

Democratic Mayoral Candidates Place Focus on Crime in Wake of Chicago Upset

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Democrats



Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot speaks at an election night rally at Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council in Chicago on Feb. 28, 2023. (Kamil Krzaczynski/Getty Images)



By Joe Gomez

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Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot's surprise loss for reelection has been largely attributed to the high level of crime in the Windy City, and in the wake of her loss several Democratic strategists and candidates for mayor across the country say a lesson can be learned.

“Anyone paying attention didn't need the Chicago mayor's race to know that crime and public safety are at the front of voters' minds,” Democratic strategist and founder of the Texas Lone Star Project Matt Angle told The Epoch Times. “Chicago does, though, show that Democrats who communicate well and address crime directly and honestly do well.”

Lightfoot received only 17 percent of the vote in the mayoral race, coming in third place, while Paul Vallas, a former CEO of Chicago Public Schools, won over 30 percent making him the front-runner in April's run-off election against Cook County Commissioner Brandon Johnson, who earned 20 percent of the vote.

Vallas's tough-on-crime approach seemed to resonate with Chicago voters amid a crime wave that has haunted Lightfoot's term in office. So far Chicago has had over 70 murders this year alone, according to the Chicago Police Department.

“Violent crime remains a major challenge whether a community is led by a Democrat or Republican and requires urgent action to address it,” Democratic Mayors Association President and Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney told The Epoch Times.

“Democratic mayors are committed to holding people who commit violent crimes accountable and ensuring police are supported with the resources they need.

“We're using every tool in our toolbox to reduce crime and improve safety—investing in mental health and substance abuse treatment, making it harder for criminals to get guns, and investing in solutions that prevent crime, like good schools and affordable housing.”



Chicago police officers and firefighters salute a procession carrying the remains of a Chicago police officer who was shot and killed as it arrives at the Cook County Medical Examiner's Office, on March 1, 2023. (Tyler Pasciak LaRiviere/Sun-Times/Chicago Sun-Times via AP)

After Democrats saw huge down-ballot losses in 2020 when Republicans tried to tie them to the “defund the police” movement, the Democratic Party has had to convince voters that it is not soft on crime by coming up with creative solutions to reduce shootings while also supporting law enforcement.

“Despite these efforts to mitigate gun violence and keep our communities safe, Democratic mayors continue to face uphill battles, especially in states controlled by Republican governors and legislatures that often thwart our efforts,” Stoney said.

“State and federal leaders must rise to the occasion to pass commonsense gun reforms, like stronger background checks, red flag laws, cracking down on illegal guns, and banning assault weapons from our streets to improve safety,” he added.

There are several high-profile mayoral races in 2023 for Democrats in major cities like Houston and Denver. The Epoch Times spoke to Democratic mayoral candidates from both cities who have a tough-on-crime approach.

Houston

Houston, the nation’s fourth-largest city is already looking at a crowded race to replace term-limited Mayor Sylvester Turner. Five candidates have tossed their hats into the ring in the mayoral election so far.

As in Chicago, a defining issue in the Houston mayor’s race is that of violent crime. For a time in 2022, the Bayou City led the nation for having the most homicides, according to data collected from the Houston Police Department.

“We’ve had a public safety crime issue nationwide, certainly in our urban centers; Houston is no different and I think what is required of our big city mayors is to be very transparent and discuss crime,” state Sen. John Whitmire, a Democrat and candidate for Houston Mayor, told The Epoch Times. “I think you need to be very transparent and talk about what’s causing the crime.”

Whitmire is the longest-serving current member in the Texas State Senate, having represented District 15 in Harris County since 1983. He also serves as chair of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee.

“I was robbed at gunpoint in my garage with my family in 1992 and then I became chairman of criminal justice in 1993, so I go to work every day to make sure that my constituents don’t go through the horrible experience I went through of begging for my life,” Whitmire said. “Public safety was my highest priority and it continues to be.”



A protester holds a sign during a rally outside of the Federal Courthouse in Houston, Texas, on Jan. 28, 2023. (Mark Felix/AFP via Getty Images)

The state senator has already racked up plenty of endorsements from law enforcement groups in the community like the Houston Police Officers Union, Afro-American Police Officers League, Harris County Deputies Organization, and the Houston Retired Police Officers Association.

“The police unions have reviewed all the candidates; they know I have a history of being smart and tough on crime,” he said.

Whitmire believes in a “smart-on-crime” approach that includes early intervention and rehabilitation programs.

“Somebody told me I should’ve copyrighted ‘smart on crime’ when I started talking about it in the early ’90s. You can’t just be tough, you should be smart, and that means don’t waste your resources. Have rehabilitation programs lock up people you’re afraid of, not those that you’re mad at,” he said.

He believes his message is resonating with Houston voters, who Whitmire says are sometimes even afraid to leave their homes at night.

“I know it’s resonating because I have crossed Houston, I work in criminal justice, I have senior citizens—the honest truth—seniors come up to me at restaurants and say, ‘Senator you have to help us, we won’t leave the house after five o’clock,’” Whitmire said. “We don’t have to live under those conditions. When people start altering their lifestyles because they’re afraid of the criminals we got a serious problem and I’m committed to fixing it.”

But though Whitmire has received accolades from law enforcement—and even from his Republican colleagues across the aisle—for his work in public safety, some Texas Democrats think voters shouldn’t rush to make a decision on who they’ll be voting for.

“Crime is a major issue in Houston, and it will be relevant to the mayor’s race, but that doesn’t necessarily give Whitmire an advantage,” said Angle. “He carries 30 years of baggage that other candidates don’t, and all of them respect law enforcement and know their first job will be to keep citizens safe.”



Denver’s State Capitol on Jan. 9, 2023. (David Zalubowski/AP Photo)

Denver

In Denver a whopping 17 candidates are vying for the top job, with crime also a major issue.

The Mile High City is facing a significant crime wave, according to a [report](#) from the Common Sense Institute, which said that “Denver ranks in the top 10 U.S. cities for crime, including: 3rd motor vehicle theft; 6th property crime rate; 10th rape crime rate.”

Aurelio Martinez, who is one of the Democratic candidates running for mayor of Denver, told The Epoch Times the city is “broken.”

“It’s very broken, you can take any issue and it’s bad; the homelessness is the worst that it’s ever been here in Denver,” Martinez said. “Car thefts are going up considerably, we also have youth crime that has skyrocketed where we have teenagers who are actually killing each

other. It's gotten out of hand and if we don't take that bull by the horns it's going to get away from us, so we have to attack it in a way where we can stop it from climbing and also reduce it."

Similar to Whitmire, Martinez has a "smart-on-crime" approach utilizing early intervention programs, prioritizing violent crime as opposed to non-violent crime, and increasing the amount of law enforcement.

"We have to look at our Department of Safety here in Denver because that incorporates the Police Department as well as the Denver Sheriffs Department, and the problem now is [that] the Denver Police are basically a one-size-fits-all, they respond to everything right now."

Martinez said he stands out from the rest of the mayoral candidates in that as a former boxer he knows how to fight.

"I was a prizefighter for 10 years so I do know what it means to engage in solid combat and to come out successful and win," he said.

Denver's election for mayor will be held on April 4 and Houston's will be held on Nov. 7.