

Democracy Priorities for Chicago's Next Mayor

The next mayor of Chicago can have a significant impact on at least two major issues affecting the health of democracy in our city and state. One is making sure every Chicagoan is counted in the 2020 U.S. Census; the other is encouraging more people to register to vote and cast ballots, especially young people.

The 2020 census

A great deal will be at stake when the next census is taken in the spring of 2020. An accurate count of all residents will help ensure that Chicago and Illinois receive their fair share of federal funding. The \$34 billion allocated to Illinois in the 2016 fiscal year comes out to roughly \$1,800 per person each year for programs such as road and highway construction, Head Start, K-12 education, student loans, foster care, Medicaid, Section 8 housing vouchers, and nutrition assistance.

The census also will determine how many U.S. House seats are apportioned to Illinois for the next 10 years – as well as how many votes our state casts in the Electoral College. With recent declines in population, a census undercount could be the difference between Illinois losing one or two congressional seats and diminishing our voice in Washington.

With so much riding on the results, we urge the next mayor of Chicago to be a leader in mobilizing outreach efforts across the city to achieve a full and fair count. Everyone has a role to play – government, business, philanthropy, nonprofit and community groups, and neighborhoods – to make sure everyone in Illinois is counted.

The City already is having an impact as one of the plaintiffs in a federal lawsuit challenging the addition of a citizenship question to the census. The plaintiffs argue the question not only is irrelevant; it would discourage participation by immigrants. The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to hear the case in April and rule in June.

The 2020 census also poses unique challenges. It will be the first to go digital – households can fill out their census form online, by phone, or the traditional mail-in form. Not only will residents want to know their options; they'll also need to be reassured that the government is prohibited from misusing census data.

Another way the new mayor can continue Chicago's census leadership is to organize and fund Chicago's Complete Count Committee to work with community organizations, the state, and the local Census Bureau office to mobilize census engagement in city neighborhoods. We also look to the next mayor to support legislation pending in Springfield that would provide \$25 million in state funds for census outreach to communities that are traditionally hard to count accurately.

Voter turnout and civic engagement

Another area in which the next mayor can bolster our democracy is to support, if not lead, efforts to increase voter participation – especially among young people of color. Chicago had strong turnout numbers for the 2018 midterms, especially for young people. But we saw those numbers slide in the February 26 mayoral election, when turnout was extremely low.

We also urge the next mayor to mobilize her administration to encourage greater participation in the 2020 election. Might Chicago consider making Election Day a paid holiday for City workers? Could the City encourage local businesses to participate in programs giving employees a day off to be poll workers? Chicago Public Schools use the election as a teachable moment to encourage civic engagement by running mock elections and debates for students to simulate an actual election?

As is the case with the next census, much will be at stake for Chicago and Illinois in the 2020 presidential election.