

Opinion: Chicago Sun-Times endorsement of Lori Lightfoot for mayor shows why they still matter

To all who have written the obituary for the value of newspaper endorsements, Chicago offers powerful evidence that it's time to throw that false eulogy out the window.

A record-setting 14 candidates crowded the ballot for mayor of Chicago earlier this year. Some had been running for months with little to show for it.

On Feb. 7, less than three weeks before Election Day, the local Fox affiliate [held a debate](#) for the five top-polling candidates in the race – prompting those polling lower to cry out in complaint.



Lori Lightfoot (Photo courtesy of CAN TV)

Barely mentioned in those stories about candidates left out of the night's debate was back-of-the-pack former federal prosecutor Lori Lightfoot, who pulled a mere 2.8 percent of the vote in that *Chicago Sun-Times* poll Fox used to gauge worthiness.

But the next morning, on Feb. 8, the *Chicago Sun-Times* [passionately endorsed Lightfoot for mayor.](#) And that changed everything.

"Several months ago, I was cut from a debate of the 'frontrunner' candidates and public polls had me at 3%. Today I am Mayor of Chicago," Lightfoot [tweeted](#) in June to back-of-the-pack Democrats running for president, urging them not to give up.

Several months ago, I was cut from a debate of the "frontrunner" candidates and public polls had me at 3%.

Today I am Mayor of Chicago.

To all the Democrats running for president, I say this: if you are running for the right reasons, never stop fighting.

– Lori Lightfoot (@LightfootForChi) [June 13, 2019](#)

America's focus will soon shift to whether an endorsement by the *Des Moines Register* or the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* helps one of the Democratic contenders break out of the pack in the upcoming Iowa Caucuses. Even if few people read the endorsements in the paper, candidates make sure voters see the endorsement headlines in campaign ads.

Most research and debate on newspaper endorsements' effectiveness focus on the presidential race, asking, for instance, why voters generally ignored the near-unanimous endorsements newspapers around the country offered to Donald Trump's opponents in the 2016 primary and general elections.

(One notable exception was the *Chicago Tribune*, whose out-of-left-field endorsement of Libertarian Gary Johnson for president may have helped boost his share of Illinois' vote to 3.79 percent from the 1.07 percent he scored four years earlier.)

Editorial Page editors, by and large, are not boastful people who post conquests like notches on a belt. No national database logs candidates for local or state elections arguably propelled from behind by strong or unexpected newspaper endorsements. How could one prove that anyway?

But we do know that unexpected endorsements are more likely to sway voters than predictable ones. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti may have eked out his four-point victory even without the *LA Times*' mild [endorsement](#) in 2013. New York Mayor Bill de Blasio *did* win in 2013 without the endorsements of the Times, the Daily News or the Post, all of which told voters New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn was the better option.

In Chicago, the surprise certainly was the driver with the *Sun-Times*' endorsement of Lightfoot.

The four biggest names on the ballot jumped into the race only after incumbent Mayor Rahm Emanuel – President Obama's former chief of staff – announced in September 2018 that he would not seek re-election.

Plenty of surprises shifted the dynamics through the course of the election, including an indictment of Chicago's longest-serving alderman, Ed Burke, who had ties to all the front-runners.

But the single-biggest curve in the polls came weeks before Election Day when the *Sun-Times* took a flyer on a back-of-the-pack former federal prosecutor most people outside Chicago never heard of. Lightfoot came from practically nowhere to get the largest share of votes in the first-round of voting and to blow past early front-runner Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle in the run-off with 74 percent of the vote.

"It gave her some legitimacy at a point where she needed it," said Christopher Mooney, a political science professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"The newspaper endorsement from the *Chicago Sun-Times* – a three-pager– was the real beginning of Lightfoot's ascent. "That was her only media endorsement and it worked," N'DIGO magazine publisher Hermene Hartman wrote in her analysis of the race.

(I was the *Sun-Times*' political reporter until 2012, and I now serve as director of communications for one of the five higher-polling mayoral candidates who did make it into the debate that night, Illinois State Comptroller Susana Mendoza. I work for the state, not the campaign. This is not a pinch-hit for Mendoza or the *Sun-Times*. Mendoza was just re-elected to a four-year term as comptroller, endorsed Lightfoot in the run-off and got over her loss.)

Lightfoot and Vallas jumped in early

Lightfoot had jumped into the race six months before Rahm Emanuel dropped out. She garnered some early progressive support but struggled to get attention. She and Paul Vallas, another former Daley chief of staff who had run school districts around the country, competed for the mantle of alternative to Emanuel.

As a federal prosecutor, Lightfoot convicted a corrupt Chicago alderman and took sensitive assignments from Mayors Daley and Emanuel, heading up the civilian accountability board that polices the Chicago Police. In those roles, she showed she was willing to make strong recommendations for change the mayors who appointed her did not receive warmly.

Once Emanuel jumped out, four big-name candidates jumped in: Preckwinkle, Mendoza, Former Obama Chief of Staff Bill Daley and former Chicago School Board Chairman Gery Chico. The “Big Four” leap-frogged over Lightfoot and Vallas in the polls. Lightfoot and Vallas cried foul, arguing Chicago needed change agents brave enough to take on Emanuel while he was still in the race – a candidate with fewer visible ties to the city’s old power structure like Burke, the Mayors Daley and Emanuel. Their arguments gained some traction after Burke’s indictment brought bad press for the Big Four.

But when Vallas and Lightfoot were excluded from the Fox News debate, only Vallas thundered from the sidelines that he should be included. Lightfoot – down at 2.8 percent in that Sun-Times poll – did not make the same noise.

Vallas ultimately got an 11th-hour invitation onto the stage after Daley cancelled at the last minute to avoid questions about a Chicago Tribune exposé on apparent test-tampering in his younger days. Businessman Willie Wilson polled high enough to qualify for that debate.

Daley raised more money than any other campaign and could afford more extensive polling than the other candidates. Those polls, which have not been publicly released, never showed Lightfoot under 8 percent, a Daley campaign source told me. But as far as the press and voters knew that night, she was still below 3 percent.

And then came that remarkable *Sun-Times* endorsement.

Sun-Times' voice once silenced

Ironically, the *Sun-Times* never would have had the chance to flex its king-maker muscles had a former set of owners had their way.

Back in 2012, a new group of owners blew into the *Sun-Times* and decreed that the newspaper would no longer make endorsements in political races. To the editorial writers fell the unenviable task of crafting a plausible pretense to cover the fact that the new owners included Republicans who disliked the Democrats the paper had been endorsing.

Conspicuous among the new owners was Bruce Rauner, who was already planning his run for governor and faced the prospect of his own paper endorsing his opponent – or his paper's endorsement being dismissed because he was a co-owner. Before he ran, Rauner sold his share of the paper. His former co-owners made an exception to their no-endorsement policy to order an endorsement for Rauner in 2014. Eventually that group of owners moved on and the *Sun-Times* found its voice again, resuming regular endorsements.

The editorial board members' hearts clearly had not been in that 2012 editorial explaining the decision to stop endorsing candidates. They wrote that endorsements were passé – voters didn't need them anymore, etc. With their endorsement of Lightfoot this year, they whole-heartedly proved their earlier argument false.

As Dick Simpson, a former alderman, now professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago, pointed out, studies show that endorsements can affect the margins, typically not swaying more than about 5 percent of the voters for candidates or referenda. But not all elections are typical. Sometimes endorsements sway no one and on occasions like this one, they appear to move the needle with more than 5 percent of voters.

Tribune Daley endorsement unsurprising

As sure as everyone in Chicago always knew the *Tribune* would [endorse Daley](#), it was also taken for granted that the *Sun-Times* would endorse Preckwinkle.

Preckwinkle's campaign was largely run by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1 in Chicago, whose workers benefit from Preckwinkle's expansion of county health programs. The union planted negative stories against Preckwinkle's rivals.

That union, SEIU Local 1, co-owns the *Sun-Times*. How would they not endorse Preckwinkle? A smaller-share co-owner of the *Sun-Times* supported Lightfoot, but on this one, editorial board members were allowed to go with their hearts. Rarely does an editorial board wear its heart on its sleeve this profoundly.

"Lightfoot, 56, has never before held elected office, but she has been a powerfully influential public servant. She has been an outspoken critic of bad moves by City Hall, calling out her own bosses. She has also – and this is not widely understood – been a force for honesty and integrity behind the scenes ... She is beholden to pretty much nobody – except you."

At this point, the *Sun-Times*, having read its own poll, knew the odds were against Lightfoot. But they didn't care. They were willing to go long on the candidate they thought was most willing to rip up the old playbook. And their conviction

showed in the strong writing.

Editorial Page Editor Tom McNamee said the most important passage in the endorsement was this: “We endorse Lightfoot because this election is bigger than any disagreement about taxes or charter schools or express trains to O’Hare. This election is about who we are, and who we want to be. Are we one Chicago or not?”

Reflecting on the endorsement’s impact, he said, “Voters were looking for something more than the ‘right’ policy positions or the ‘right’ experience or whatever. They were looking to feel good about living in this town. Chicago, like the whole country, is divided and contentious and people are weary of it. They want to be able to pull for something again.”

Endorsement starts avalanche

At the *Sun-Times* and other newspapers I’ve worked for, I have watched the publisher come down on occasion, put his thumb on the scales and exercise his prerogative to endorse the lesser candidate. Professional editorial writers know it is their duty to make a plausible argument for the publisher’s choice. The Philadelphia Inquirer’s editorial board [saw its choice](#) for mayor overturned in 2015. That clearly was not the case in this election. Readers could see the Sun-Times’ passion for Lightfoot leaping off the page.

The endorsement lit up talk radio, Facebook and the Twittersphere.

Lightfoot’s supporters – many of them exhausted from years of Quixotic crusades to bring reform to Chicago – were suddenly energized and reinvigorated. Voters looking for a new option suddenly saw Lightfoot as viable. The wave began and Lightfoot’s numbers started going up as voters defected from the Big Four and the nine other challengers. Friends whose support for my boss I had counted on began apologizing and telling me they were leaning toward Lightfoot as an

increasingly plausible challenger to Preckwinkle and Daley.

“In a normal race, even for mayor, the usual rule of thumb is that a newspaper endorsement can affect maybe as high as 5 percent of the vote, usually a little less than that,” Simpson said. “I think this time it did play an oversize role.”

Several factors broke Lightfoot’s way at once, Simpson noted. Her television ads started in earnest at this time. Her opponents ran negative ads against each other but not against her. Their numbers went down and hers went up. By Election Night, Feb. 26, Lightfoot finished with 17.5 percent of the vote in the 14-candidate field, 8,324 votes ahead of Preckwinkle. In the run-off five weeks later on April 2, she smoked Preckwinkle 74 percent to 26 percent.

“Any time something happens that is unpredictable, maybe that had an effect,” said Mooney, the UIC professor. “Endorsements on average don’t have a major impact – people have other sources of news. But when it’s unusual that’s different. The Tribune says, ‘We should have Daley as mayor.’ Nobody notices, because that’s what you’d expect them to say.”

Candidates and elected officials reluctant to appear before newspaper editorial boards to seek their backing on policy initiatives or election endorsements should study Lightfoot’s experience and march into their local newspaper even if the odds are against them.

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