

SNG-Chicago mayor's race-12-3-18

Keeping score tricky in Chicago mayor's race

By Jim Nowlan

The mayor of Chicago is arguably more important than the governor of Illinois. Maybe that's why more than two dozen have been gathering petitions for the city's Feb. 26 non-partisan election (though all the candidates are Democrats).

Chicago is both less and more than it used to be. After World War II, the city alone had 3.6 million residents, more than half the state's total population. Today, there are 2.7 million, just one in five Illinoisans. Yet central city Chicago is the beating heart of a three-state metropolis of 10 million people, with a gross economic product that would make it the 20th largest nation in the world by that measure.

And I hate to say it, but the region sends lots of tax money to support schools and services for struggling Downstate communities like mine.

Chicago is a tale of at least two cities: One, the mostly white, booming downtown and North Side, where millennials flock to good high tech and professional services jobs. The other, largely African-American and Latino to the south and west, where residents feel left behind and often live in fear of out-of-control, homicidal gang bangers.

The next mayor has to keep the boom booming and also tackle the wrenching problems in the neighborhoods. He or she will face a budget that is in even worse shape than the basket-case state fiscal mess, with huge payments looming for police and fire pensions and big debts to retire, and no money to pay either.

Set aside the important, generally successful 6 percent of Chicagoans who are of Asian descent, and the rest are almost equally divided, one-third each white, African-American and Latino.

University of Illinois at Chicago politics professor and old friend Dick Simpson is my primary source for what follows.

Dick says the present large cast of characters will be winnowed down to about eight who will survive challenges to their petitions over the coming month. Of that group, he expects three will be white, three black and two Latino.

And that's how you have to break out Chicago politics, through a racial and ethnic prism, with a small band of white progressives maybe above all that. Most Chicagoans will vote for "one of their own" in the Feb. 26 balloting. No candidate is likely to win much more than 20 percent, so the top two vote-getters will square off in an April 2 run-off.

At present, the front-runners appear to be Cook County Board president Toni Preckwinkle, a black former public school teacher; Susana Mendoza, just elected state comptroller but ready to jump into a much larger pond; Bill Daley, son and brother of the mayors Daley, and former schools head Paul Vallas (a student of mine when I taught for a year at Western Illinois University).

Round one will boil down to three factors: money; candidate organizations, and compelling campaign narratives.

Simpson thinks a candidate will need \$3-5 million to compete through both elections; other insider friends of mine think it will take more.

Candidate organizations are of uneven size and effectiveness, volunteers having largely replaced Democratic Party patronage workers of old.

Simpson thinks two campaign narratives will vie for resonance with the voters. One will contend that city budget management chops and the capacity to work closely with the business-finance world are most important.

The other will hold that Chicago desperately needs a new type of leader. That is, a mayor who truly understands the neighborhoods outside the downtown, who will work to revive them and reduce the violence, all the while keeping the downtown humming.

A front-runner today might well fail to catch fire, or find his or her political baggage too heavy to carry. For example, Preckwinkle enacted an odious soda pop tax, which was repealed; Mendoza is seen as a hand-maiden of party boss Mike Madigan; Bill Daley and Paul Vallas may be seen as yesterday's story, and insensitive to the neighborhoods.

Money likes a winner, so expect lucre to flow to those whose messages catch fire in debates.

If on Feb. 26, one black and one Latino emerge, where will the white voters turn? If a "minority" and a white emerge, where will the other minority group turn? Thus, candidates will have to keep both elections in mind as they appeal to voters.

Much to be sorted out. All very important to the future of Chicago, the region and the state.