

Chicago Elections 2023

# From raising taxes to defunding the police, we fact checked Paul Vallas and Brandon Johnson

As both Chicago mayoral candidates traded barbs again at a WBEZ/Chicago Sun-Times/UoC forum, we fact checked repeated claims and criticisms they've lobbed.



Chicago mayoral candidates Brandon Johnson, left, and Paul Vallas, answer questions during a WBEZ and Chicago Sun-Times mayoral candidate runoff forum at the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts at University of Chicago, Thursday, March 30, 2023. Tyler Paschik LaRiviere / Chicago Sun-Times

By Mariah Woelfel  
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Chicago mayoral candidates on Thursday turned the national news of Donald Trump's stunning indictment into political talking points in one of the last public forums ahead of next week's April 4 runoff election.

Cook County Commissioner Brandon Johnson attempted to tie Paul Vallas to Trump by citing a [recent funding influx](#) to help elect Vallas by a group founded by Trump's former education secretary Betsy DeVos.

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"It's playing out in the city of Chicago," Johnson said. "This Trumpian-style politics that has inserted itself into this campaign is quite disturbing and these ideas... are surrounding my opponent."

Vallas said Trump's indictment was expected and that "justice needs to be served," as he distanced himself from the DeVos funding, which is going to a separate group in support of electing Vallas, not to his campaign itself.

"I've never had any conversations or contacts with Betsy DeVos," Vallas said. "And our campaign has not received any money from her."

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The candidates threw other barbs at each other in the hour-long debate held on the South Side by WBEZ's Reser, the Chicago Sun-Times and the University of Chicago's Institute of Politics. There was little new heard, except when Johnson said he would fire the city's Public Health Director, Dr. Allison Arwady if elected.

"We have different views of public health, so no, she will not stay on in my administration," Johnson said.

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Vallas said he would keep her on: "If she elects to stay on, absolutely."

There have been at least 18 debates or public interviews in the four-week period between the election's first round and now. Those events have been chock full of promises, accusations and attempts to set the record straight.

Here's a fact-check or some additional context for a few of the frequently repeated claims of the 2023 runoff campaign trail.

### Policing

#### Vallas: "Hundreds of officers" will return if I'm elected, including retirees

Chicago police ranks have shrunk by about 1,600 officers since 2019, but there's not much evidence that bringing back retirees will work. Several cities have tried to hire back police retirees but few have reported success.

In Chicago, WBEZ reached eight retirees, ranging from age 51 to 70. Two said they might consider going back to the department. The others were content with new jobs or had moved away.

Vallas reiterated Thursday that he knew of "300 officers who have indicated a willingness to return." But beyond whether he could make that happen, there are questions about whether they should.

Rhonda Porche Bullock, a former trustee of Fraternal Order of Police Chicago Lodge 7 — the union for most of the city's cops and police retirees — [recently told WBEZ](#) that retirees would be slow to embrace the consent decree, a federal court agreement to reform the police department.

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Vallas has not said what he would do about a municipal code that requires cops to retire from sworn ranks at age 63 or whether he'd offer terms competitive with what many CPD retirees have: a police pension and a non-city job.

#### Johnson: "I am not going to defund the police."

In 2020, Johnson said in a radio interview that defunding the police is a "political goal." He has distanced himself from those comments on the campaign trail and did so again Thursday night: "Paul hear me. I'm not going to defund the police."

Johnson's current policing plan does not explicitly call for decreasing *nor* increasing the Chicago police budget.

Johnson has vowed to find \$150 million in "efficiencies" in the police department's budget by streamlining supervisor to employee ratios. And he was [initially unclear](#) about whether those savings would stay within the department.

He is now repeatedly vowing to keep that money for police — and put it toward training, promotions, and mental health services for officers.

### Taxes

#### Vallas: "I would impose a property tax cap on individual properties"

Though Vallas has repeatedly said he would "impose a cap on individual property taxes" if elected, he did not make clear until this week that his plan for doing so would require a change to state law.

That's in part because property tax bills in Chicago are calculated by several entities that the mayor does not control, including the Cook County Assessor's office.

Earlier this week, Vallas pointed to a state law that would allow for capping assessments — but said the threshold it sets is "too high." He said it would be a priority of his to amend the state law to lower the threshold. His campaign did not respond to multiple requests for which law Vallas was referring to.

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On the contrary, Vallas has not ruled out raising the portion of property taxes the city does control — but has characterized it as a last resort.

#### Vallas: Johnson wants to create a city income tax.

Johnson's plan does not call for creating a city income tax.

His tax plan is similar in many ways to an aspirational plan crafted by a progressive political group that's backing him — the United Working Families. It calls for an increase to the city's hotel/motel tax. Johnson also wants to impose a ["bed tax"](#) that would charge certain businesses \$4 for each person they employ.

While the UWF does call for a city income tax, Johnson's budget plan does not.

Still, it's a claim Vallas has run in television commercials and has continued to make, despite Johnson reiterating earlier this week that "I did not propose a city income tax. You really gotta stop saying that."

#### Johnson: I will not raise property taxes

Johnson has made this promise repeatedly. But, even with a slew of new revenue ideas, financial experts say it would be difficult for the next mayor not to raise property taxes at all.

That's because Chicago relies heavily on property taxes to meet state-mandated pension payments after decades of fiscal mismanagement. And Johnson, like all the other candidates who ran for mayor, has promised not to miss those payments.

"I just would really reinforce to people that part of the reason for the pension system being so underfunded today is tied to keeping property taxes flat," said Amanda Kass, an assistant professor at DePaul University's School of Public Service who researches public finance.

"And so we kind of can't have it both ways of ... we can't properly fund the pension system and reduce property taxes. It's an ugly reality."

### Schools

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#### Vallas: As CPS CEO, "we built 78 new school buildings"

This statement, which Vallas repeated again Thursday night, is slightly misleading. The 78 figure actually includes just 18 new schools built under Vallas, according to his campaign spokesperson.

The rest were schools that received "significant renovations," or more than "\$2 million in major improvements," during his time as CEO from 1995 to 2001.

#### Johnson: When he was CPS CEO, Vallas "went to Springfield, worked with Republicans" and created the school district's current pension crisis

When CPS was under Vallas in 1997, Springfield lawmakers allowed the district to forgo payments to the pension fund because the fund was on good financial footing at the time.

Without the burden of a pension payment, Vallas borrowed money for a major capital improvement plan to renovate schools [that were "in ruins"](#) with "broken windows" and "leaky roofs," CPS board president at the time Gary Chico said.

For Vallas's tenure, and for years after, CPS paid barely anything toward its pensions, all while accruing new debt from capital plans that CPS is still paying off today.

Even though CPS was allowed to forego pension payments amid good fiscal health in the 90s, it was not best practice to do so, [pension researcher and DePaul's Kass told PolitiFact](#), and it made it more difficult for CPS to weather the economic downturns of 2001 and 2008.

### Misc.

#### Johnson: Vallas is a Republican

Vallas has never run for public office as a Republican.

But in a 2009 interview, Vallas said he is "more of a Republican than a Democrat" when explaining why he was considered running as a Republican for Cook County Board President. He wound up not running at all.

"Vallas has run for public office three times — all as a Democrat — and calls himself a 'lifelong Democrat.'" But he has enjoyed broad support from Republican circles during the 2023 campaign.

Vallas has taken heat for the public support he received from controversial and divisive Republican billionaire Ken Griffin, who has spent millions trying to defeat Democrats in Illinois elections, and spent nearly \$54 million defeating a proposed graduated income tax in 2020. Griffin has not given money directly to Vallas, but some of his company's top executives at Citadel have given Vallas half a million dollars collectively.

Vallas has been criticized for personally opposing abortion, though he says he supports others' right to choose. And he has had to defend himself [over news that his Facebook and Twitter accounts have liked](#) or engaged with racist posts [that mirror right-wing talking points](#).

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#### Vallas: Johnson has never managed a budget

As a Cook County Commissioner, Johnson has voted on numerous county budgets, the last of which was nearly \$9 billion. But he has not managed or independently crafted them.

Cook County commissioners are not solely responsible for managing or crafting budgets, a job left to officials within the county's budget office.

But they can influence and vote on them. To that end, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle has [praised Johnson](#) for having "championed" more equity in county budgets.

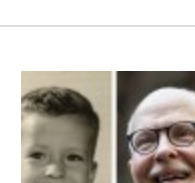
WBEZ reporter Tessa Weinberg contributed.

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