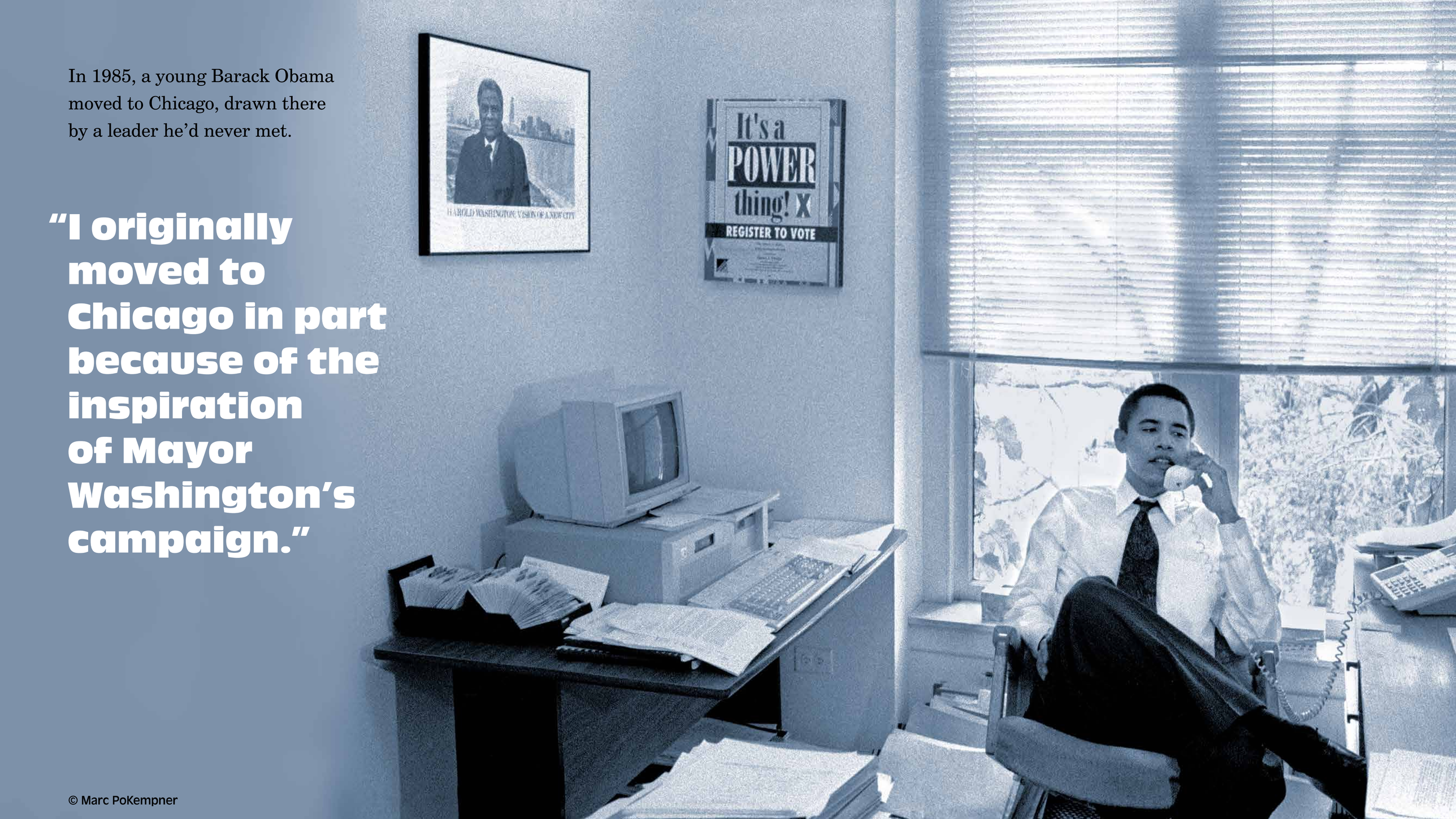
The Man.
The Moment.
The Movement.

PUNCH

Discussion Guide

In 1985, a young Barack Obama moved to Chicago, drawn there by a leader he'd never met.

"I originally moved to Chicago in part because of the inspiration of Mayor Washington's campaign."



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The challenge

In 1983, Harold Washington survived a tough, bruising election to become Chicago's first African American Mayor.

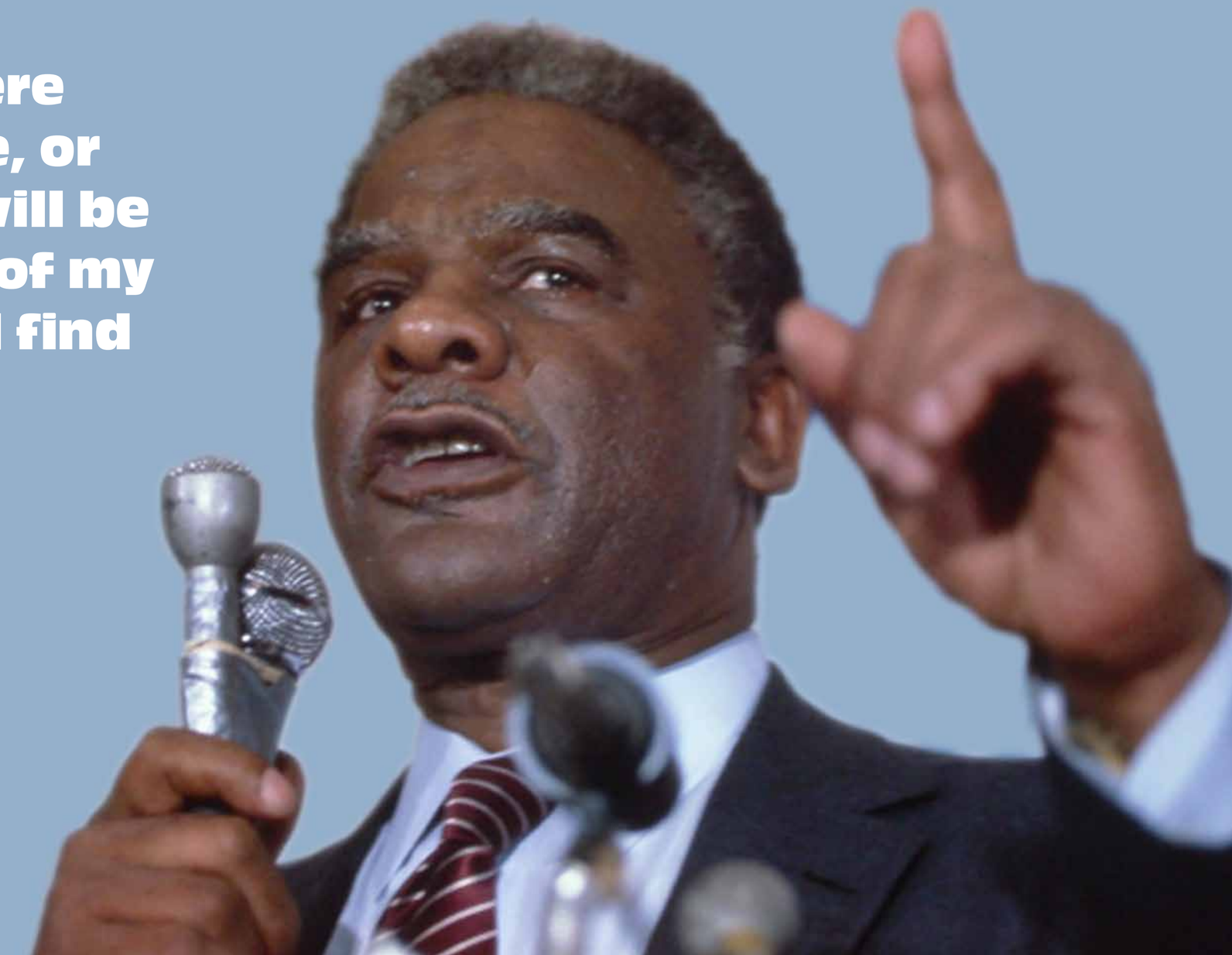
Washington's 1983 campaign was more than just a political run; it was a monumental step for Black empowerment. To achieve victory, Washington's campaign welcomed everyone to his coalition, from Hispanics and women to the LGBTQ+ community. As mayor, he took on Chicago's longstanding issues of corruption and favoritism head-on.

“I am using the concept of fairness as the glue to hold this city together,” Washington told his supporters.

“No one—no matter where you live, or how you live, or who you love—no one will be safe from the fairness of my administration. We will find you, and be fair to you, wherever you are.”

Mayor Washington won hard-fought victories and blazed a trail for leaders across the country to follow. His untimely death in 1987 cut short his tenure and splintered his coalition. What can we learn from his career and governance?

A thrilling story with unforgettable characters, *Punch 9 for Harold Washington* provides a playbook for how to restore our American democracy.



Discussion Questions—The challenge

1. How did the election of Harold Washington reflect the gains of the Civil Rights Movement?
2. Why do you think Barack Obama was inspired by Harold Washington?
3. What were some of the biggest obstacles Harold Washington faced when he became mayor?
4. Why do you think people from all over the world recognized and remembered Harold Washington?

Activity

Coding a Timeline

Practice basic coding while exploring history.

Using platforms like Scratch or Tynker, create a simple interactive timeline of Harold Washington's life, integrating images, text, and clickable events.

The moment

Demanding representation and justice

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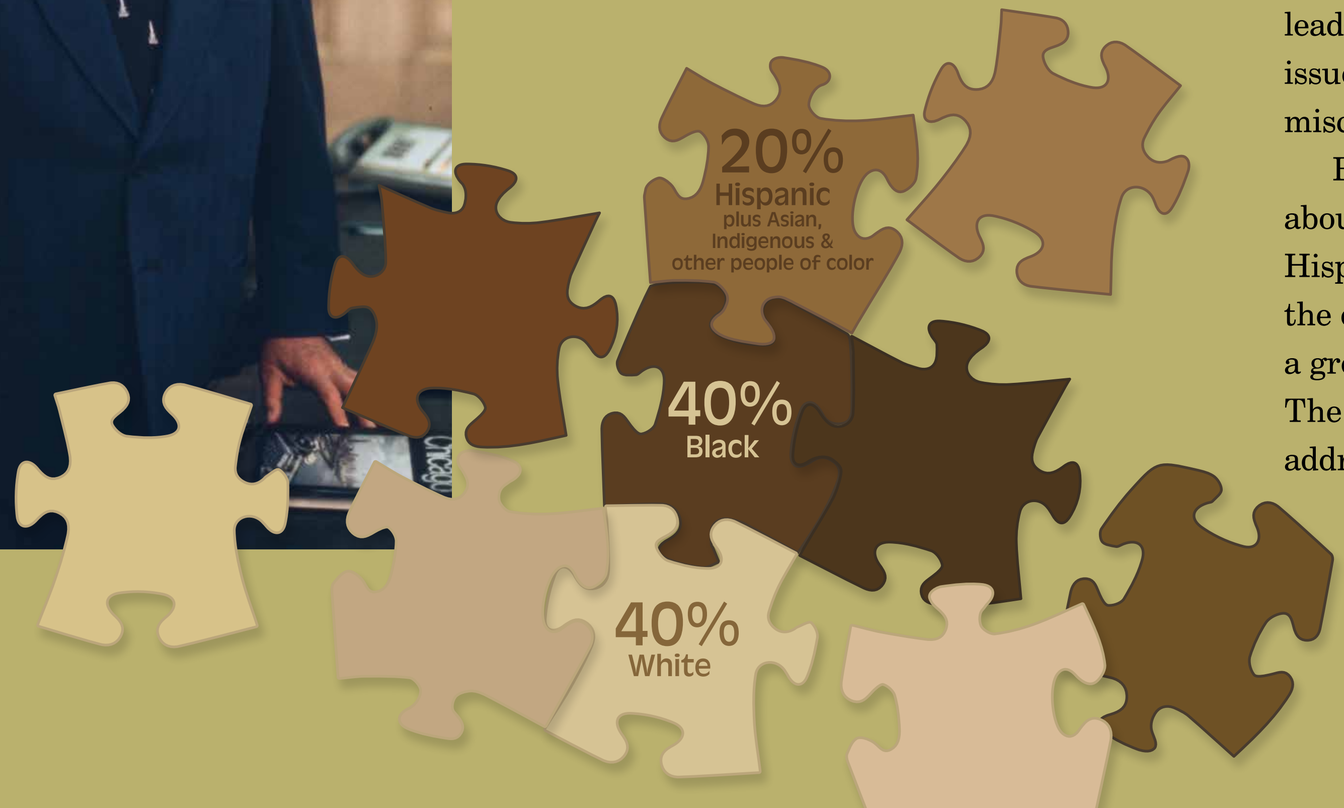
In 1983, Chicago was still influenced by the legacy of former Mayor Richard J. Daley, who ruled from 1955 to 1976. Daley's approach, known as "machine politics," revolved around a vast network of city workers and officials who were essentially bound to him. Their job security and benefits were directly tied to their loyalty to Daley. This system made it very difficult for independent candidates to win elections. In the face of deceptive tactics at the polls, campaigns provided straightforward instructions like "Punch 9!"



As Black and Brown residents arrived in greater numbers, Daley's strategy to keep Whites from moving away was to establish barriers to racial integration. Under his leadership, Chicago became the most segregated large city in America.

Daley did recognize the significance of Chicago's large African American voter base. Despite their challenges, this community had robust voting rights, unlike in the South. Daley often secured a majority of Black votes by offering concessions to Black leaders. In return, these leaders would not challenge Daley on sensitive issues, particularly Civil Rights and police misconduct.

By 1980, Chicago's population was diverse: about 40% Black, 40% White, and 20% primarily Hispanic. With these demographic changes and the evolving political environment, there was a growing call for representation and justice. The stage was set for new leaders to emerge and address these demands.

Discussion Questions—The moment

1. How did Mayor Richard J. Daley's "machine politics" influence the political environment in Chicago during Harold Washington's time?
2. Why was the phrase "Punch 9!" significant in the context of Chicago's elections, and what does it reveal about the tactics used during that period?
3. How did Daley's strategies impact racial integration and the broader Civil Rights movement in Chicago?
4. In what ways did the changing demographics of Chicago in the 1980s set the stage for new leadership and demands for representation?

Activity

Soundscapes of Chicago

Merge science (acoustics) with arts

After discussing the political and social environment of Chicago in the 1980s, create a soundscape (a sound recording representing the city). This could include political speeches, street noises, music of the era, and more.

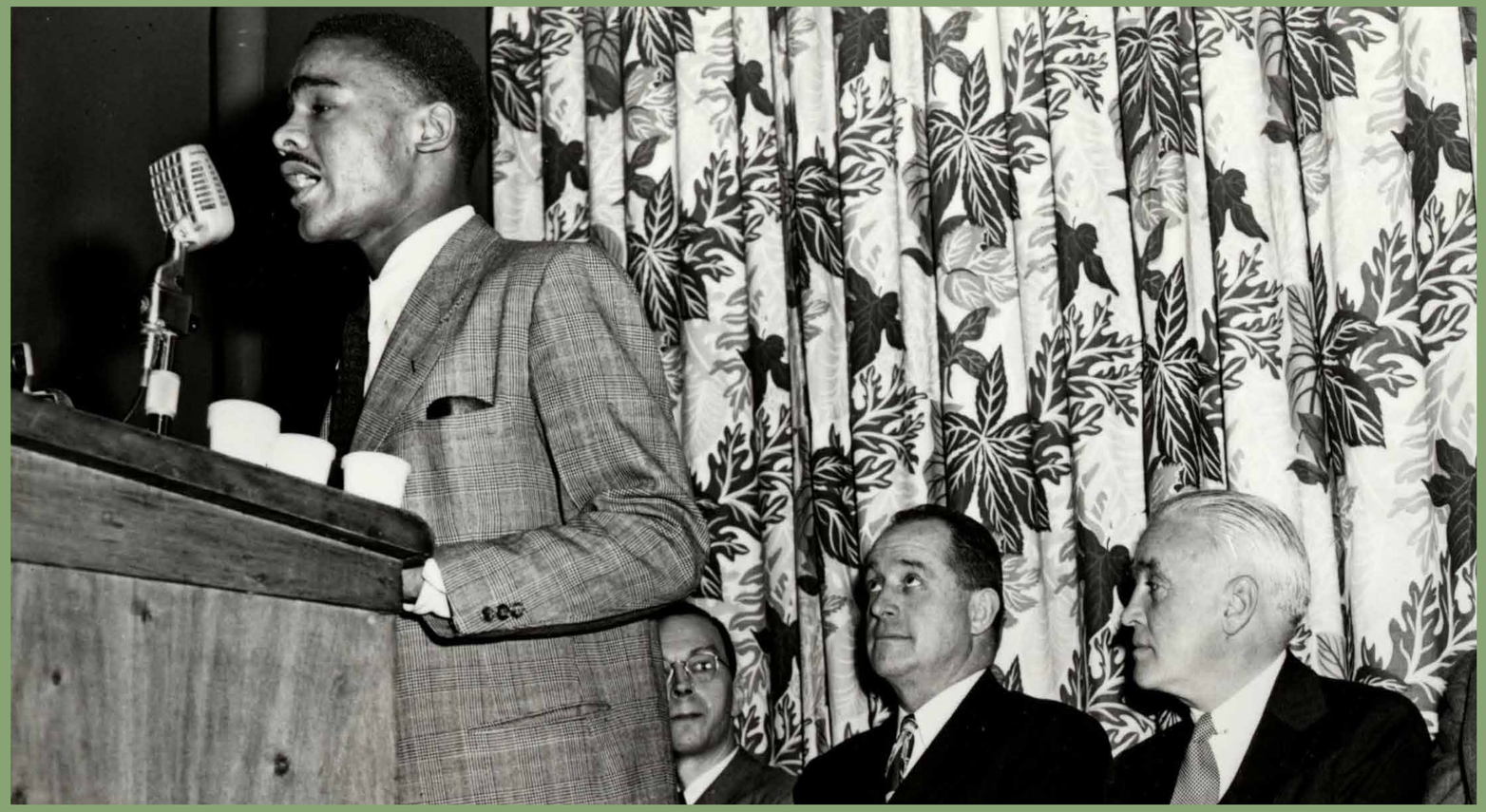
The candidate

Harold Washington, born in Chicago in 1922, was deeply rooted in the city's South Side Black neighborhoods. His father, Roy, was a lawyer, preacher, and a key figure in the Democratic Party. From his early teens, Harold was active in politics, and after serving in World War II, he attended Roosevelt College. This college, progressive for its time, was where Harold honed his political and debating skills.

As Harold's political career grew, so did Richard J. Daley's influence. Washington made a name for himself working with Alderman Ralph Metcalfe, a respected figure in the Black community. Under Harold's guidance, the Young Democrats organization played a crucial role in supporting Daley. By 1964, with Metcalfe's backing, Washington earned a spot in the Illinois Legislature. He often aligned with the Machine, but also took principled stands, like pushing for the nation's very first state holiday to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

After Mayor Daley's unexpected death in 1976, the political landscape shifted. In a 1977 special election, Washington ran for mayor but only secured 11% of the votes. Despite challenges from the Machine, including running candidates with the same last name against him, Washington held onto his state legislative seat, thanks to his district's support. In 1980, he was elected to the U.S. Congress, a role he relished.

In 1982, momentum grew to elect Chicago's first Black mayor. Spearheaded by activists like Lu Palmer, the community held strategic meetings to decide their best representative. At a pivotal gathering, the community cast their votes, and the choice was clear: Harold Washington was their chosen candidate to lead Chicago into a new era.



Discussion Questions—The candidate

1. How did Harold Washington's early experiences in Chicago's segregated neighborhoods influence his political trajectory?
2. What role did Roosevelt College play in shaping Washington's political beliefs and strategies?
3. In what ways did Washington both align with and diverge from the Machine's directives?
4. How did the political landscape change in Chicago following Daley's death, and how did this open opportunities for leaders like Harold Washington?

Activity

Political Poster Design

Design a campaign poster for Harold Washington using graphic design software or traditional art materials. Incorporate symbols and slogans that represent his platform and the community's aspirations.

The election

Washington believed governance must be equitable and inclusive.

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In 1983, Chicago witnessed an election like no other. Harold Washington, a U.S. Congressman, battled against the then-mayor, Jane Byrne, and made history by becoming Chicago's first Black mayor.

This victory was made possible by a significant voter registration drive in 1982, where over 130,000 individuals, primarily African Americans, were registered by community activists.

Community groups, not politicians, drove the voter registration push. POWER, an organization focused on welfare and employment rights, was particularly active, setting up registration booths near public aid offices. Over 200 community groups championed the cause.

Harold's primary win was by a slim margin, and his victory against Republican Bernard Epton was by less than 50,000 votes.

Despite securing only 8% of the White vote, Washington's victory symbolized the culmination of a monumental grassroots effort.

In his inaugural address to all Chicagoans, he stated, "We are a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-language city.... Racial fears and divisiveness have hurt us in the past. But I believe that this is a situation that will and must be overcome."

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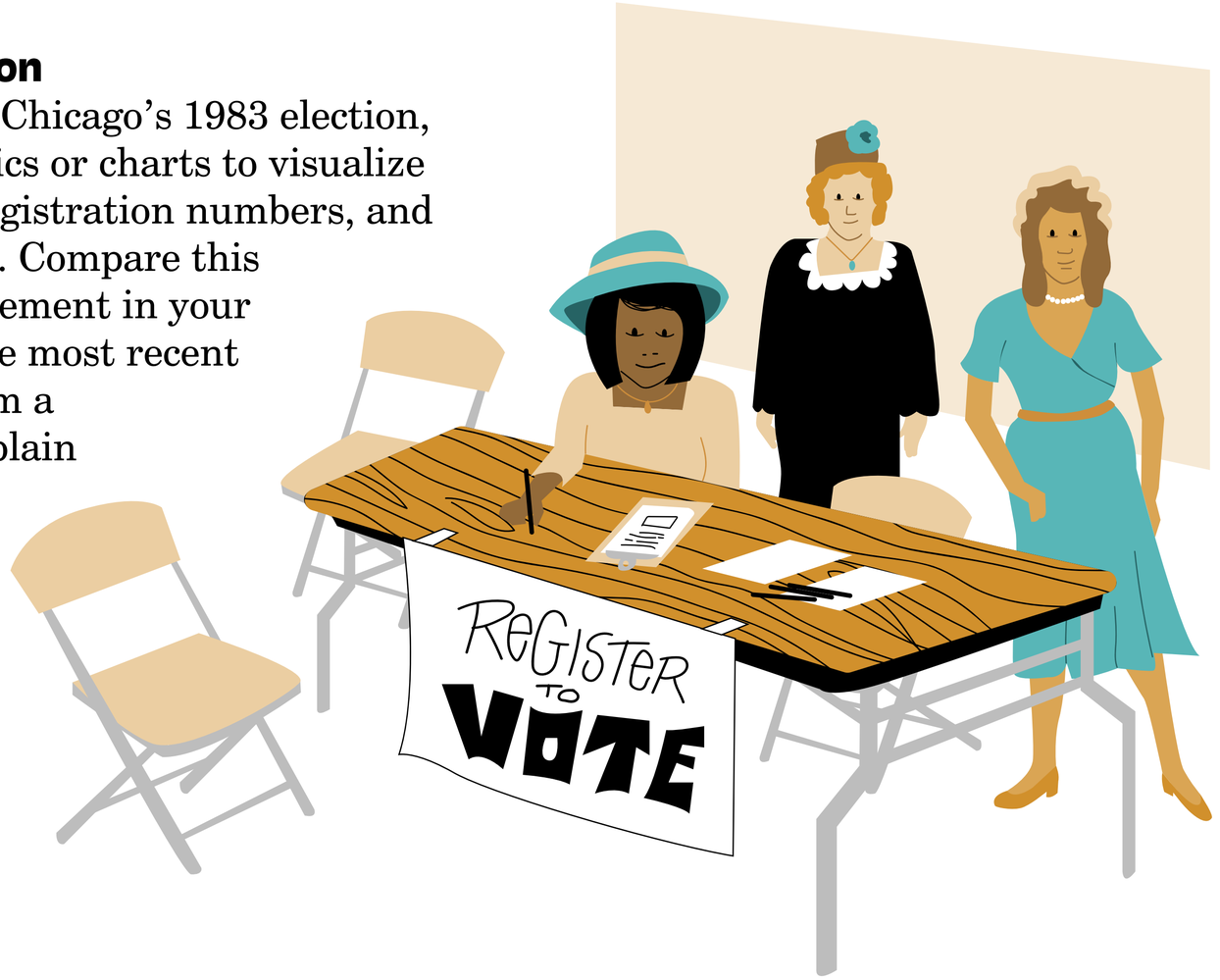
Discussion Questions—The election

1. Why was the 1983 Chicago mayoral election considered unique in U.S. history?
2. How did community groups influence the outcome of the election?
3. In what ways did Harold Washington's campaign reflect a broader desire for change within Chicago?
4. What challenges did Washington face, given that he secured only 8% of the White vote?

Activity

Data Visualization

Using data from Chicago's 1983 election, create infographics or charts to visualize voter turnout, registration numbers, and vote percentages. Compare this with voter engagement in your community in the most recent election, and form a hypothesis to explain the differences you observe.



The Council

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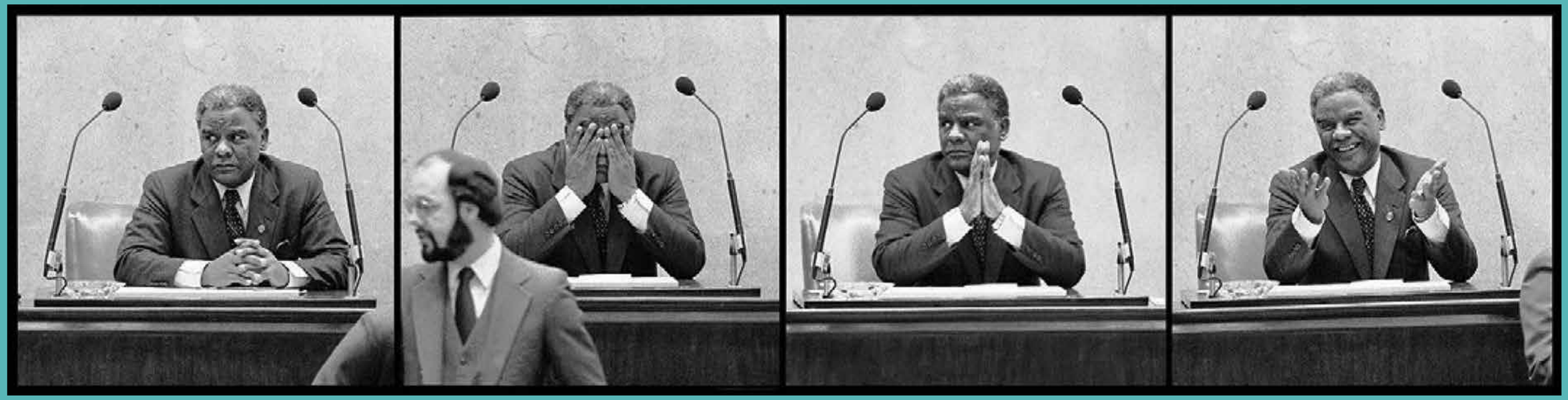
On May 1, 1983, Mayor Harold Washington chaired his first City Council meeting. He faced a huge challenge:

29 out of 50 Council members had united against him, promising to block his every move.

While race played a role, the real issue was the Council members' attachment to Chicago's old power structures. The City Council in Chicago holds significant authority, even more than the mayor, with the power to approve or reject the mayor's decisions. Each Alderperson represents a ward, a neighborhood of about 50,000 residents. Historically, Aldermen, as they were called in the 1980s, wielded considerable influence in their wards, sometimes leading to corruption.

Previous mayors controlled the Council through a patronage system, exchanging jobs and contracts for support. However, Washington aimed to dismantle this system, signing the Shakman Decrees, which prohibited hiring city staff based on political reasons. This move was backed by his African American voter base, ensuring the loyalty of many African American Aldermen.

The Council's opposition was just one vote away from overriding Washington's decisions, leading to numerous stalemates. This period, known as the "Council Wars," persisted until 1986. A court ruling deemed the 1980 ward map unfairly biased, and ordered it to be redrawn. After special elections, Washington gained more allies, resulting in a balanced Council and allowing him to govern more effectively.



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Discussion Questions—The Council

1. Why did a majority of the City Council oppose Mayor Harold Washington initially?
2. How did Chicago's unique City Council setup contribute to the challenges Washington faced?
3. Why were the Shakman Decrees significant in changing the political landscape of Chicago?
4. What were the implications of the "Council Wars" for Chicago's governance?

Activity

Ward Map Design

Design a ward map for your city or town, ensuring equal representation for all groups. Then color-code your map based on hypothetical political alliances.

The future

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Harold Washington’s tenure as Chicago’s mayor from 1983 to 1987 was transformative, setting a precedent for future civic leaders. As the city’s first African American mayor, he not only shattered racial barriers but also championed numerous progressive reforms.

Despite facing a rebellious city council, famously dubbed the “Council Wars,” Washington was undeterred. He successfully introduced the Freedom of Information Act in Chicago, a move that underscored his commitment to transparent governance. Additionally, he established the Committee on Gay and Lesbian Issues, a pioneering initiative that highlighted his dedication to inclusivity and addressing the needs of all community segments.

Washington’s approach to governance was deeply rooted in public engagement. He frequently hosted town hall meetings, providing residents an opportunity to interact directly with their mayor and express their concerns. Remarkably, he reached out to even those neighborhoods that hadn’t supported him, building bridges in a divided city.

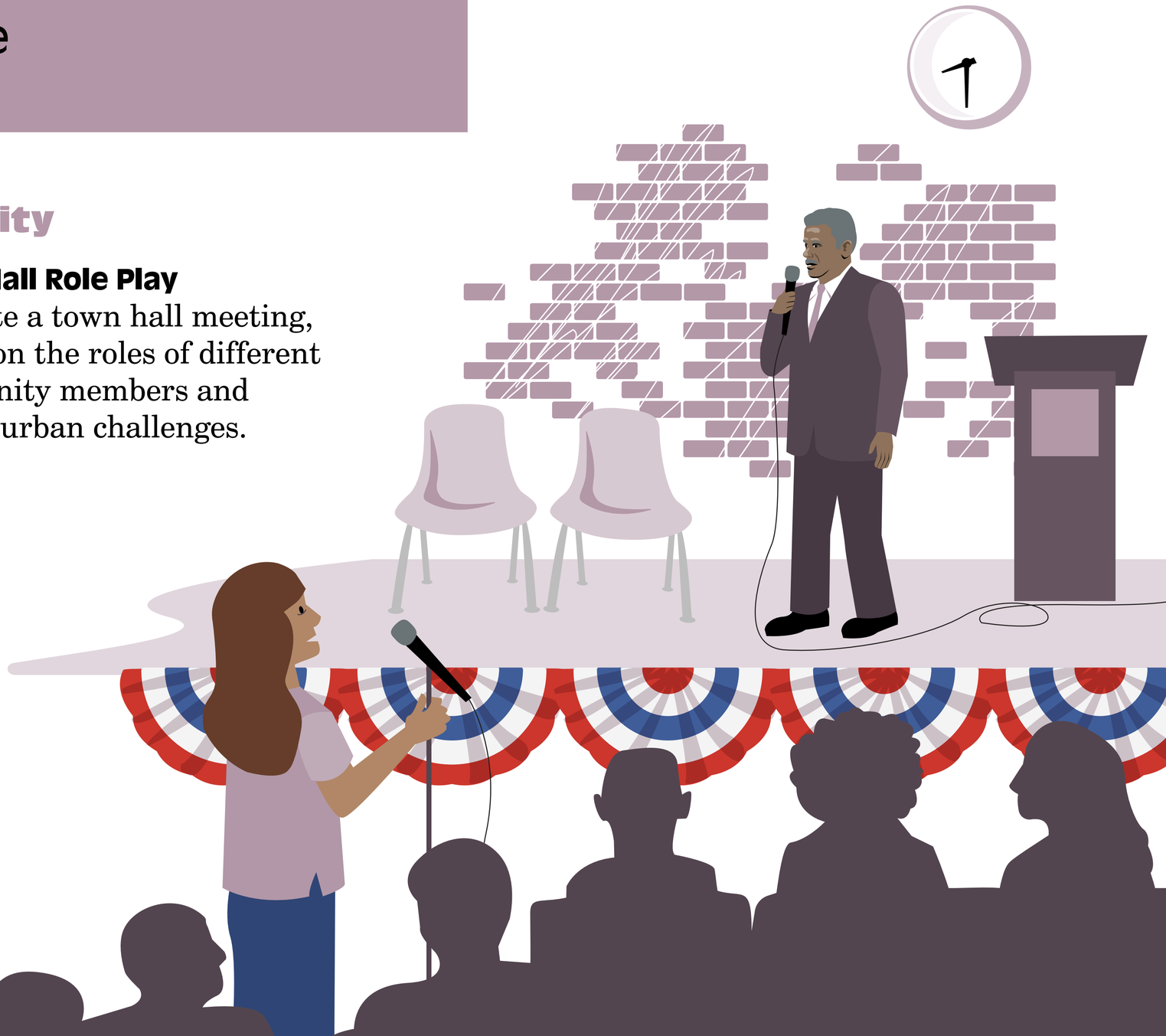
One of his most significant contributions was the introduction of “Chicago Works Together.” This comprehensive city development plan aimed at equitable resource distribution, ensuring every neighborhood, not just the downtown areas, had opportunities to prosper. This vision remains a guiding light for addressing contemporary urban challenges.

Discussion Questions—The future

1. How did Harold Washington's tenure as mayor redefine leadership in Chicago?
2. What challenges did Washington face with the "Council Wars," and how did he navigate them?
3. How did Washington's approach to governance differ from his predecessors?
4. What lasting impacts did Washington's leadership have on Chicago's urban development and community engagement?

Activity

Town Hall Role Play
Simulate a town hall meeting, taking on the roles of different community members and discuss urban challenges.



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