



## CASE STUDY - NOVEMBER 2025

# Defeating the Chicago Real Estate Transfer Tax Ballot Measure

### Background

In March 2024, Chicago voters were presented with Ballot Question 1, a real estate transfer tax (RETT) proposal branded as “Bring Chicago Home.” The measure sought to:

- Decrease the tax by 20% for property under \$1 million.
- Increase the tax by 166.67% for property between \$1 million and \$1.5 million.
- Increase the tax by 300% for property over \$1.5 million.

Proponents claimed the tax would generate \$100 million annually for homelessness and affordable housing initiatives. However, the measure was defeated, with 52.17% voting “No.”

### Origins and Political Context

The Real Estate Transfer Tax proposal emerged as a key agenda item of Chicago’s Progressive Movement, particularly among the Chicago Teachers Union and its affiliated political grass roots organizations that include United Working Families, all of whom had gained political momentum over the prior decade. The coalition viewed Mayor Johnson’s win as a mandate to implement a range of left-leaning policies, including the transfer tax. The original enabling legislation for the referendum was passed by the Chicago City Council by a 32-17 margin in November 2023, and RETT was slated for the March 2024 Primary Election.

Opposition to RETT began to grow during the legislative process, with key opposition forming among certain elected officials, the community, civic organizations, and some labor unions. Centralized opposition was a challenge to mobilize, given the increasingly fractured nature of Chicago’s political ecosystem, which had witnessed significant upheaval over the prior decade and was further exacerbated by the post-COVID-19 environment.

In late 2023, Greg Goldner and Adam Gypalo of Resolute Public Affairs, long-time professionals and political strategists headquartered in Chicago, began efforts to forge a larger coalition aiming to defeat the ballot initiative in the upcoming March 2024 Primary Election.

### Strategic Challenge

Despite polling well in abstract terms (e.g., taxing millionaires to fight homelessness), the proposal lacked specifics on how funds would be used. The proposal was intentionally

vague on how the anticipated revenues would be used to increase its appeal among voters. Notably, the supportive coalition had substantial financial reserves, as well as a strong complement of experienced field organizers and canvassers that had been active in the 2020, 2022, and 2023 political cycles.

In contrast, the opposition effort was initially resource-challenged, lacking both an in-house field apparatus and sufficient funds, given the fractured political environment. This fracture resulted in multiple aligned opposition factions pursuing strategies to defeat the Bring Chicago Home effort, including legal challenges that ultimately failed to stop the referendum.

The opposition couldn't win by contesting the goals of the measure; instead, it had to reframe the narrative around trust, execution, and political overreach. In turn, this required substantial effort by Goldner and Gypalo to keep the opposition faction aligned and coordinated. Goldner oversaw the general strategy, including message framing and media engagement, and Gypalo was focused on coalition management.

## **Strategy & Tactics**

### **1. Reframing the Issue**

- Shifted from policy to trust: The opposition campaign emphasized the undefined nature of the \$100 million “slush fund” and questioned whether voters trusted the city government and Mayor Johnson to spend it wisely.
- Tied the proposal to existing frustrations like past failures with school lottery funds and parking meter deals to erode trust.

### **2. Targeting Persuadable Voters**

- Focused all messaging on voters over 50, a group skeptical of city leadership and more likely to turn out.
- Avoided engaging with younger voters, who were unlikely to participate in the low-energy March primary.

### **3. Decentralized Messaging**

- No visible campaign face or brand: There were no public events, no social media accounts, and no central campaign identity. Ads bore only required disclaimers.
- Used credible third parties: Messaging was delivered through aldermen, neighborhood groups, and associations with built-in trust among constituents.
- Messaging was strategically focused on the topic and the negative impact on everyday Chicagoans, lack of trust in the current Mayor and allies to spend money wisely, versus any effort to brand the “opposition entity/group.”

### **4. Media Strategy**

- Prioritized cable, streaming, and text messaging over expensive broadcast.

- Geo-targeted neighborhoods with tailored video messaging among wards and targeted communities with high rates of homeownership, disrupting the proponents' field efforts.
- Engaged with editorial boards (e.g., *Chicago Sun-Times*) to highlight inconsistencies between the ballot text and the promises being made publicly.

## 5. Coalition Building (Selective and Strategic)

- Created a diverse coalition of Aldermen who ranged from high-rise, mixed-use residential, and commercial districts to single-family home-dominated areas.
- Shared polling and messaging with the Chicago Association and the National Association of REALTORS®, who reshaped their campaign accordingly.
- Despite limited participation from major business associations (like the Chamber of Commerce or the Illinois Restaurant Association), the opposition drew support from real estate groups, high-net-worth individuals, and individual businesses.

## 6. Ground Game Countermeasures

- In stark contrast to the Bring Chicago Home Coalition, who employed dozens of field organizers and phone bank coordinators, the opposition did not possess a field organization. Instead, they strategically disrupted the proponents' canvassing efforts by geofencing neighborhoods and preemptively delivering counter-messaging via text and digital ads.

## 7. Budget Management

- The campaign spent roughly \$1.8–1.9 million, slightly less than the \$2+ million spent by proponents.
- The Chicago Association of REALTORS® spent around \$1.2 million.
- The total campaign expenditures on both sides were a wash. What made the difference was message discipline and strategic focus.

## Results

- The measure was defeated 52.17% to 47.83% — a roughly 15,000-vote margin.
- The campaign won or tied in 30 of Chicago's 50 wards, including key areas that had initially supported putting the measure on the ballot.
- African-American homeowner-driven precincts, previously aligned with the mayor's coalition, voted against the measure. These precincts were found within wards considered to be "progressive" base areas and governed by progressive Aldermen, who now have a report card on file for standing against their voters' interests for the 2027 election.

## Lessons Learned

1. **Don't fight the issue; fight the framing and focus on the details.** Winning was possible not by debating the merits of housing policy, but by making the question about government accountability and execution.

2. **Keep it lean and focused.** A disciplined, efficient campaign can outperform better-funded opponents if it targets the right voters with the right message.
3. **Avoid being a target.** By decentralizing spokespeople and delivery of messages, the campaign gave opponents nothing to attack.
4. **Older voters drive outcomes.** Especially in low-energy primaries, messaging tailored to older voters can be decisive.
5. **Timing matters.** A March ballot win was critical; a November vote would have been more expensive and more difficult to win.

The defeat of the Chicago transfer tax ballot measure demonstrates how disciplined strategy, targeted messaging, and tactical focus can successfully counter a well-organized and well-funded campaign. By reframing the issue around public trust in government, concentrating communication on older, likely voters, and avoiding the trap of defending the economic impact on industry groups, the campaign offers clear lessons for others facing similar transfer tax proposals.