

VOTERS REJECT BRING CHICAGO HOME

Defeating the Chicago
Teachers Union's Tax Hike
on its Home Turf

CLIENT:
Illinois Policy Institute

IRON LIGHT



Background

Chicago is famous for the “friendly confines” of Wrigley Field.

And Chicago voters are famous for their friendliness toward tax increases.

In 2020, 71% of Chicagoans voted for a “fair tax” referendum imposing a statewide progressive income tax. And 81% of Chicagoans voted for President Joe Biden.

That’s why in 2024, every political observer in the country expected Chicago voters to approve the “Bring Chicago Home” referendum, which would raise \$100 million for homelessness services by hiking the transfer tax on all Chicago properties valued at over \$1 million.

But that’s not what happened.

Chicago voters rejected Mayor Brandon Johnson’s signature tax increase referendum (52%-48%), which would have threatened Chicago’s economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and driven up rents citywide.

This resounding defeat for Mayor Johnson and his allies in the Chicago Teachers Union has put his plans for an \$800 million suite of tax hikes on hold indefinitely.

Here’s how we did it.



The Challenge

In April 2023 Chicagoans elected former Chicago Teachers Union organizer Brandon Johnson as their mayor.

Johnson represented a platform of major tax and spending increases to tackle Chicago's various challenges, including homelessness and crime.

His plan for a transfer tax targeted high-priced real estate sales, but in reality would have made living in Chicago far more expensive for everyone, particularly those at the bottom of the economic ladder.

The Chicago Teachers Union (the most powerful teachers union in the country) made this issue their top priority in the March 19 primary election.

The union and their allies knocked on 300,000 doors, made 600,000 phone calls, and literally pulled children out of school to vote in favor of it.

The Solution

The power of a think tank comes from their ability to deliver the right message at the right time to the right audience to compel action.

Thankfully, Iron Light had led a year-long campaign prior to this election making Mayor Johnson the most unpopular mayor in Chicago's history (29% approval) while also dropping the net favorables of the Chicago Teachers Union from +17 to -9.

When our neuroscience-based message testing revealed the leading message against Bring Chicago Home was that voters couldn't trust Mayor Johnson with new revenue, we knew we had the opportunity to win against all odds.

Our digital, text and email campaign resonated deeply in the Chicago market. This culminated with the domination of all earned media in the two weeks leading up to the election when our team revealed a plot from the Chicago Teachers Union to capture the tax revenue for themselves—and to pull children out of class to vote in favor of the increase.

Our team's work was cited by every single major news outlet in the city, Bari Weiss' Free Press, and even Elon Musk. (See [CBS](#), [NBC](#), [ABC](#), [WGN](#), [WTTW](#) and [Fox 32 TV](#) and [WGN](#), [WLS](#), [WBBM](#) and [WBEZ](#) radio. Our experts also informed editorials from [WSJ](#), [The Chicago Tribune](#), and [Crain's](#).)

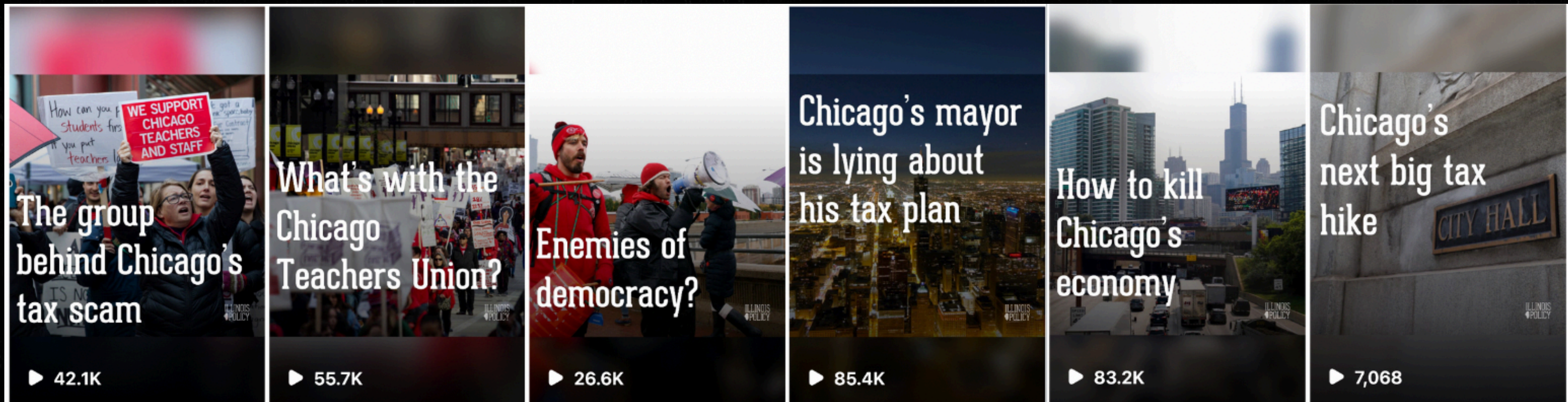


The Solution

We earned 235,000+ unique email opens from Chicago voters in the 8 days leading up to Election Day, entirely focused on Bring Chicago Home and voting resources.

Due to our years-long investment in the client's "owned audience" strategy, this leveraged influence came at no marginal cost to the campaign.

We also earned 2.5M+ organic views on our content on X; earned 111,000+ organic views of relevant articles on illinoispolicy.org; and earned 300,000+ organic video views on Instagram Reels.



The Results

The Wall Street Journal editorial board said it best:

“On Tuesday voters shocked everyone by soundly rejecting a ballot referendum to raise the city’s real-estate transfer tax, despite active support by Mayor Brandon Johnson and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

“Or perhaps the defeat was because of their support...

“The vote is a particular defeat for the CTU and president Stacy Davis Gates. The union mobilized its members to support the referendum and even marched high-school students to the polls to vote for it during school hours. A draft of the union’s contract demands that leaked to the press noted that it wants financial assistance to fund teacher housing and that the campaign would begin with Bring Chicago Home.

“The vote shows the CTU is beatable.”





The Results

Despite record low voter turnout (22%)—which typically advantages the local political machine—the Bring Chicago Home campaign failed, and its proponents directly credited Illinois Policy Institute’s work for that outcome.

This win protects millions of Chicagoans – property owners, renters, investors and shoppers – not to mention the city's overall economic recovery.



Bring Chicago Home

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The movement to Bring Chicago Home, founded and led by those with lived experience of homelessness, faced an onslaught of attacks from the right-wing Illinois Policy Institute and the corporate landlords and mega-developers who created the housing crisis we live every day.

We couldn’t be prouder of how this people-powered campaign laid out a different vision for our city. We are more committed than ever to a struggle for justice with, for, and by the 68,000 homeless Chicagoans and hundreds of thousands of others struggling to pay rent.

📅: [Chicago Coalition for the Homeless](#)



Chicago Will Continue to Fight for Housing Justice

The Bring Chicago Home campaign exists in the long lineage of past and present struggles for fair housing, civil rights, and economic justice. While yesterday’s election results are disappointing, **we are nowhere near the end of our journey.**

There are still 100,000 outstanding mail-in ballots to be counted, but whatever the final count, one thing is abundantly clear: how determined our opponents are to continue profiting from displacement and inequality. **From landlords sending intimidating emails to tenants to a legal challenge attempting to invalidate the results, the realtors, corporate landlords, and mega-developers fought us at every turn.**

Our broad-based coalition—made up of homeless and formerly homeless people, union members, faith leaders, social service providers, community organizations, and grassroots volunteers—is determined to keep fighting for housing justice. Together, our city-wide field program knocked over 300,000 doors, made over 600,000 phone calls, and sent over 1 million text messages across all 50 wards. **This is the work that makes our movement stronger over the long haul, no matter the final result.**

BRING CHICAGO HOME

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THE WRENCH IN THE CTU MACHINE



IRON LIGHT

Solving Wicked Problems