

Ranked-Choice Voting Won in New York and is on its Way in Washington

Stoney Bird

And not just ranked-choice voting (RCV). The voters won, too.

New York City just conducted the biggest ranked-choice voting election ever in the U.S. The bumble of the test ballots grabbed headlines – but that had nothing to do with RCV. That was just human error (darned humans!) from the election officials – and it was promptly corrected. As far as RCV goes, the election was a huge success.

We know this thanks to polling of the voters both before and after the election. The question before the election was whether voters would be more likely to vote because of RCV. The answer the voters gave: yes! at a ratio of nearly four to one. And indeed, the turnout for this primary election was the most it has been in the city since 1989. With RCV, voters rightly feel that the election results will more closely reflect their views.

After the election, pollsters asked what the voters thought of the experience. Their answers: it's simple to use (95%) and we want to keep it (77%).

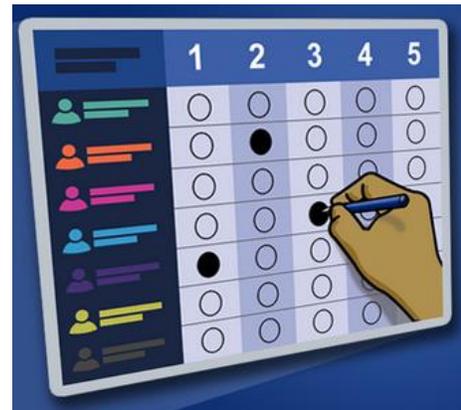
The election results were a success, too, at least if you think that election results should reflect the spectrum of perspectives among the voters. Because of RCV, the New York City Council will be the most diverse it has ever been. The Council's perspectives will be weighted the way the people's are.

Why Only in Primaries?

Alert readers will have noticed that the election in New York City was “only” a primary. In fact, last November when New York City voters decided to adopt RCV they explicitly decided that it would not be used in New York's general (November) elections. The reason is that New York law allows fusion voting in the general elections. Fusion voting means that a given candidate can be endorsed by – and run on the ticket of – more than one party. It's a feature of their elections that New Yorkers are strongly attached to. The result is that a given candidate could appear on the ballot more than once – which would add an extra obstacle to adopting ranked-choice voting.

Another aspect is that in New York City whoever wins the Democratic primary will almost certainly win the general election in November. Practically speaking, the primary is the whole game.

A Primer on RCV



On the ballot, voters rank as many candidates as they like.

All first-choice votes are counted. If a candidate receives more than 50% of first-choice votes, that candidate wins.

If no candidate earns more than 50% of first-choice votes, then counting will continue in rounds.

At the end of each round, the last-place candidate is eliminated and voters who chose that candidate now have their vote counted for their next choice.

Your vote is counted for your second choice only if your first choice is eliminated. If both your first and second choices are eliminated, your vote is counted for your third choice, and so on.

This process continues until there are two candidates left. Between these two, the candidate with the most votes wins.

Doesn't New York have Runoffs for Their Primaries Anyway?

Yes, it does. The difference is that with a conventional runoff, the voters would have had to come back to the polls a second time, which could be eight weeks later. Historically, the turnout in New York's runoff elections has been 60% less, so only a minority of voters are deciding the result. By using RCV and avoiding a separate runoff election, the city has also saved at least \$10 million in election administration costs.

A Growing Movement

The New York election means almost 40 U. S. cities will hold RCV elections this year, including Salt Lake City, Utah (for the first time this year), and Minneapolis, Minnesota, which has been using RCV for several years. The state of Alaska will hold its first RCV elections in November; their law, adopted by the voters in 2020, covers state and federal offices, including President of the United States. Maine has been holding RCV elections for several years. The voters of Austin, Texas, the country's 11th largest city, have passed RCV and are waiting for the Texas legislature to permit Texas cities to use it.

What's Happening in Washington

Two big "almosts" occurred in Washington this year. The Local Options Bill came nearer to passing the state legislature than ever before, and this summer the King County Council was on the verge of putting it on the ballot for King County voters in November. Both these measures will be returned to next year.

Washington's Local Options Bill (HB 1156) would allow local jurisdictions to adopt ranked-choice voting if they wanted to. It got through two committees with bipartisan support, and it almost reached a vote in the House when time ran out.

Local jurisdictions are presently prohibited from using RCV because of Washington's requirement to hold a top two primary. There is an exception for charter counties that hold non-partisan elections. That's why King County could think of adopting RCV even without passage of the Local Options Bill. Only two other counties would qualify under the exception, and they are San Juan County and Whatcom County. As we write, the San Juan County Charter Review Commission is considering an amendment to the county charter that would call for RCV.

In Whatcom County there are practical barriers, both relating to the difficulty of amending the Whatcom County charter. For the County Council to propose an amendment relating to how the County Council is elected they must do so unanimously. And for the people to petition for the matter to be put on the ballot, they have to gather 20,000 signatures or more. So, in Whatcom County we'll have to wait for the Local Options Bill to pass.

In the King County Council, the issue only came up a few weeks before the deadline for action. Although there were enthusiastic supporters on the Council (especially Councilmembers Girmay Zahilay and Jeanne Kohl-Welles), others were not as familiar with the idea and were uncertain about whether the voters would support it. When it became clear that the measure could not pass unless it provided for no implementation deadline, Councilmember Zahilay withdrew it. He has promised to revisit the issue next year.

Why We Need RCV

One great benefit of RCV is that you can vote for the candidate that you really like without fear that it is going to throw the election to someone you can't stand. In other words, you don't have to worry about vote-splitting. In addition, candidates realize that they need the second choice on ballots that give their first choice to one of the candidate's opponents. As a result, they generally don't engage in as much negative campaigning. They stick to the issues. There is neither the cost nor the unrepresentative result of a primary which typically has a much lower turnout.

So far we've been talking about the simplest form of ranked-choice voting, sometimes called single-winner ranked-choice voting or instant runoff voting. As the name suggests, it produces a single winner and is best adapted to elections to offices where there is a single holder: Governor, Mayor, County Auditor, and the like. For many, the real gold in RCV is when it is adopted in proportional form. This is the form best adapted to elections of a body like a legislature or a city council or county council. The key points about proportional RCV are that each district has several representatives, ideally five or more, and that the results are proportional, just as the name suggests. If a particular perspective gets 30% of the vote, they get (roughly) 30% of the representation – not zero the way they do now. And if a perspective gets 51% of the vote, they get 51% of the representation – not 100% the way they do with the winner-take-all elections that we currently have.

No More Gerrymandering

Why is proportionality so important? One reason is that the legislative bodies that we elect would more closely reflect the views of the electorate. Even better, having multimember districts makes gerrymandering effectively impossible. Gerrymandering, as you may know, is the art of drawing voting districts to get the election results that you want. It's a way for politicians to choose their voters instead of the voters choosing their representatives. The League of Women Voters estimates that 90% of the seats in Congress are in effect reserved for one party or the other through the practice of gerrymandering. The infuriating thing is that with winner-take-all elections you have inherent gerrymandering even if the line-drawing is not done with partisan intent. Drawing the lines in any way at all encloses a certain composition of voters, largely predetermining the results of the elections for years to come. We can't get rid of that clog on democracy unless we get rid of winner-take-all elections and adopt proportional ranked-choice voting.

What You Can Do

In short, ranked-choice voting would make our democracy more representative, make politicians more accountable, end the vote-splitting problem, end gerrymandering, reduce election costs and make campaigns less negative. If that sounds good to you, here are a few things you can do:

- Go to the FairVote Washington website (www.fairvotewa.org) and
 - Sign up as a supporter
 - Donate
 - Offer to volunteer
- Go to the legislature's website (leg.wa.gov), click on "Bill Information", search for "1156", and click on "support". You can also write a comment in favor of the bill.
- Write to your legislators in support of HB 1156.

See you on the other side!

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Stoney Bird is a former corporate lawyer who has been working for the adoption of ranked-choice voting since the sessions of the Whatcom Charter Review Commission in 2015.