites and Hispanics as groups clearly voted differently than did African Americans.

Table 4 Candidate Vote Totals in Chicago Precincts Composed 90% of a Single Racial/Ethnic Group

	February White Candidates	February African American Candidates	February Hispanic Candidates	April Lightfoot	April Preckwinkle
90% White Precincts	63.5%	23.2%	13.3%	81.1%	18.9%
90% African American Precincts	14.2%	80.2%	5.6%	67.9%	32.1%
90% Hispanic Precincts	26.9%	24.2%	48.9%	75.7%	24.3%

² The ecological regression results for the April election had a high statistical error, likely owing to the low turnout in the elections and the high non-citizen proportion of Hispanics, but we are satisfied that they are reasonable estimates of the makeup of composition of the Lightfoot and Preckwinkle voters.

³ The weakness of this method is that members of a racial/ethnic group have been shown to vote differently in places that are integrated rather than segregated because on average they have higher incomes or may be more strongly disposed to interact with persons of a different race, or have different experiences of racial segregation.

Tables 5 through 7 summarize the vote totals by ward in their precincts that are at least 90% of one major racial/ethnic group.

Table 5. Vote Totals in 90% African American Precincts by Ward

Ward	February African American Candidates	February White Candidates	February Hispanic Candidates	April Lightfoot	April Preckwinkle
3	3,511	566	205	2,720	1,566
4	3,045	393	173	2,198	1,526
5	3,792	554	212	3,039	1,807
6	7,747	1,292	478	6,895	3,402
7	5,582	1,003	503	4,827	2,337
8	10,306	1,936	746	8,759	4,508
9	8,160	1,482	578	7,290	3,159
10	365	71	29	313	154
15	785	124	52	725	308
16	2,524	500	185	2,356	1,045
17	4,591	810	303	4,101	1,841
18	2,491	608	220	2,287	978
19	221	70	23	247	96
20	3,831	530	230	3,141	1,544
21	9,631	1,719	725	8,976	4,038
24	3,430	496	210	2,990	1,278
27	866	187	63	741	374
28	3,615	532	202	3,122	1,323
29	3,286	602	257	3,085	1,245
34	8,481	1,751	662	7,674	3,432
37	2,470	434	174	2,309	858

Table 6. Vote Totals in 90% White Precincts by Ward

Ward	February African American Candidates	February White Candidates	February Hispanic Candidates	April Lightfoot	April Preckwinkle
2	668	1182	237	1,683	287
19	395	4,160	443	3,897	246
27	73	70	30	127	22
32	250	320	73	532	95
38	147	651	195	739	96
39	205	375	136	601	117
41	1,399	44,86	1,155	5,185	734
43	398	656	127	985	168
44	164	133	41	243	60
46	228	102	42	257	84
47	231	93	49	250	85
48	399	268	87	516	224

Table 7. Vote Totals in 90% Hispanic Precincts by Ward

Ward	February African American Candidates	February White Candidates	February Hispanic Candidates	April Lightfoot	April Preckwinkle
12	224	186	367	361	156
14	429	665	1,277	1,078	278
15	193	226	457	708	195
16	46	56	109	128	567
22	826	821	1,564	1,671	554
23	91	146	233	239	69
26	70	63	87	129	62
31	86	86	102	198	67
35	210	163	233	337	132
36	72	91	119	213	57

Disparity in Race/Ethnicity of Voter Roll-Off from February Primary to April Runoff

As important as was how voters participated in the election, equally important was where and how they didn't. The pattern of voter turnout shifted from the February election to the April election. About 34,000 (6%) fewer ballots were cast in the April runoff than in the February primary.

The roll-off in voting from the February primary to April runoff did not occur evenly across the city. As the figures in Table 8 show, roll-off levels in precincts from February to April correlated highly with the race of the candidate voters voted for in the February primary. We found a positive correlation between April levels of voting in precincts and how strongly they voted for African American candidates in February. *Precincts that initially voted for African American candidates on average increased their voter turnout in April.* The pattern was the opposite regarding votes for white and Hispanic candidates in February. *Voter turnout declined in April where there was more support for white and/or Hispanic candidates in February, hence the positive correlations of .446 and .508 respectively.*

Table 8. Correlation of Vote Total Roll-off from February to April Election with Percent Vote for Same-Race Candidates

	African American Candidates	White Candidates	Hispanic Candidates
Correlation with voter Decline	-.344	.446	.508

Voter roll-off also correlated with the race/ethnicity of a precinct's voters. As Table 9 shows, there was a correlation of .305 between the white population of precinct and the amount of voter roll-off. The correlation was the opposite for African-American precinct population.

Table 9. Correlation of Vote Roll-off with Race/Ethnic Percent of Precinct VAP

	Percent of Precinct VAP White	Percent of Precinct VAP African American	Percent of Precinct VAP Hispanic
Correlation of Voter Decline with Race/Ethnicity of Precinct	.305	- .464	.330

Looked at yet another way, there was a high correlation between a precinct's factor score on the African American, white and Hispanic factors and their April vote and roll-off. For example, a precinct's white factor score level correlated (.296) with amount of voter roll-off.

Table 10. Correlation Between Precinct Factor and Voter Roll-off

	February African American Factor	February White Factor	February Hispanic Factor
Voting Roll-off from February to April	- .181	.296	.459

The number of votes cast in the April runoff in the homogenous precincts dropped in precincts of all three racial/ethnic majorities from their February primary totals. However, the decrease in participation was greatest in the Hispanic precincts, where April participation was only three-fourths of February participation, followed by the white precincts, which had a decrease of almost 12%.

Table 11. Percent Change in Number of Votes Cast from February to April by Race/Ethnicity of Precinct VAP

Predominant Race/Ethnicity of Precinct	Change in Votes Cast from February to April
90% White	-11.9%
90% African American	-3.4%
90% Hispanic	-27.8%

The ecological regression for the April election estimated white turnout as a percent of VAP at 30.6%, African American at 29.4% and Hispanic at only 9.3%.

Who Got the Votes of the February Losing Candidates?

Because the election narrowed from 14 candidates in the February primary to 2 in the April runoff, many voters who were to vote in both elections had to change their votes from one of the 12 losing candidates to either Lightfoot or Preckwinkle. Changes in Lightfoot's and Preckwinkle's vote totals from February to April were calculated by precinct. We can infer how support for February candidates shifted to the April finalists by calculating the correlation between a precinct's support in February and additional votes for Lightfoot or Preckwinkle in April.

As we can observe below, there was a high correlation between February votes for white and Hispanic candidates and increased voting for Lightfoot in April. There was a modest correlation between February votes for Preckwinkle and April votes for Preckwinkle, suggesting a small trend toward African American voters moving from the other African American candidates to her, but not doing so for Lightfoot.

Table 12. Correlation of Additional Candidate Votes in April Runoff with February Primary Vote by Candidate Race

	February vote for African American Candidates	February vote for White Candidates	February vote for Hispanic Candidates
Additional Lightfoot Votes in April	-.060	.790	.284
Additional Preckwinkle Votes in April	.232	.041	.175

Calculating the correlations between Lightfoot's and Preckwinkle's April vote totals and the vote totals of each of the 12 other February candidates' vote totals suggests who each of the February candidates' voters may have voted for in April.

- Lightfoot probably picked up most of the voters for Vallas, Daley and McCarthy, and picked up very few of the voters for Ford or Wilson.
- Preckwinkle probably picked up most of the voters for Enyia, Wilson and Ford, and almost none of the voters for Chico, Mendoza, Joyce, Vallas, Daley or McCarthy.

Table 13. Correlation of Vote for Losing February Candidates with April Lightfoot and Preckwinkle Votes

February Candidate	Correlation with April Lightfoot	Correlation with April Preckwinkle
Chico	.245	-.207
Mendoza	.202	-.094
Enyia	.336	.762
Ford	-.057	.207
Sales	.257	.239
Wilson	-.189	.255
Fioretti	.294	.096
Kozlar	.276	-.003
Joyce	.372	-.229
Vallas	.687	-.069
Daley	.651	-.004
McCarthy	.397	-.236

Conclusion

Clearly Chicago has made progress since the days of Harold Washington, when between African Americans and whites, at least, voting was astonishingly polarized. In the 1987 Mayoral general election, when Harold Washington ran against Edward Vrdolyak and Donald Haider, Washington polled only 9.4% of White Northwest Side voters and 4.6% of White Southwest Side voters. He received 97.9% of South Side African American voters and 97.5% of West Side African American voters.

Analysis of the 2019 Chicago election, about 30 years later, indicates a much higher willingness of residents of most Chicago neighborhoods to vote for candidates of different race or ethnicity than themselves. In the runoff election, Lightfoot received her strongest support proportionally among whites and some white precincts on the northwest and southwest sides voted for her overwhelmingly. Still, the data indicates persistence of some racially influenced voting.

- The factor analysis neatly divided precincts into those supporting African American candidates, Hispanic candidates or white candidates.
- There was a high correlation between the race/ethnicity of voting age population of a precinct and the race of candidates it supported, and whether it supported Lightfoot or Preckwinkle.
- The homogenous precinct analysis showed a clear correspondence of the race/ethnicity of precincts and the race/ethnicity of the candidate.
- African American voter support for African American candidates remained particularly strong, though less so than thirty years ago.
- The high levels of voter roll-off from February to April in many areas of the city suggest that in many places the result was less full support for Lightfoot than unwillingness to vote for Preckwinkle.

As we move toward the legislative redistricting that will follow the 2020 Census, and consider various policy issues facing Chicago, we should be mindful that however much progress has been made, people's race/ethnicity is still a factor to some degree in public affairs.

Sources

Voting data was obtained from the website of the Chicago Board of Elections.

Voting Age Population data (VAP) was estimated by adjusting 2010 U.S. Census block population data to Census tract-level American Community Survey Data for 2012 through 2016 and aggregating blocks into precincts.

Paul Kleppner, James Lewis and Garth Taylor, *Metro Chicago Politics Atlas, 1992* Chicago Urban League, Metro Chicago Information Center and Northern Illinois University.

About the Author

Jim Lewis has over 25 years of experience analyzing, writing about, and actively engaging a variety of social policy issues. He was a principal investigator on Northwestern University's Illinois Families Study, the official evaluation of welfare reform in Illinois, was the City of Chicago's statistical consultant on three of its point-in-time counts of homeless persons, and provided expert testimony and affidavits in 1990s federal redistricting litigation regarding the Chicago Ward and Illinois Congressional remaps. Dr. Lewis has conducted program evaluations dealing with high school reform, insurance industry innovation, public housing relocation and workforce development.

Dr. Lewis has held the positions of Vice President for Research and Planning at the Chicago Urban League, Director of the Institute for Metropolitan Affairs at Roosevelt University (where he also taught urban studies and research methods), and Senior Program Officer and Director of Research and Evaluation for the Chicago Community Trust where he headed grant-making in human services, workforce development, policy advocacy and organization mergers.

Dr. Lewis holds his Ph.D. from Northwestern University in American History and has an appointment as a senior researcher in the Great Cities Institute at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Dr. Lewis' expertise includes statistics and modeling, survey design and interpretation, program evaluation, indicator and metrics systems design, and policy analysis.

About Rob Paral and Associates

Rob Paral and Associates help human service, healthcare, educational, governmental and other organizations to understand the community they serve. We provide new demographic, social and economic information and assess the human needs of populations. More information may be found at www.robparal.com