

Running a Registration Drive: New Voters Recast Chicago Politics

Michael Cordts

One of the most dramatic and memorable elections in recent U.S. history was the mayoral victory of Harold Washington in Chicago. In becoming Chicago's first black mayor in 1983, Washington first scored a come-from-behind primary win over the incumbent woman mayor (Jane Byrne) and the son of the founder of the city's Democratic Machine (Richard Daley), and then narrowly defeated a well-funded Republican candidate in the general election. These historic events were not chance occurrences. (As journalist Michael Cordts makes clear in this analysis, Washington's triumph was produced by a massive registration drive of black voters who were determined to make the city more responsive to their needs.)

The results of the organizers' efforts continue to be demonstrated in Chicago, by the way. Additional registration drives helped to fuel Washington's difficult but successful reelection bid in 1987, for which he had a rematch with Jane Byrne in the Democratic primary. Washington's second term was an abbreviated one, cut short by his sudden death from a heart attack in late 1987

Ed Gardner had never met Harold Washington. But the millionaire president of Chicago-based Soft Sheen hair products was convinced by Chicago black activist and former policeman Renault Robinson to chip in \$50,000 and the services of Soft Sheen's advertising department to produce radio spots urging people to register to vote and to "Come Alive October 5"—the registration deadline for the November general election.

Registration groups soon began meeting at Gardner's gleaming factory. Representatives from The Woodlawn Association; Rev. Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH; the People's Movement for Voter Registration; and from

People Organized for Welfare and Employment Rights (POWER) met for weekly "skull sessions." Those who had joined forces to protect what they saw as continuing decay of civil and economic rights for blacks and other minorities were soon convinced by Robinson, journalist Lu Palmer from the People's Movement, and POWER's grass roots organizer Slim Coleman that a massive registration drive could possibly bring a black to the mayoral office. It did. How did it happen?

Mayor Byrne politics

Early in Jane Byrne's administration, she had scored points with blacks when she and her newly acquired newspaperman-husband and political strategy advisor, Jim McMullen,

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moved into the gang-ravaged Cabrini Green housing project for a short time in March 1981.

But she passed over a black as interim school superintendent; replaced two black school board members with two white women opposed to desegregation; passed over a highly qualified black for superintendent of police; oversaw a gerrymandering of aldermanic districts that hurt blacks; and attempted to unseat a black alderman who proclaimed his independence from the dominant city Democratic Machine.

The clincher was appointing three whites to the Chicago Housing Authority board that serves a nearly all-black clientele. When blacks protested the appointment, the mayor made sure no blacks could disrupt the City Council approval meeting by packing the gallery with city workers.

A caller to a radio talk show suggested blacks strike back by boycotting ChicagoFest, a pet project of Mayor Byrne's. Rev. Jesse Jackson took up the idea, and it unified most of the black community. All of this generated deep distrust in Byrne's black constituency that, rightfully, claimed to have put her in office in the first place.

"You come to a point and you say, 'That's it.' The last appointment (to the Chicago Housing Authority) was it," said Nancy Jefferson, executive director of a West Side community council and a member of Byrne's transition task force.

The black registration drive

(Harold Washington was the two-term U.S. representative from Illinois's First District, the most stable and longest-lived black community in the United States.) In the spring of 1982, he was not completely convinced a black could be elected mayor of Chicago.

Washington demanded hard evidence that the "movement" was more than just an arithmetical possibility. Even though he won his last election by the widest margin in the country, he would not be a sacrificial lamb

in a mayoral race. But he gave the opposition hope.

He had told supporters in June to register 50,000 new black voters by October 5 (the last day of registration in Chicago's 2,914 precincts for the November 2 election), "and then maybe I'll run."

("I handed him 50,000 names before the deadline and said, 'Now you run,'" said Coleman. And, as Washington watched in amazement, that registration drive became a crusade.)

Said one black ward committeeman in early October, "If you're not registered in my neighborhood now, you stand to be humiliated."

These were the elements of this remarkable registration drive:

- More than one hundred community groups united under an umbrella organization called People's Movement for Voter Registration, including Nancy Jefferson's heavy-weight organization. People's Movement concentrated on seventeen of the city's fifty wards that are predominantly black, with special emphasis on public housing residents still enraged at the mayor. Registration tables were set up at supermarkets, parks, picnics, and special events in the black community.
- One of the city's legendary street gangs, the El Rukns, formerly known as the Black Peace Stone Nation, escorted more than one hundred people to City Hall to register in late August.
- The Mount Pisgah Church, which had been feeding thousands of families weekly, refused to give out bags of groceries to anyone who could not present a registration card.
- The influential Rev. George Clements, pastor of Holy Angels parish who had touched Chicago by adopting a son, refused to admit pupils whose parents were not registered. He preached of the "sin" of failing to vote that "cries out for vengeance from the heavens."

- More than seventy-five black ministers who had backed Byrne in 1979 launched a registration drive from the pulpit in early August. They were joined by another one hundred ministers a few days later.

People

Nothing and no one embodied the success of the registration drive more than People Organized for Welfare and Employment Rights (POWER), which was glued together by "radical" Slim Coleman. Coleman, 39, came to Chicago in 1969 from Cleveland where he worked as a union organizer for the Ironworkers. Before that, he organized hospital workers in Boston, having dropped out of Harvard a few courses short of a degree in philosophy, history, and government.

He set up shop among the Appalachian whites in Uptown Chicago forming the "Heart of Uptown Coalition" and backing a series of unsuccessful radical aldermanic candidates, including José "Cha Cha" Jimenez, a street-gang leader.

POWER, a coalition that eventually grew to thirty-one welfare rights and community groups, was organized in December 1981 to protest cuts in the general assistance program. After a series of lawsuits, clashes with the Republican governor, and a lack of commitment from Mayor Byrne, POWER turned to the massive voter registration drive "to make sure they would listen to us."

Coming together for the first time under Coleman were diverse community groups well known to each other, historically separated by different areas of concern, and now united by the times. "We'd been trying for years to get such a coalition together," said Roger Fox, research director of the Chicago Urban League. "The time was right. Their interest and involvement was a manifestation of what people were prepared to do on their own. You didn't have to talk people into registering. They wanted to."

The key to POWER and, some would argue,

to the election, were brainstorming sessions. "We were asking each other how to tap the class issue, how to get to these people," Coleman said. "Then somebody said, 'We all know one place they go every month.'" POWER had found in a survey of 1,800 public aid recipients that all were angry but that only thirty percent were registered. That's when POWER joined the community-based Outreach program, run by the Board of Elections, and the voter registration began. In August, the Board of Elections agreed to allow registration for the first time at twenty-four public aid and six unemployment offices.

Asserting it was nonpartisan, POWER secured funding for themselves from both Republicans and Democrats, but only the Democratic candidate for Governor, Adlai Stevenson III, gave money (\$10,000, a gift from which he would clearly benefit many times over). Incumbent Republican Governor Jim Thompson refused to allow registration in state office buildings, by contrast.

The registration program won the support of some Machine-connected officers. The newly elected chairman of the local Democratic party, Alderman Edward R. (Fast Eddie) Vrdolyak, needed to prove he knew how to crank votes out of the Machine in November. It also was no secret that Byrne favored a Washington candidacy in hopes of splitting the anti-Byrne vote between Washington and another candidate also in the race.

Coleman, who now admits there was heavy electioneering for Washington during registration at public aid and unemployment offices, gloats that Vrdolyak "fell right into our trap, took the bait hook, line and sinker. . . ." The Machine's acquiescence in the registration drive proved costly indeed.

An overwhelming response

There was an overwhelming response from the "captive" audience. (The Outreach program registered 102,444 voters, more than seventy percent of them black.) Of the 102,444, 42,000

registered in front of public aid and unemployment offices.

By dusk October 5, the Outreach program had added an incredible 250,249 new voters. Michael E. Lavelle, chairman of the Chicago Board of Elections, called the results "tremendous." The reluctant but stirred Washington, however, stayed out, pointing to a 1979 study by the Chicago Urban League that indicated it may be easier to get Chicago blacks to register than to vote.

The Thompson debacle

The gubernational race between Republican Governor Jim Thompson and former U.S. Senator Adlai Stevenson III left little doubt that black Chicago was ready to flex newfound muscle. Thompson went into Election Day with a cushy 400,000 vote lead in the polls. He won by 5,074 votes. It was the closest gubernational race in the state's history. This definitely showed that registration drives could pull newly registered voters to the polls.

Washington's decision

On November 10, eight days after being reelected to Congress by the widest margin in the nation, Washington announced his candidacy for mayor. He had to be dragged into the fray, and he was reminded of the ingredients that had elected blacks as big-city mayors: a losing effort that brought widespread name recognition, a surge in voter registration during the second run, a high turnout, a huge black plurality and at least ten percent of the white vote, and two white candidates in the race.

Washington had been in the 1977 mayoral primary, gathering only eleven percent of the vote in a city forty percent black. Two whites were now in the Democratic mayoralty primary race, Mayor Jane M. Byrne and Cook County State's Attorney Richard M. Daley, son of the late, great Chicago Machine boss, Richard J. Daley.

The numbers

Winning ninety-five percent of the black vote in Machine Chicago (as other successful black mayor candidates had in other cities) was iffy at best. Also unknown was the size of Washington's power base in fragmented and fractious black Chicago. The Washington formula for success was "80-80," a black turnout of eighty percent with eighty percent of those voting for him.

Like a teacher prodding a promising but undisciplined student, Harold Washington preached long and hard that the political pie would never be fairly divided in racially divided, Machine-controlled Chicago. The sermon was always the same: Winning would require a color-blind coming together of the disenfranchised and the angry, coupled with a resolve to take control. Most of all, the leadership to bring it all about would have to come from the community. All was possible under the right political circumstances, said Washington.

The campaign

The contest unfolded Chicago-style, ugly and rough-and-tumble and with zest: A three-way race between a black and two white Irish Catholics—a woman incumbent and a challenger named Daley—wrestling for control of the Chicago Machine that proved in November it could still get the vote and, in some cases, with imagination. (U.S. attorneys were again forced to compare cemetery and voter lists.)

By the day of the Democratic mayoral primary, there were an estimated 615,000 registered blacks, up almost 160,000 since the massive registration drive began. In a post-mortem of Washington's win, the black turnout was estimated at 473,000 votes. Using the yardstick of needing eighty percent of the black vote to win, Washington collected 378,840 black votes, about eighty-nine percent of his total 424,146. A crucial ten to eleven percent of his total came from whites and Hispanics.

The 10 Wards in Chicago with the Largest Net Increase in New Registrants Between the 1983 Mayoral Primary and the April 12 Mayoral General Elections

<i>Ward</i>	<i>Percentage Black</i>	<i>New Registrants</i>	<i>Percent Increase</i>	<i>Total Voters</i>
21	98.4%	1,256	3.2%	40,456
9	89.1	1,237	4.0	32,335
16	98.5	1,131	3.5	33,269
17	99.0	1,111	3.1	36,933
34	96.9	1,065	3.0	36,341
29	87.6	1,028	3.8	27,940
6	98.3	1,002	2.4	43,117
28	96.6	1,000	3.4	30,365
8	96.1	932	2.4	38,984
23	96.1	888	2.4	38,513

When the dust of the Democratic mayoral primary cleared, 1,235,324 of Chicago's 1,594,253 eligible voters had gone to the polls—a 77.5 percent turnout—which put Washington within general election victory of becoming Chicago's first black mayor. The results of the primary were:

- Washington, 60, a state legislator for sixteen years and a rising star on Capitol Hill, received 424,146 votes, 36.5 percent.
- Jane M. Byrne, 48, the city's first woman mayor who had amassed a staggering \$10 million campaign fund, received 388,259 votes, 33.4 percent; and
- Cook County State's Attorney Richard M. Daley, 40-year-old son of the legend, received 344,721 votes, 29.6 percent.

The battle was not yet over, however. Many Chicagoans, including the chairman of the Cook County Democratic party, were unhappy with Washington's primary win in a city that has been called the most segregated in the nation, and precinct captains retched at Washington's promise to end the patronage that fuels the Machine. Many supported little-known GOP candidate Bernard Epton, and the national Republican party helped to finance his campaign. Washington, D.C.-based media consultant John Deardourff was retained and support came from all directions.

The Democratic reaction

(National Democratic Party Chairman Charles T. Manatt came to Chicago in early March and begged for unity, calling the election of Washington in the general election the national party's "top priority.") "We have a job to do in 1984," he warned Cook County Democrats who balked at singing Washington's praises. "His election is important to the future of the party."

Voter registration continued to amaze the experts. The number of registered jumped another 31,536, the biggest registration increase ever between a Chicago mayoral primary and a mayoral election. By the March 14 deadline for the general election, 1,625,786 voters were registered—a sixteen year high. Washington's winning total in the April 12 general election, 656,727 votes (a plurality of 39,568 over Epton) reflects one of the most awesome displays of bloc voting that America has ever seen.

(Running an effective registration drive is a tactic that neither party can afford to ignore. With presidential year voter turnout figures down to around fifty-four percent, campaign professionals understand the growing importance of registration drives coupled with get-out-the-vote efforts. The Washington victory in Chicago proved the point beyond doubt.)