

What Do Chicagoans Want to Know About Local Elections?

48 Interviews About the 2019 Chicago Municipal Election

What people care about,
where they find information and
what they think is left out

A project by



<http://bit.ly/CBElectionSurvey>
www.citybureau.org

In collaboration with Interactivity Foundation / Ballotpedia / Robert R. McCormick Foundation

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Introduction

Over the summer of 2018, City Bureau Documenters conducted interviews with friends and family on their knowledge of the upcoming February 2019 mayoral and aldermanic elections. The purpose of this survey was to explore what issues people care about and the role local media play in civic engagement.

City Bureau is a civic journalism lab based in the Woodlawn neighborhood of Chicago. Our mission is to bring journalists and communities together in a collaborative spirit to produce equitable journalism and encourage civic participation. The Documenters program is one of three City Bureau programs. City Bureau recruits, trains and pays this group of highly engaged citizens to participate in newsgathering and expand our pool of communal knowledge.

This survey was not intended to be a scientific look at Chicago's population, but rather a semi-structured way of listening to Chicagoans in anticipation of the municipal election. The resulting 48 interviews constitute a first round of interviews, with another 30 coming in January 2019, focusing specifically on the Austin neighborhood.

Results from this survey were anonymized and shared with our partners at the Interactivity Foundation and Ballotpedia. It is part of a project in which community "listening sessions" were held in Chicago to determine what questions residents would like to ask candidates in the municipal election. Questions were pulled from the sessions, refined and ranked based on participants' votes. Questions will be [presented to candidates](#) prior to the election and their responses will be published on the Ballotpedia website. Support for this project comes from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation.

For inquiries about this survey, please contact Bettina Chang at bettina@citybureau.org.

Limitations

As the survey was not designed to be intentionally representative, it cannot be said to apply to the wider community of Chicagoans. Compared to Chicago's demographics, our survey included fewer people of color, more young people and just one resident of the Far South Side. Based on the self-report voting data, it appears our cohort is more civically engaged than Chicagoans at large; we did not ask respondents about their education or income level.

However, the sample that was created by our method did approximate racial demographics of eligible voters in Chicago, based on data from the 2015 municipal election, courtesy of Who Votes for Mayor, a project by Portland State University. According to Who Votes for Mayor,

white/non-Hispanic voters constituted 40 percent of eligible voters in the 2015 municipal election (despite only comprising about 32 percent of the overall population).

Timing was also a limiting factor. Most interviews were conducted in July and August, more than half a year before the election, therefore many people had not been thinking about municipal elections at that point. Several major political events occurred after the first round of interviews were conducted, which will certainly change public perception of the election: Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced that he would not run for re-election, longtime Alderman Danny Solis announced the same and the offices of powerful Alderman Ed Burke were raided by federal agents. These interviews occurred before the November 2018 midterm elections and therefore much of the nation's attention was on national politics at the time.

Summary

The survey focused on what people know about local politics and elections and where they get their information. As part of longer-response questions, respondents often referred to issues that they cared about with regards to local politics.

- Chicago Public Schools
 - Respondents wanted to know more about the impact of the 2013 school closings. Looking ahead, they asked how elected officials could better support public schools.
- Crime, violence and policing
 - Some respondents said they were concerned by crime and violence in their neighborhoods, while others argued that increasing policing was not the answer. Respondents were looking for ways to address crime, violence and the role of the police in ways that strengthen their communities.
- Candidate voting records
 - Respondents felt that political candidates use vague, polished rhetoric on the campaign trail, and therefore wanted to know about incumbents' voting records to get insight into what they actually attempt and accomplish while in office. They wanted voting records to be more accessible to help voters make decisions and to sustain the public's interest after the election.
- Political corruption
 - Many participants in our survey expressed mistrust or apathy with regard to the elections and politicians.
- The role of journalism
 - Participants identified a need for concise, data-driven coverage of issues, such as infographics, voting scorecards, investigative reporting, etc.
- Level of knowledge/engagement about local politics

- People had not necessarily sat down and had a political conversation with someone they knew before. It was embarrassing but it also made them feel like they ought to be more politically engaged.
- Many said they don't seek out news on local politics; social media and interpersonal networks had more potential for sharing news and information
- Several confessed they paid more attention to national politics and gave chicken-or-egg responses that national politics seemed more important, especially under Donald Trump's presidency, and that they thought more nationally focused news sources like the New York Times, NPR and MSNBC offered "better" coverage.

Methods

Thirty Documenters participated in this project, each conducting 1 to 4 interviews. They were instructed to interview acquaintances who differed from each other in key features, such as gender, age, race or ZIP code. Documenters administered a total of 58 surveys, which included a few demographic questions and mostly qualitative questions. They recorded their interviews and entered multiple choice answers, audio files and transcriptions of relevant sections of their interviews in an Airtable form.

Of the 58 interviews conducted, 48 met our quality standards to be included in this analysis.

Demographics

We're interested in how news and ideas are passed from person to person and so this was very much an organic survey built on the personal networks of Documenters. The City Bureau ethos attracts a certain kind of Documenter who in turn has a certain type of social circle. Like the Documenters who contributed to this project, interviewees skewed left-leaning and under the age of 35, but in other demographics were fairly diverse for not employing any sampling methods.

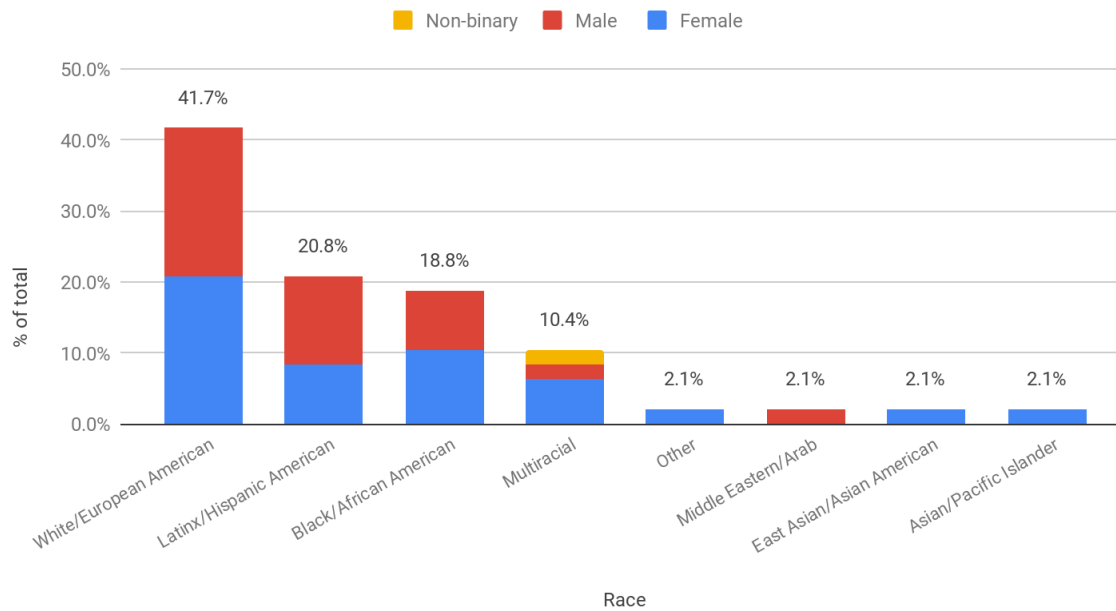
<i>Gender</i>	Sum	Percentage
Female	25	52.1%
Male	22	45.8%
Non-binary	1	2.1%

<i>Age group</i>	Sum	Percentage
18 - 24	12	25.0%

25 - 34	23	47.9%
35 - 44	2	4.2%
45 - 54	3	6.3%
55 - 64	4	8.3%
65 - 74	4	8.3%

Race	Sum	Percentage
White/European American	20	41.7%
Latinx/Hispanic American	10	20.8%
Black/African American	9	18.8%
Multiracial	5	10.4%
Other	1	2.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	2.1%
East Asian/Asian American	1	2.1%
Middle Eastern/Arab American	1	2.1%

Race and gender of interviewees

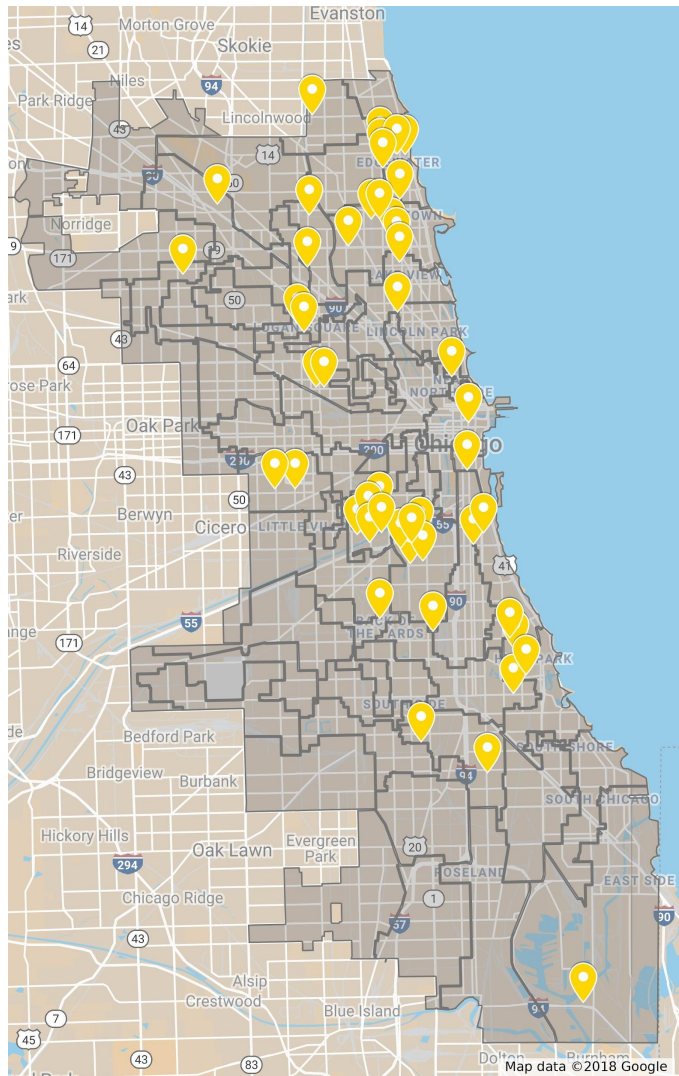


Map of interviewees

This map displays the approximate location of each interviewee, based on ZIP code, mention of ward/alderman and discussion of neighborhood concerns. Interviewees were more sparse south of 63rd and on the western fringes of city limits.

The Edgewater-to-Lakeview area and the Lower West Side-Bridgeport area had the highest concentrations of interviews but this appears to be coincidental, as each area had only one (in a couple cases two) interview per Documenter and Documenters did not necessarily live there themselves.

While quite a few interviewees could not name their alderman or ward (including many in the Edgewater-Lakeview area), the Lower West Side-Bridgeport contingent seemed more aware, stating that they lived in either Danny Solis's ward (11th) or Patrick Daley Thompson's ward (25th).



Voting Habits

Did you vote in the last municipal election (2015, mayor/aldermen)?

Respondents had a much higher than average rate of voting; overall turnout amongst registered voters in Chicago in 2015 was 34% in February and about 40% in the April runoff election for mayor.

<i>Response</i>	Sum	Percentage
Yes	25	52.1%
No	16	33.3%
Was not eligible	5	10.4%
Don't remember	2	4.2%

Did you vote/will you vote in the...

- *March 2016 primary*
- *March 2018 primary*
- *November 2016 election (presidential, Congressional)*
- *November 2018 election (governor, attorney general, Congressional)*
- *None of the above*

This was a select-all-that-apply question and interviewees indicated high voter turnout for all cycles.

<i>Election</i>	Sum ("Yes")	Percentage
November 2018 election (governor, attorney general, Congressional)	43	87.8%
November 2016 election (presidential, Congressional)	40	81.6%
March 2016 primary	29	59.2%
March 2018 primary	28	57.1%

None of the above	1	2.0%
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Info on Upcoming Elections

Awareness

Before speaking to me for this assignment, did you know you would have the opportunity to vote for mayor and aldermen next February?

Response	Sum	Percentage
Yes	39	81.3%
No	9	18.8%

While the majority said they were aware of the upcoming February mayoral and aldermanic election, it was far enough in the future to not yet be on the radar of many interviewees. Even for interviewees who could name several candidates running for a particular office, the typical attitude was:

- | I know nothing about the upcoming election in 2019 at this moment. Zero.
- | Goose egg. If you want to talk to me about it in mid-January, I will try to catch up on it and get a sense of what things are.
- |
- | -- 65-74 year old White/European American male living downtown
- |

Mayoral election

What, if anything, do you know about the upcoming mayoral election in February? Where did you get this information?

As this survey was conducted in the summer, most interviewees were at the very least aware that Mayor Rahm Emanuel would be up for reelection. Most seemed dissatisfied with Mayor Emanuel but expressed concerns that with early contenders like Garry McCarthy, Dorothy Brown and Troy LaRaviere (who has since withdrawn), the vote would be split and, in the event of a runoff, Emanuel would be reelected. Emanuel's decision not to run for reelection has significantly changed the tenor of the elections and widened the field of candidates. When it

came to the mayoral election, interviewees were most concerned about big-picture accountability topics:

- The Chicago Democratic machine, corruption and backdoor deals
- Chicago Public Schools closings, funding and improvement
- Police brutality and alternatives to over-policing and the planned police academy on the West Side
- Gun violence, crime and public safety
- Poor transparency surrounding the shooting of Laquan McDonald
- Development and growth in areas outside the Loop

I know I'm not voting for Rahm Emanuel. I know there are a lot of candidates and I feel like it hasn't quite shaken out who the front runners are for me yet. As it gets closer to the election it gets more obvious who is a viable candidate. Often I just wait until those stories start to come out before making a decision about who to learn more about.

-- 35-44 year old White/European American living on the north side

I don't think a lot of people are aware . . . People are not willing to go look for that information [about the upcoming mayoral election] on their own. I'm sure it's there [on the Internet] but if we could bring that forward to the communities . . . Maybe you can put it on the trains or public transportation where people can see it.

-- 45-54 year old Black/African American female living on the south side

Aldermanic Elections

What, if anything, do you know about the aldermanic election in your ward in February? Where did you get this information?

Interviewees ranged from being well-aware of events in their ward to not knowing what an alderman was. Those who were aware primarily got their information from interacting with the alderman and/or candidates themselves, newspapers, radio, social media or other community networks. The less-informed said they would start paying attention to elections in January or later.

Most expressed a desire for more accessible information on aldermanic roles and responsibilities, what their alderman was up to and how the community could hold them accountable. On a ward level, they focused on more immediate concerns such as:

- Economic growth in neighborhoods experiencing disinvestment
- Rising rent and gentrification

- How TIF and property tax money is spent
- City parking/ticketing policies and potholes

| How do we keep neighborhoods diverse while still promoting growth? You know: safety, health, business, and a thriving community while not having to succumb to the temptations of, 'Let's go in and wipe certain buildings or neighborhoods out in the name of profit.' So how can you keep diversity and make my neighborhood healthy at the same time? Which I know is a very difficult challenge.

| --35-44 year old Latinx/Hispanic American female living on the north side

| Even if you take away corruption and look at the way the system is structured, where you have one party that's always in power and really you're just choosing between this guy's cousin or this guy's nephew . . . you end up with the question of 'what's the point of voting?' Or 'what's the point of supporting this system?' Can we do something to fundamentally change that system that actually keeps people from becoming engaged? Because what ends up happening is folks feel like, 'I don't have any political power.'

| --25-34 year old Latinx/Hispanic American male living on the west side

Useful News Coverage

When it comes to news coverage of Chicago, interviewees described a need for both depth and breadth: context and background of the political landscape and bullet-pointed updates. Many interviewees also felt they were inundated with content and wished their news experience was more organized or curated, while still exposing them to a variety of sources.

| I think there's a big problem in news in getting into the weeds. Ideally you're surrounded in this liquid of news and you get a feel for what things are [happening] in the city. These facts come at you and you're like, 'Oh, we have an issue with gun violence.' But that's not really a way to do things anymore because there is so much information available. We need to be able to sort through it. So anything that goes towards educating the populace on some sort of bird's eye view is really productive to me . . . I'm fine with too much information. I just need to be aware of ways to sort through [it].

! -- 25-34 year-old White/European American male living on the north side

Local news sources

What sources do you use for news and information about Chicago and/or your neighborhood?

This was a select-all-that-apply question and news publications (online or print) was the most common response across age, gender and race, with about three-quarters of interviewees indicating that they used them. Social media was a close runner-up and in later questions of the interviews, many said that upon further thought, social media was a more significant source of news for them than they initially realized. More so than the other categories, social media is many different things to many different people but powerfully shapes the information we see and share.

Interviewees may have had different interpretations of the overlaps between sharing information with neighbors/friends and seeing posts from acquaintances on social media, but the high ranking of both, as well as comments by interviewees, indicated that their social interactions—whether online or in-person—were important conduits for news and perspectives that they found important but may not have necessarily sought out on their own. See the final column for a summary of specific news sources interviewees mentioned throughout their conversations.

Type of news source	Sum	Percentage	Commonly mentioned sources
News publication (online or print)	37	77.1%	• Chicago Tribune • Chicago Sun-Times • Block Club Chicago • New York Times • Crain's Chicago Business • Chicago Reader • South Side Weekly
Social media	35	72.9%	• Twitter • Facebook • Instagram • Snapchat
Sharing info with neighbors/friends	27	56.3%	
Community groups (neighborhood group, block club, church, chamber of commerce, etc.)	18	37.5%	• Aldermanic newsletters • Community email listservs

Individual journalists/public officials/public figures	17	35.4%	
Advocacy/activist groups	16	33.3%	
Radio news	14	29.2%	• WBEZ • WGN • WVON • Podcasts
TV news	14	29.2%	• ABC • NBC • WGN • CNN • WTTW • Campaign ads

Not useful news sources

For the group as a whole, radio and TV tied for the least-cited news sources at 28.6% but interviewees felt very differently about them. Those who listened to radio news did so regularly and considered it helpful. Those who didn't made no mention of it. It remained in the bottom two news sources across demographics.

In contrast, interviewees were split when it came to TV. TV news jumped up into the top five news sources for interviewees who were over the age of 35, African American or Latinx. In later responses, TV news was the most commonly given example of "not useful" news: biased or poorly researched ninety-second spots on complicated issues and vitriolic campaign ads. But for those who did watch, it was an evening ritual and the easiest news source to access and digest goings-on in the city.

18 - 34 year olds, ranked news sources

Type of news source	Percentage
News publication (online or print)	80.0%
Social media	77.1%
Sharing info with neighbors/friends	51.4%
Advocacy/activist groups	34.3%

35 - 74 year olds, ranked news sources

Type of news source	Percentage
News publication (online or print)	69.2%
Sharing info with neighbors/friends	69.2%
Social media	61.5%
TV news	53.8%

Community groups (neighborhood group, block club, church, chamber of commerce, etc.)	34.3%
Individual journalists/public officials/public figures	37.1%
Radio news	25.7%
TV news	20.0%
Grand Total	35

Community groups (neighborhood group, block club, church, chamber of commerce, etc.)	46.2%
Individual journalists/public officials/public figures	30.8%
Radio news	38.5%
Advocacy/activist groups	30.8%
Grand Total	13

**Black/African Americans,
ranked news sources**

Type of news source	Percentage
News publication (online or print)	77.8%
Sharing info with neighbors/friends	55.6%
Social media	55.6%
Community groups (neighborhood group, block club, church, chamber of commerce, etc.)	44.4%
TV news	44.4%
Individual journalists/public officials/public figures	22.2%
Radio news	22.2%
Advocacy/activist	11.1%

**Latinx/Hispanic American,
ranked news sources**

Type of news source	Percentage
News publication (online or print)	70.0%
Social media	60.0%
Sharing info with neighbors/friends	40.0%
TV news	40.0%
Advocacy/activist groups	30.0%
Community groups (neighborhood group, block club, church, chamber of commerce, etc.)	20.0%
Individual journalists/public officials/public figures	20.0%
Radio news	20.0%

**White/European American,
ranked news sources**

Type of news source	Percentage
News publication (online or print)	85.0%
Social media	80.0%
Sharing info with neighbors/friends	60.0%
Community groups (neighborhood group, block club, church, chamber of commerce, etc.)	45.0%
Individual journalists/public officials/public figures	45.0%
Advocacy/activist groups	40.0%
Radio news	30.0%
TV news	25.0%

groups					
Grand Total	9	Grand Total	10	Grand Total	20

*Other race demographics not included in this data table because of small sample sizes.

How often do you read local Chicago news articles?

<i>Frequency</i>	Sum	Percentage
Frequently (2-5x a week)	15	31.3%
Infrequently (2-5x a month)*	15	31.3%
Very frequently (more than once a day)	14	29.2%
Very infrequently (once a month or less)	4	8.3%

* The original survey listed "once a week" as an additional option. We combined these responses with the "infrequently" category after the survey was conducted, realizing that the latter includes the former descriptor.

Local Political News

*Think about all the ways you receive news and information about **local politics and government** (i.e. Chicago, Cook County, Illinois).*

What kind of news/information is useful to you? What kind is not useful and do you not want at all? What kind of news/information do you want that is missing?

Interviewees received information about local politics and government in a variety of ways. Significant value was placed on hyperlocal and community news sources as well as detailed coverage of legislation and social issues.

Interviewees said they used, would use, or would like more of the following resources:

- Infographics or other interactive tools
- Trackers on progress of legislation in City Council and how elected officials are fulfilling their campaign promises
 - Though no interviewees specifically mentioned anything like [Legistar](#) or [Chicago Councilmatic](#), they described functions of such resources
- Explainers of how local government works, both from media and from the city itself
- Hyperlocal news sites in the vein of [DNAinfo](#), [Chicagoist](#), [Logan Squarist](#), [Block Club Chicago](#), etc.
- Aldermanic newsletters, community listservs, neighborhood Facebook groups, etc.
- Investigative pieces, particularly those that highlight and humanize an issue affecting marginalized groups
- Neutral, fact-based reporting
- Links to articles and discussions on social media

A lot of times a politician will make a claim that this will do X-Y-Z thing and it oftentimes would require some sophistication and expertise to look into. [For example]: there's this proposal to provide subsidy to existing landowners, and in return they promise to maintain an 'affordable' rent for 15 years. Has this been shown to work in other cities? Has it been tried in Chicago in the past? What do current research or experts say?

-- 18-24 year old Black/African American male living on the south side

Visuals. Here's your ward. It starts with your ward. The alderman's job is this. [At my company] there's an organizational chart where I could look you up and see who you report to and what you do. Something like that would be cool.

-- 55-64 year old Latinx/Hispanic American female living on the south side

Election News

*Think about the ways you receive news and information about **elections** in general (including local and national elections). What kind of news/information is useful to you? What kind is not useful and do you not want at all? What kind of news/information do you want that is missing?*

Interviewees acknowledged the value of both neutral data- and fact-based information, as well as the opinions of acquaintances or public figures they respected. Interviewees said they used, would use, or would like more of the following resources:

- A database or factsheet of the elected position, each candidate's platform, background, political career and affiliations
 - Several specifically mentioned wanting an elections SparkNotes or, more concretely, for [BallotReady.org](https://ballotready.org) to be updated with more information by the candidate, activist groups and other community interests
- Instead of debates, televised community forums in which the candidate must answer questions from the public
- [Endorsements](#) or voter guides from [organizations](#) or [individuals](#) who have done their research and break down important but less high-profile offices in the courts, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, etc.
- Thorough policy proposals, rather than vague campaign promises
- Balanced opinion pieces from journalists or other public figures
- Conversations with family, friends, and communities across the city

What would be more fascinating [than watching a debate] would be having dinner with eight people who are important to the community

| and have roots there . . . to hear their opinions and why they believe
 | what they do. And they can agree or disagree; I would rather the
 | discourse not be about 'who is the better candidate?' but 'what
 | experiences have you had with a particular candidate that have affected
 | you personally and the neighborhood as a result?' I would find that
 | much, much more helpful and informing than two candidates giving
 | stock answers and spinning things because they can.
 |
 | -- 25-34 year old White/European American male living on the
 | northwest side

Voting in February

Do you think you will vote in the municipal election in February? Why or why not?
Do you usually vote in municipal elections? What about other elections-- which
do you care about and why? If you don't care about elections, why not?

Though interviewees expressed varying degrees of engagement over the course of the survey, by the end the vast majority of interviewees said they would vote in the February election because they recognized the power of their vote. The experience of having an intentional, extended conversation about local politics and elections seemed to have an effect on some; these people said they did not usually discuss politics with the people in their lives but that the interview made them want to be more informed.

| No. I do not have enough information at this time. Unless I choose to gain
 | more information then I will not vote.
 |

| --18-24 year old Latinx/Hispanic American male living on the west side
 |

| I definitely have a heightened interest now . . . I haven't learned a single thing
 | yet about who's running or what's going on besides those dates, but [this
 | interview] made me come to terms with myself, how little I know and how
 | much I've yet to learn . . . I would definitely see it as like a landmark that I
 | finally voted for something in my adult life. As for [impact on the ward or the
 | city], I have no idea. I don't know the kind of impact that a vote has. I don't
 | even know how many people actually participate in municipal elections.
 |

| -- 18-24 year old Latinx/Hispanic American female living on the north side
 |

| Yeah, I think I'll vote, because it's important to have your voice heard and I
 | think it's important to get people who will use their power to do good things
 |

for the community . . . I actually think local politics is where things are less
 polarized [than national politics] . . . The kind of issues we're voting on at the
 local level are, for example, 'We need to save the 31st street bus.' . . .
 And people want to get somebody in office who will work with CTA to save the
 bus. Those are the kind of things that will actually change policies and change
 the way the country works.
 -- 18-24 year old Asian/Pacific Islander female living on the west side

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