

The Elections in Chicago - A View From Chuy's Base Area

May 5, 2015



This is the fifth in a series of articles about the Chicago mayor and council elections. Scroll down to find others. - Eds.

Chicago hasn't seen such electoral contention since the days of Dick and Jane - and Harold. Even in defeat, the Jesús "Chuy" García challenge brought a familiar spirit back to the city by the lake. No one expected the immigrant from Durango to challenge the abrasive Rahm in a run off. Nor could we have predicted the surprising synergy that would result from over a dozen insurgent ward campaigns and Chuy's crusade. In the 12th ward on the Southwest side, we learned that politics is local.

Following a spontaneous and wildly successful petition drive which netted 62,000 names in less than a month, passion in wards north, south and west threatened to ignite a city-wide blaze.

To our chagrin, the wind in our city could not propel enough burning embers across the Dan Ryan and the Eisenhower. In the posh areas of the new economy, condo dwellers stamped out the sparks with their tony boots. They rushed to the polls as if panicking in a lakefront fire drill. Municipal employees and pensioners tried to nurture the flame out southwest and northwest. But suspicious property owners turned on their sprinklers in spite of distaste for mayor one percent. Constant TV attack ads paid for with Rahm's millions were the showers that fell harder on some neighborhoods than others.

Jesús "Chuy" García awoke long dormant alliances. Young activists stepped forward and exchanged skills with veteran organizers. Hundreds worked to create new mechanisms for electoral struggle. Aldermanic candidates emerged to give leadership to progressive ward organizations. Terms like "privatization", "community policing", "progressive taxation", "participatory budgeting", and "the neighborhoods" became familiar topics.

When the votes were all counted, we were not the kind of movement that could topple Rahm Emanuel's coterie of global power brokers. We are a populace fragmented by the cunning of the one percent. We rose up to fight back. We lost. And yet we gained a lot.

At the risk of over simplification, the mayor's tactic was to arouse suspicion of a Mexican American populist. To whites, the message, encoded in dog whistles, was that Chuy is a nice, but naïve, Mexican boy. His call for audits of city corruption was spun as an evasion of fiscal responsibility. At a more sinister level, the unspoken message called for unity to keep the burgeoning Latino community in its place – at the precarious margins of progress. Fearful of dire warnings of municipal bankruptcy, many white voters sided with the one percent. Chuy's biggest strength is his unapologetic compassion and his defense of the undocumented. In the minds of a beleaguered middle class, this roughly translated as "keep them in their place, scrambling at the bottom alongside the Blacks".

And to African Americans, many of whom have been pushed even beyond the margin, there was not a deep enough reservoir of solidarity. Competition for jobs and economic opportunity between Blacks and Latinos has created a divide. The rivalry, often downplayed in polite discussion, is nonetheless real. It's the most recent iteration of the age-old scenario – not unlike the divisions set up at the turn of the previous century when southern sharecroppers were imported as replacement workers in the stockyards.

More than anything else, the race hinged on race.

Yet we gave them a scare, flexed some political muscle, won a handful of new aldermanic seats, learned a lot, increased our numbers, and projected an example for similar coalitions and struggles nationwide.

The key was a grass roots approach. Some purists missed this important dynamic. They stood on the sidelines calling Chuy a corporate neo-liberal in disguise. They predicted that Chuy would enact austerity budgets. They feared that his campaign was not radical enough to energize those who have lost hope. They jumped on weaknesses in outreach to African American communities as a deal breaker. The campaign's call for hiring of 1000 police officers was cited as an indication of treachery.

In the near southwest 12th ward, we didn't even try to influence the citywide campaign over which we had little control. We felt that, if everything fell into place, we might be able to replicate the minority-led Harold Washington inter-regnum of thirty years ago. But, more realistically, we were fighting for power at the ward level and to defend our people. As things stand, neo-liberal schemes define the political landscape. Rahm Emanuel personifies this perfidy along the predominantly Latino Archer corridor. Transfer of wealth proceeds apace.

The elevation of Commissioner Garcia as our standard bearer at first seemed accidental – driven, as it was, by Karen Lewis' brain tumor and County Board President Toni Preckwinkle's refusal to accept the challenge.

But it is not random chance that reform's most credible and trustworthy candidate arose from the Latino political movement. Commissioner Garcia has positioned himself as an honest independent. He has been steady in opposition to each successive re-incarnation of machine politics. He got his start as a pioneer for Chicano empowerment in the late seventies. The ward organization, which he helped form in Little Village, is the only opposition precinct apparatus which has stayed intact over this span. The man has displayed courage several times in his career – from his willingness to stand in for his assassinated compadre, Rudy Lozano, to his recent acceptance of the torch from Ms. Lewis, the outspoken leader of the teacher's union.

Chuy's campaign meme was that Rahm takes from the neighborhoods and rewards the rich. The gleaming center versus decaying ghettos and barrios was a fundamental metaphor. Specifics in

regards to safety, education, revenue generation, and services were plentiful. Problems with the mix of issues, the way they were broadcast, difficulties in creating a citywide campaign, and missed alliances do not alter the key point – Chuy was articulating a broad populist message.

With regard to Chuy's strongest base of support, critics should own up to their own blind spot. He unapologetically spoke for a large, multi-class base in a Latino community that is marginalized and becoming more so. It is almost too obvious to state that Latinos are overwhelmingly members of the working class. The dynamism of the Latino fabric in Chicago is hard to ignore.

Correctly and in keeping with his longstanding approach, Chuy subsumed his Chicano politics within a call for class justice. Unions were his financial bedrock. Class was a unifying blanket. Good government was a broad appeal. But the speakers of Spanish, the people whose names end in "ez" and "ño", the Latinos of Chicago, were his reliable electoral base.

In our work in McKinley Park, we were struck by the Latino solidarity. Every precinct produced vote percentages coinciding almost exactly with the percent of Latino voters. Of course there are small remnants of the discredited Hispanic Democratic Organization (HDO). In my own precinct, there are four reliable Rahm votes in the household of machine-backed, State Senator, Tony Muñoz. And, of course, we know white and Chinese voters who went with Chuy. But the general pattern holds.

Significantly the Latino community in Chicago supports a relatively vibrant commercial class. Their interest is strongly with the economic well-being and the secure residency status of all Spanish speakers. They along with Latino professionals – both public and private — were totally on board. It was never hard to solicit *botanas* and *comidas* for Garcia events. Rahm Emanuel photo ops with Latino elected officials, who called themselves the *Rahmtinos*, elicited derision in all Southwest side barrios.

In the run off, Latino turnout, while elevated and enthusiastic, did not cascade to the mighty levels that we experienced with African Americans voting for Harold Washington or Barak Obama. Social and historical reasons prevail. A huge cohort of noncitizens intermingles with many who are not registered or feel culturally and linguistically alienated.

Similarly, the hoped for re-unification of the Black-Brown alliance of the 1980s, was not spectacular. Emanuel's money produced saturation attack ads, street level pay offs, misleading promises, and appeals to racial divisions by proxy publicists. Some lingering loyalty to Rahm as an emissary from President Obama depressed the African American turnout significantly. Rahm pulled down majorities in the mid-50s to mid-60s in African American precincts.

Long known as a united voting bloc, African Americans were divided and confused. Could the Garcia campaign have said the magic words and repaired a historic divide? Weaknesses in the commissioner's campaign were a reflection of something broader. He could not create on-the-ground leadership and proof of good faith for such an alliance in a matter of weeks. Stubborn realities of segregation, alternating tactics of favoritism and neglect, gerrymandering, and economic competition have chilled the dialogue among the two communities.

Chuy's history is replete with efforts to reach out and champion the Black agenda. He was a swing vote for Harold Washington in council wars. He has stood against discriminatory landlords and segregated high school boundaries. More so than any current elected official in Chicago, he has worked to create working multi-ethnic and multi-issue coalitions. When he was in the Illinois Senate, he was a member of the Black caucus. In contrast, the incumbent one percenter used guile to fashion relatively cheap and insignificant gestures as a lifeline to African Americans.

In the 12th ward, Pete DeMay's aldermanic campaign intermingled with Chuy's mayoral crusade. Like Chuy, Pete stepped forward when no one else was willing. He entered a one-on-one bout with machine regular, George Cardenas.

Pete was an anomaly - a white guy with credibility as a United Autoworkers organizer, fluent in Spanish and with organizing experience in Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Tennessee. He was a hard-working and combative campaigner. He united with an existing core of activists in the McKinley Park neighborhood and attracted an expanded following. His platform centered on education, end to regressive revenue measures, as well as more equitable public safety and ward services.

It is here, at the deepest level of political activity, that the elections of 2015 are interesting and instructive. In the precincts, we mixed the battle for local accountability with the broader, city-wide effort. We went toe to toe against a well-funded, entrenched machine. We stood upright in the middle of the ring. We were surprised to see a Latino cheering section for the güero against a man who has a surname evocative of Mexican radicalism. So effective was the challenge, that Cardenas appealed to a home town referee - Rahm's Chicago Board of Elections. Ruling on preposterous legal pretexts, the board declared a technical knockout. Pete was stricken from the ballot. We were down for the count before we could finish the first round.

We'll never know if Pete's aggressive campaign could have ridden Chuy's coat tails to victory against a Latino apologist for neo-liberalism. His spunk and organization touched a nerve. Even without his name on the ballot, we netted an unprecedented 20 to 25 percent write-in count in the municipal general election.

The use of legal shenanigans to derail Pete's challenge was as obvious as it was odious. The required number of nominating signatures was 473. We collected over 2100. Of these, 1400 were invalidated in challenges. The majority were stricken based on overly precise requirements that the signatures match exactly with their original applications. One hundred and fifty names were ruled "out of district" by a computer program that was obviously flawed. Each in-district address that was rejected was clearly within the boundaries.

Then, with a remaining cushion of 300 above the needed level, Cardenas' election lawyer submitted witnesses and affidavits supposedly proving a pattern of fraud. The alderman's staff had gone around the ward during work hours to badger signers into recanting their names on Pete's petitions. On the basis of 47 coerced affidavits and 3 suspect witnesses, the hearing examiner declared all sheets turned in by Pete himself to be inadmissible. Our signature total fell to 407 and we were off the ballot.

Activists and constituents understood the cynical use of a municipal board to protect a favorite of Mayor Emanuel. The commissioner is a lawyer who has received over \$200 million in municipal fees for billable hours in recent years. We made common cause with other campaigns who had suffered similarly egregious rulings. We rallied voters who saw these maneuvers as a sign of weakness by the incumbent and an affront to democracy. The commitment of the core tightened and the drive for write-in votes picked up steam.

Chuy had surpassed all expectations and held Rahm to only 45%. With none of the five candidates receiving more than half, the mood at our 12th ward election night gathering was mixed. We had brought home landslide numbers in all our precincts for Chuy. We knew that write-in votes were accumulating in astonishing numbers but Pete's defeat was seen as unavoidable. The obstacles were too great.

Looking around the banquet room, the majority of Pete's active campaigners were Latinos. They

were union members. They were young people gaining their first taste of politics. They were from each section of a gerrymandered district. We all saw this cause as inseparable from the city wide crusade to "Take Back Chicago".

Precincts were the critical unit of geography. The goal was to staff each precinct with people who live there. Typically in our southwest campaigns, the stability of such teams has been uneven. Most often - especially when the turf is larger than a ward — volunteers show up for canvassing. They are handed walk sheets based solely on the areas that have not yet been covered. In Pete's campaign - because we had the added dynamism of working in concert with the Chuy mobilization - we had such a large base of volunteers that we were able to approximate the old style machine structure.

Democratic ward armies of the past have been based on captain and patronage loyalists. These teams are in decline nowadays because of a shift from hiring clout to sub-contracting and privatizing. Our home grown teams were able to match up favorably with the diehards. We held precinct meetings, put out specific flyers by neighborhood, and were able to allocate crews of watchers, passers, and runners at every polling place. Just as our ward was a battle ground in the mayoral, the precincts were key for Pete's challenge.

To grab and hold some power even at the ward level, this must be a continuing emphasis. We forged cooperation by local people of good will - from recreation and cultural leaders, to teachers and librarians, to retired and current union people, to the youth and the unemployed. Links to citywide issues and to the concerns of other neighborhoods are a priority. Of particular importance will be creating unity with African American communities.

Here in the Latino southwest side, the progressives fought five aldermanic battles in addition to the overarching Garcia effort. Though they were not arrayed as an official slate, there was an informal alliance which benefited each local race and contributed to Chuy's organizing. The various teams picked up tips from each other. Those which didn't survive the first round joined in to help out those still in the field and to work side by side in the mayoral. Marching bands from two of our high schools led parades to early voting.

The teams from various ward struggles and from the Chuy field offices now have an opportunity to forge tighter working unity. We face stiff challenges as Rahm begins his next four year reign. We expect renewed attacks in ever changing forms. That's what it's all about — learning from electoral efforts, gearing up for the next one, and directing a united front against inevitable attacks.