

## **Mayoral Election in Evanston, Illinois: In the Wake of Covid-19**

### **I Logistics**

On February 23, 2021, Evanston, Illinois had a Local Primary Election. The ballot included races for aldermen, City Clerk positions, and mayor. Each city in the United States dictates how local elections are held. Evanston only holds local primary elections for mayoral candidates if there are more than two candidates, and this year there were three: Daniel Biss, Lori Keenan, and Sebastian Nalls. In Evanston, when there is a primary election, if one of the candidates running for mayor receives a majority of the votes, they win by default; however, if none of the candidates receive a majority, then the two candidates with the most votes will face off again in an April election. If a primary election was forced, meaning there were initially only two candidates, then only one election in April takes place rather than a primary and subsequent election.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the recent mayoral election, Daniel Biss received a majority of the votes in the primary election so there was not a secondary race in the later April election.

### **II Candidates, Campaigns, and Covid-19**

*The Daily Northwestern*, the self-proclaimed “only daily news source” of Northwestern and Evanston, links information in an article entitled “Everything you need to know about Evanston’s municipal primary” which lists information about each of the three mayoral candidates that ran in the recent mayoral race; the first candidate listed was Daniel Biss.<sup>2</sup> Daniel Biss’s campaign focused on a positive future for Evanston, especially in the wake of Covid-19.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacob Fulton, “Everything you need to know about Evanston’s municipal primary,” *The Daily Northwestern*, 2021, <https://dailynorthwestern.com/2021/02/23/city/everything-you-need-to-know-about-evanstons-municipal-primary/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Fulton, “Everything you need to know about Evanston’s municipal primary,” *The Daily Northwestern*, 2021, <https://dailynorthwestern.com/2021/02/23/city/everything-you-need-to-know-about-evanstons-municipal-primary/>.

His campaign website uses three words to describe him that immediately catch any voter's eyes: "Progressive. Experienced. Transparent."<sup>3</sup> Those three words are impactful not only in a pandemic but also when campaigning in a very progressive, liberal city. The next attention-grabbing part of his website gives a one-sentence summary about Biss' goals for Evanston saying, "Daniel will bring his experience and progressive values to address our most critical issues, from Covid-19 to racial injustice to affordability."<sup>4</sup>

Biss' campaign site breaks down his views by describing him in three sections. The first section is titled "Organizer" which focuses on his schooling at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, his teaching at the University of Chicago, his service during the Iraq War, and mentions the initial spark of interest in being involved in his community. The second section is titled "Experienced;" it focuses on his past political experience in the Illinois House of Representatives and when he represented Evanston in the Senate. The final section, entitled "Progressive" focuses on progressive, historic legislation that he has previously implemented including a ban on LGBTQ+ conversion therapy, the creation of a retirement-security program, the protection of residents from inappropriate police surveillance, and other progressive policies that have helped Evanston streamline the government. The most noteworthy part of this page was under the section of "Progressive" in which Biss focused his campaign concerning Covid-19. Targeting the progressive audience of Evanston, he mentioned that while being in the Covid-19 pandemic and facing the devastating effects it has had on the economy and the wellness of individuals, we are only beginning, as a country, to try and amend inequities in our country that have always been around. Biss proclaimed that municipal

---

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Biss, Daniel Biss for Evanston, <https://www.danielbiss.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Biss, Daniel Biss for Evanston, <https://www.danielbiss.com/>.

governments are the beginning of the solution and that Evanston should set an example for other states.<sup>5</sup>

The second candidate for the mayoral race was Lori Keenan. Lori Keenan's campaign focused on her approachability and her dedication to Evanston as a resident who has lived there for over two decades. Keenan used the word "grassroots" to describe her activism. She further explained this description by writing about her involvement in saving certain public libraries within the city of Evanston, working to save a local landmark, and supporting residents who opposed environmental racism. Keenan also described her other volunteer work including being a "Girl Scout leader, T-ball coach, and PTA committee chair," and wrote further that it is also important to mention that she is a working parent with bills to pay. Her grassroots activism and her talk of being a regular person make her an approachable, appealing candidate.<sup>6</sup>

A page on Keenan's campaign site is dedicated to discussing the issues in Evanston along with the date that she wrote them. Among the issues, the most recent addition, written in December of 2020, was about Covid-19. Keenan wrote about the devastating effects of Covid-19 from death and illness to the economic effects to the stress it has been causing families. Furthermore, she addressed the impacts the pandemic has had on minority communities. Keenan wrote that she would support the community with evidence-based guidance so that Evanston can "not only survive but eventually thrive again."<sup>7</sup>

The final candidate for the mayoral race was Sebastian Nalls. Nalls is a 21-year-old junior at Purdue University, and a recent alum of Evanston's Public High School: Evanston Township High School. Nalls was inspired to run for mayor after the breakout of

---

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Biss, Daniel Biss for Evanston, <https://www.danielbiss.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> Lori Keenan, Elect Lori Keenan Mayor 2021, 2020, <https://www.keenan4evanston.org/about>.

<sup>7</sup> Lori Keenan, Elect Lori Keenan Mayor 2021, 2020, <https://www.keenan4evanston.org/about>.

protests after the murder of George Floyd, and he wanted to ensure that a community center called the Robert Crown Community Center and Library continued to receive funding. Nalls aimed to create relationships with youth activism groups in Evanston which the current mayor has been accused of failing to do.<sup>8</sup>

Nalls did not have a campaign website like the other two candidates, so his anecdotes about Covid-19 were from interviews with the press. In one interview, in which Nalls' was asked to share his opinion on "The single most pressing issue facing Evanston's city government" and what he would do about it, Nalls responded by highlighting the "equitable economic recovery of Evanston," specifically in regards to Covid-19. Nalls elaborated on how he would work with the city manager on developing a recovery plan for Evanston that would work on closing the current deficit and set the city up for future financial success. Furthermore, Nalls discussed the need to communicate openly with local business owners and residents to create an equitable recovery plan. He looked even further into the future using the time of recovery from Covid-19 as an opportunity to fix other programs and policies in the city.<sup>9</sup>

### **III Election Results**

This mayoral race was a nonpartisan election, but it is important to acknowledge that all of the three candidates' policies were progressive and liberal. The results of the 2021 mayoral election in Evanston were Daniel Biss winning with 73.6% of the votes, Lori Keenan earning 17.5% of the votes, and Sebastian Nalls earning 8.9% of the votes.<sup>10</sup>

After the election results were announced, Biss told local news source *Evanston Now* that his priority as mayor-elect was to help the city recover from the Covid-19 pandemic and to quickly

---

<sup>8</sup> Zachary Bahar, Sebastian Nalls: ETHS alum runs for mayor, *The Evanstonian*, 2020, <https://www.evanstonian.net/news/2020/10/20/sebastian-nalls-eths-alumn-runs-for-mayor/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jonah Meadows, Sebastian Nalls: Candidate For Evanston Mayor, *Patch*, 2021, <https://patch.com/illinois/evanston/sebastian-nalls-candidate-evanston-mayor>.

<sup>10</sup> The Chicago Tribune, 2021, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/election-results/>.

get as many residents vaccinated as possible. Additionally, Biss told *Evanston Now* that other issues he wanted to continue focusing on were public safety, affordable housing, sustainability, and equity within the local government. Biss has helped create positive change from within the government in the past, so it will be interesting to see if he follows through with his promises of creating a better Evanston.

### **Moving Forward**

Daniel Biss will be a mayor who the people of Evanston will look to not only because of his past but because of his future. Biss will take office on May 10th, 2021, and he says his priority will be tackling the Covid-19 pandemic. Biss is an important figure in the nation as there is turmoil not only due to the pandemic but also because of police brutality and racial injustice throughout the country. Biss is becoming a leader of one of the first cities in the United States that approved reparations for its Black residents. This is the first step that Evanston is taking to try and begin to amend the atrocities that Black people faced directly at the hands of white people. Biss has spoken confidently about his plan to help the city recover while addressing racial inequity in Evanston. Daniel Biss is a significant figure because he is ready to face head-on the issues that are plaguing the country from Covid-19 and systemic racism. His plans to aid the city in recovery include focusing on inclusionary housing policies that improve diversity, promoting sending social workers and health care professionals rather than police, supporting the reparations program that was recently approved by the City Council, and facilitating economic recovery that will help residents. Evanston elected a mayor whose goals will help move the city forward, and who will set an example for the rest of the United States to follow.