

Why Not Sawyer?

Rod Sawyer emerges as the only grown-up in the race for Chicago's mayor. An analysis of the other candidates and why the media is ignoring his campaign.

by Stan Hollenbeck/February 20, 2023

With only a few days left, there are nine candidates vying to unseat the rather unpopular current Chicago mayor. Who can take the reins of the 25th largest city in the world on the first day without needing a considerable learning curve? It is becoming apparent that Roderick T. Sawyer is the sole candidate who could.

Sawyer, the well-liked son of the late, well-liked Eugene Sawyer who was elected by his peers to serve out a four-year term after the sudden death of Mayor Harold Washington, elected just seven months prior. The elder Sawyer was also the longest-serving African American member of the Chicago City Council at the time. The younger Sawyer grew to maturity being schooled in knowing the best and worst practices of running a city that drives the third largest regional economy in the nation with a GDP larger than most European countries.

In 2011, Roderick T. Sawyer was elected to the office his father had relinquished in 1987 to become the 53rd mayor. After subsequently being re-elected for three successful terms to serve as alderperson of Chicago's 6th Ward for twelve years, he made the soul-searching and gut-wrenching decision to, once again, follow in his father's footsteps. This past June, he decided not to seek a fourth term and announced his candidacy for mayor, the only other office his father had held for close to four years.

The 59-year-old Sawyer is the only candidate in this race who has more than a decade's worth of experience in municipal government and can reference a sizable record of major policy accomplishments. He has been at the forefront of police reform and accountability for the past seven years and spearheaded one of the most comprehensive reform policies in the nation. When Chicagoans go to the polls in February, they will be voting for members of the newly formed Community Commission for Public Safety and Accountability to provide citizen leadership, direction and policy on policing in Chicago ... a major milestone in Sawyer's seven-year battle for police reform. He introduced and passed an anti-privatization ordinance that will keep Chicago from ever having another parking meter deal. It was Sawyer that introduced the first ordinance to create a \$15 minimum wage in 2014 and was instrumental in creating an elected school board in Chicago.

Sawyer's known ability to build consensus and provide cool, competent leadership is acknowledged even by his critics. This makes him a standout among all other candidates and the only real adult at the table.

The 2023 race is shaping up to play out in a similar fashion to what elected the virtually unknown Lightfoot, who garnered just 17.54% of the votes in a field of 14 candidates in the 2019 Municipal General Election. In the Municipal Runoffs a month later, 38% of the eligible voters turned out to cast 386,039 votes for Lightfoot, just a little more than 24% of the city's registered voters ... hardly a sweeping mandate for the former prosecutor hired by the U. S. Attorney George Bush appointed. However, it was enough to defeat the better-known Toni Preckwinkle, who had once served as 4th Ward Alderman and had been recently re-elected as Cook County President. Most citizens of Chicago woke up the next morning and exclaimed "Lori ... who?"

Originally, there are eleven candidates for mayor but only nine made it to the ballot. Most of them never had any successful experience in running an elected executive office or governing a city and certainly very limited institutional knowledge. Seven out of the nine would be akin to the proverbial dog that caught the car it was chasing.

At the top of the ballot is 27-year-old Ja'Mal Green, an actor and community organizer known for his activism in the Black Lives Matter movement. This is Ja'Mal's second attempt in running for mayor. In 2019, he got knocked off the ballot after the signatures on his petitions were successfully challenged. His petitions are again being challenged this time and by the same person, Willie L. Wilson who got the fourth spot on the ballot. Needless to say, Ja'Mal returned the favor by challenging Willie's. (*Wilson eventually dropped the proxy objections to both Green and Sawyer.*)

Wilson is a Republican multi-millionaire. In spite of his seventh-grade education, Willie is a shrewd businessman who started by flipping burgers and mopping the floor at McDonalds. He secured a franchise parleying that into five McDonald's outlets which he sold and eventually reinvested in a company that imports medical supplies from Asia that made him another fortune during the pandemic. He has made two other unsuccessful runs for mayor even though his campaign is the best funded mostly due to his personal bankroll. Willie is noted for his cash and gasoline giveaways and always polls well in the poorer African American sectors of the city. However, his lack of polish makes him a hard sell among the voters along the Lakefront as well as in the Northwest and Southwest Side wards.

In second place on the ballot is relative newcomer Sophia King, who prior to her appointment as 4th Ward Alderperson, had previously never held public office. Her biggest claim to fame is that her husband went to law school with Michelle Obama. She and her husband are friends and neighbors of the Obama family. It was because of this friendship that President Obama's former chief-of-staff and then Chicago mayor, Rahm Emanuel, appointed her to fill out the term of 4th Ward Alderman Will Burns (another Obama associate) who resigned to take a lucrative position in the private sector. She subsequently won a special election for the council seat in 2017 and was re-elected to serve a full term in 2019.

Third on the ballot is another nascent officeholder, 37-year-old Kam Buckner, who was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives from the 26th district in 2019. Prior to his three years of experience as an elected official, he worked in the non-profit sector and holds a law degree.

In fourth place is Brandon Johnson, also new to elective office. He is just finishing his first four-year term as the 1st District Cook County Commissioner and now is seeking to become mayor of Chicago. He was pushed to the forefront by the Chicago Teachers Union and the SEIU local #1 after their preferred candidate, Chuy Garcia (who is at the bottom of the ballot) couldn't make up his mind whether or not to run.

A mustache floating over an empty suit, opportunistic publicity hound Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, is the political equivalent of Paris Hilton or the Kardashians ... famous for being famous. Throughout his undistinguished legislative career, he has been noted mainly for what he opposes ... not what he proposes. In July 2019, García voted against a House resolution condemning the Global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement targeting Israel. In 2021, García was one of eight Democrats to vote against the funding of Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system ... hardly the actions of a "progressive". He has sponsored nothing of significance, preferring instead to "sign on" to other's legislation for the "photo op" In 1984, he became a committeeman of the Democratic Party of Cook County and, as the result of a remap and a special election he won a seat on the Chicago City Council and was able to hold it for a second term. In 1992, again a result of a redistricting, he resigned from the council and nominated his protégé, the now disgraced and convicted Ricardo Muñoz, in order to serve an unremarkable term as senator in the Illinois State Legislature. In the next election, he was defeated.

However, Chuy kept in the public limelight by founding and appointing himself executive director of a community development non-profit. García became spokesman for members of a group demanding the construction of a high school promised to the community. Fourteen parents and grandparents organized a hunger strike, but Chuy was not among them. After a decade's hiatus, Chuy finally clawed his way back into the political arena in 2010 to win a seat as 7th District Cook County Commissioner until the Chicago Teachers Union recruited him to run for mayor in 2015 only to lose to Rahm Emanuel in the run-off election. He was rewarded with retiring Luis Gutiérrez's "safe seat" in the U.S. House of Representatives and was just re-elected in November. However, realizing there was no publicity advantage serving in a Congress that his party did not control, he immediately announced he was running (again) for mayor. Recently he had declared himself the "frontrunner" as a result of a poll his chief financial backers devised. However, Craig Wall, a political reporter for WLS-TV revealed that, "... while Garcia's campaign is basking in the poll, he is also facing scrutiny over the political donations linked to Sam Bankman-Fried, the now-indicted founder of FTX crypto ..." As recently as December 12, Garcia took part in a congressional hearing on FTX while his congressional campaign had accepted nearly \$200,000 (since hastily returned) in independent expenditures made on Garcia's behalf by a PAC funded by Bankman-Fried. His real poll numbers are currently plummeting.

This is also the second bite of the apple for 5th place Paul Vallas who got only 5% of the vote last time and is being financially bankrolled by the interests of local and national Republicans such as \$10,000 from Jay D.

Bergman who donated \$1 million to Republican Super PAC American Crossroads in 2012 and in 2016, he gave \$500,000 to Future45, a super PAC supporting Donald Trump. One particular eyebrow-raising contributor of \$5000 was Richard E. Hagen, a disgraced former CPD detective who was sued by Laquan McDonald's family for covering up his shooting. The City of Chicago paid \$5 million to settle that lawsuit.

Vallas has resigned under a cloud or was summarily dismissed from every single school district CEO position he ever held. Vallas's Chicago resignation was preceded by a notable lack of support from then Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. Vallas subsequently sold himself as the premier "turnaround specialist." Washington Post reporter Valerie Strauss wrote in a 2013 article, "Whether, indeed, Vallas turned around Chicago, Philadelphia, and New Orleans is contested ... critics point to abysmal graduation rates for black and Latino students, enormous budget deficits, and implementation failures."

His failure in his final foray as a school superintendent became a legal matter. In March 2013, Vallas became the permanent superintendent of the Bridgeport Public Schools. The following July, Connecticut Superior Court Justice Barbara Bellis ordered Vallas removed from the position after he neglected to complete mandated coursework and certification. Vallas was forced to step down in November ... just seven months into his tenure. He has lost every public office he ever ran for, may not qualify a Chicago resident and yet now the media reports him as the frontrunner according to at least two reliable and unbiased polls.

Lori Lightfoot, the incumbent, was an Assistant State's Attorney in Republican John Ashcroft's Department of Justice. She has recently doubled down on that belligerent prosecutorial style she carried into the Mayor's Office with an "it's my way or the highway" attitude and a consistent, petulant "in-your-face" method of bullying members of the City Council that has made her a pariah in quite a few political circles. Many political pundits predict she won't even make the run-off. She holds 6th place on the ballot.

After tying up Sawyer's campaign with a petition battle for more than four weeks, Willie Wilson's proxy, Ricky "Hollywood" Hendon, withdrew the objections, possibly fearing some potential legal ramifications for his fibs, and the law prevailed.

Now the voter has the opportunity to vote for someone who so obviously has the experience, institutional knowledge, and good common sense to move the city forward for the next four years. So, the question comes down to "Why not Sawyer?"

The answer is simple. Money. Back in September 2014, during the filing of signatures for the municipal election, veteran political reporter Jay Levine told this writer the unvarnished truth about that and all elections. No matter how superior a candidate's credentials, policy positions or fitness for office, "... all we (the media) look at is the money. This is the only reliable predictor of who can win any office". Sadly, he has consistently proven correct.

This has been particularly true in municipal races. For most in the media, they recognize that it takes a considerable amount of campaign cash to pay for the advertising that pays their salaries, so they ignore or minimize coverage of candidates who do not have significant financial backing, no matter how good they are.

To be sure, the Sawyer campaign had a lot of setbacks that hobbled fundraising outreach early on. They got off to a late start with his petition drive that allowed such challenges to his signatures, delaying any significant early fundraising efforts. During the campaign, he had emergency back surgery for a herniated disc that limited his speaking engagements. With nine candidates in the race, his public speaking time at mayoral forums was severely curtailed and even further stymied with the constant interruption of candidates attacking and speaking on top of each other. The WTTW forum was so rowdy that closing statements were eliminated entirely.

"Throughout these past few weeks, I have listened to all the candidates, and I've been listening to voters", says Sawyer. "It's not my style to engage in ad hominem attacks and I've walked that walk, in spite of not getting the same media attention of those who do."

In the future, there must be some way to level the playing field such as publicly financed municipal elections that severely limit the enormous influx of mega-money that we've seen in this election cycle. It's a sad commentary on this Chicago election that, not only do nice guys finish last but also the best ones do, as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stan Hollenbeck served as Director of the City of Chicago City Council's Legislative Reference Bureau for more than a decade before leaving in 2013 to become principal associate of Hollenbeck Strategies, Inc. as independent writer and consultant for several current and former elected officeholders as well as non-profit organizations and businesses needing to navigate government regulations.

Stronger When Working Together

Defining roles of Chicago's mayor and its City Council

Unlike other American cities of its size, Chicago is chartered by the State of Illinois as a “strong council-weak mayor” form of government with “home rule,” giving it some independence from control by the state legislature. As Chicago grew in size and stature, the city council and state legislature ceded some authority to the mayor, creating an executive branch modeled after the federal government.

However, even though the council is a legislative body, it also has executive functions sometimes referred to as aldermanic prerogative. In practice, alderpersons, who each represent approximately 55,000 people (about the same as a mid-sized city), are considered the “mini-mayors” of their ward. When something goes wrong on your block, or when someone wants to get something done that requires city approval, the usual first step is to call or email the alderperson's office.

Alderman (Aldersperson) is the title given to a member of Chicago's City Council. There are 50 of them in the city, and they have a surprising amount of jurisdiction over what happens in their wards.

Each serves an area that contains 2 percent of the city's 2,746,388 residents, called a ward. Residents of each ward vote for their alderperson every four years along with the mayor, City Clerk and City Treasurer. After the U.S. Census every decade, the ward boundaries are redrawn to reflect changes in the constituency.

Once elected, an alderperson becomes a member of the City of Chicago City Council. Alderspersons get an annual budget from the city of more than \$1 million to spend on capital improvement projects in their ward, like repaving roads, replacing traffic signals, or upgrading street and alley lighting. It's called “menu money”.

Most alderspersons know their wards best and should have a say in what projects get priority. Alderspersons also can weigh in on issuing liquor licenses for stores and restaurants that want to serve alcoholic beverages as well as facilitate permits to host block parties, parades, sidewalk sales and any event that requires a street closure.

When there's a bigger project, like a developer who needs permission to build a new high-rise apartment building or a new grocery store, the entire City Council approval is needed.

But in practice, the alderperson of that ward normally has the final say on any big development as other alderspersons almost always will defer to the alderperson of the ward in which the project is proposed. Alderspersons meet once a month to vote on the mayor's agenda and their own proposals.

Notwithstanding that most of the recent Chicago city councils have delegated away many of their functions to the mayor either through fiat or action by the state legislature as the State of Illinois granted Chicago a city charter with a “weak mayor – strong council” structure. In such a system, the council acts as both a city-wide legislative body and, occasionally, as an executive body in matters that only concern their wards. Council members must (or should) approve almost every action the mayor takes unless the state legislature says otherwise.

#

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stan Hollenbeck served as Director of the City of Chicago City Council's Legislative Reference Bureau for more than a decade before leaving in 2013 to become principal associate of Hollenbeck Strategies, Inc. as independent writer and consultant for several current and former elected officeholders as well as non-profit organizations and businesses needing to navigate government regulations.