UPGRADE LOCAL ELECTIONS
WITH RANKED CHOICE VOTING

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Why Consider Ranked Choice Voting for Your City or Town?

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) would yield substantial benefits to any city or town that adopts it for their municipal elections. Importantly, RCV can be used for elections under any municipal model of government. It can be used to elect a strong mayor and a city council, or a select board and a town meeting. It can elect at-large offices, district offices, or any combination of the two. RCV does not change your form of government; it improves how that government is elected.

If adopted by your city, Ranked Choice Voting would:

- **Save time and money** by eliminating the need for costly, low-turnout preliminary elections;
- **Encourage positive campaigns** because candidates are rewarded by voters for building coalitions and pay a higher price for mudslinging;
- **Promote fair representation** of the entire community by bolstering the diversity of those elected to at-large offices;
- **Discourage strategic voting** in at-large races by allowing voters to sincerely rank candidates instead of gambling with a “bullet vote”; and
- **Truly engage voters** by creating more exciting, issue-based campaigns, where every voter feels empowered and represented by the process.

These benefits, each discussed in greater detail below, explain why RCV is being adopted by an increasing number of jurisdictions across the United States. Today, nearly 4 million Americans live in jurisdictions that use Ranked Choice Voting for public elections. These include the cities of Portland, Maine; San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland, California; Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Takoma Park, Maryland; and Telluride, Colorado. Cambridge, Massachusetts has used a multi-winner version of RCV to elect its nine member city council and six member school committee for 75 years, as well. In November 2016, Maine became the first state in the nation to enact Ranked Choice Voting for state and federal elections.

Ranked Choice Voting enjoys support from leading organizations and figures, locally and nationally. As a state senator in Illinois, Barack Obama introduced a bill to enact RCV in his state, and his 2008 presidential opponent John McCain backed an RCV initiative in Alaska. RCV has the support of the Common Cause Massachusetts, the League of Women Voters Massachusetts, MassVote, as well as the Massachusetts Democratic Party. Ranked Choice Voting is also endorsed by former presidential candidates Bernie Sanders, Howard Dean, and Ralph Nader, as well as dozens current and former elected officials around the Commonwealth.
How does RCV work?

RCV is as easy as 1, 2, 3

Under Ranked Choice Voting, voters rank candidates on the ballot in order of preference. Consider an election with three candidates: Alice, Bob, and Carol. If Alice is your first choice, Carol your second choice, and Bob your third, you simply indicate that ranking on the ballot, normally by filling in a “1” bubble next to Alice, a “2” next to Carol, and a “3” next to Bob. It’s literally as easy as 1, 2, 3. The completed ballot would look similar to the sample provided in Figure 1.

**Rank candidates in order of choice**

Fill in the **1** next to your 1st choice.
Fill in the **2** next to your 2nd choice.
Fill in the **3** next to your 3rd choice.

*Note: Ranking 2nd and 3rd choices will not hurt your 1st choice.*

![Sample Ranked Choice Voting ballot](image)

**Figure 1.** Sample Ranked Choice Voting ballot

RCV is essentially a series of runoffs, but tabulated automatically, without separate trips to the polls. For this reason, it is sometimes referred to as “instant runoff voting.” Here is how votes are tallied in a single-winner race. First, all the first choices on the ballots are counted, and if any candidate has a *majority* (50% +1), that candidate is elected immediately. However, if no candidate has a majority, then the last-place candidate is eliminated, and every ballot that was counted towards that last candidate now counts towards that ballot’s *second* choice instead. If there is still no candidate with a majority, the candidate with the fewest ballots is again eliminated. This process repeats until a candidate reaches the majority needed to win.

Some critics have pointed to the tallying process just described as evidence that Ranked Choice Voting is too “complex” for most voters. Please realize, however, that a voter doesn’t need to *tabulate* the ballots themselves to *use* the system successfully. Voters need only understand the simple concepts of a “first choice,” a “second choice,” and so on. Voters in Massachusetts cities and towns are just as capable of understanding this as the millions of voters in the US and around the world who use RCV each year.
RCV Saves Time and Money

*RCV eliminates costly, low-turnout preliminary elections.*

A standard feature of city government in Massachusetts is the *preliminary election*. As we argue below, preliminary elections play an important role, but they also come with a number of downsides, downsides not present under Ranked Choice Voting.

Preliminary elections are held whenever the number of candidates for an office is more than twice the number of seats to be elected to that office. The preliminary then trims the number of candidates to exactly twice the number of seats. For a single-winner office like Mayor or district councilor, a preliminary election is required when there are three or more candidates, and it narrows the field to exactly two candidates. For a multi-winner race like the four at-large Boston city council seats, a preliminary is held when there are nine or more candidates, and it narrows the field to eight.

Preliminaries serve a very important purpose: to guarantee a majority winner and eliminate potential “spoiler” candidates prior to the general election. Consider the most well-known example of the spoiler effect: the 2000 presidential election. Since Al Gore and Ralph Nader appeared on the same ballot with George W. Bush, left-leaning voters risked splitting their support between Gore and Nader, possibly causing Bush to win. If the country had instead held a preliminary election before the general, that would have narrowed the field to just Gore and Bush, who would have then competed in a final head-to-head race without any risk of vote-splitting or spoilers.

Ranked Choice Voting retains all the benefits of holding both a preliminary and general election, but it *streamlines the process into a single election*, so that voters only take one trip to the ballot box. RCV winnows the field of candidates automatically, rendering the preliminary unnecessary. If the 2000 presidential election had used RCV, many Nader supporters would have ranked Nader first and Gore second, voting their conscience while still indicating a backup in case Nader can’t win. Other Nader voters would have chosen Bush second or no one second, which is also allowed under RCV.

Although preliminary elections address the spoiler problem, holding a separate election is expensive. Since 2000, Massachusetts cities have canceled at least ten preliminary elections by home rule petition approved by the legislature, “because of the fiscal crisis that the country, state, and individual cities and towns are in,” according to the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts.¹ When Boston eliminated its preliminary in 2007, the city saved up to $750,000 in police detail, poll workers, and ballot printing costs.²

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Then there’s the abysmal turnout for preliminary elections. Turnout for New Bedford’s 2015 preliminary election dropped to 7.9%, the lowest ever recorded in the city, and only one-third of their general election turnout (28%). But New Bedford’s 2015 preliminary turnout looks staggering compared to Springfield’s preliminary that same year, where a mere 4.7% of registered voters showed up, even though it included a six-way race for mayor. When only 35 Springfield voters had trickled in by 10 a.m. that year, one election warden yelled “where are you people?!?” to anyone who would listen.4

Furthermore, low turnout elections have a discriminatory effect on low-income voters and people of color. Historically, the “turnout gap”— the difference between white and non-white turnout and between non-low-income and low-income turnout — tends to shrink as overall turnout increases and to widen as overall turnout falls.5 Therefore, concentrating the runoff process into a single higher-turnout RCV election yields more representative voter participation and a fairer election result.

Cities have the opportunity to avoid the hassle, cost, and built-in bias of preliminary elections by using Ranked Choice Voting instead, which has all the advantages of a preliminary election without any of the downsides.

**RCV Encourages Positive Campaigns**

*RCV rewards coalition-building and penalizes mudslinging.*

Negative campaigning is ubiquitous in modern political contests. In fact, a study by the Wesleyan Media Project found a majority of advertisements in recent presidential elections cycles to be negative.6 Not surprisingly, many political scientists conclude that such ads breed voter cynicism and apathy and ultimately depress voter turnout.7

While Ranked Choice Voting won’t eliminate mudslinging entirely, it considerably deters it. Candidates in an RCV election need to appeal to supporters of other candidates, to pick up the crucial second- and third-choices they often need to win. In a 2013 survey comparing cities that use RCV to ones that do not, 5% of respondents in cities with RCV said candidates criticized each other “a great deal of the time,”

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4 Goonan, Peter. “‘Where are you people?’ election warden asks.” MassLive. Sep 8, 2015.
compared to 25% in cities without RCV, and 36% of respondents saw no negative attacks in RCV cities compared to only 12% in non-RCV cities (Figure 2).

RCV Promotes Fair Representation

*RCV bolsters the diversity of those elected to at-large offices.*

Nearly all cities and towns in Massachusetts elect their at-large and multi-winner seats using a method called *block voting*. Under block voting, a voter may vote for as many candidates as there are seats to be elected. For example, to elect the nine seats on the Lowell City Council, voters are asked to “vote for not more than nine.” To elect eight Town Meeting Members for their precinct, Lexington voters may vote for up to eight.

The fundamental problem with block voting is that it generally produces unfair results, results that disproportionately favor political majorities, leaving minority interests unrepresented or underrepresented. Consider this example: there is an at-large election between 10 candidates for five at-large seats, and the electorate is divided. The majority of voters (60%) want candidates A, B, C, D, and E to win, and the minority of voters

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(40%) favor candidates F, G, H, I, and J. If the majority vote for candidates A through E and the minority vote for F through J, every candidate favored by the majority is elected, and the minority is left with no representation at all. Worse yet, the same result — one faction winning every seat — can occur even if the largest group is not a majority but a mere plurality that votes for the same candidates.

The problem of unfair representation under block voting is not merely theoretical. Cities around the country have been sued under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act for diluting political representation with this system. In 2009, for instance, a federal judge found Port Chester, NY in violation of Section 2 for routinely denying the Hispanic community’s candidate of choice. Hispanics comprised 49% of the population of Port Chester, but had no representation on Port Chester’s at-large Board of Trustees. Lowell, Massachusetts, another municipality that uses at-large block voting to this day, has had at most one non-white member of its city council in any given year, even though non-whites comprise about half the electorate.

Figure 3. Fair Representation of At-Large and Multi-Winner Seats under RCV

Ranked Choice Voting, on the other hand, ensures the full diversity of the community is represented in at-large and multi-winner seats. Given the same voter preferences described in the previous example, RCV will elect three candidates favored by the 60% majority and two favored by the 40% minority. That is, 60% of voters win 60% of the seats, and the remaining 40% of voters win 40% of the seats (Figure 3). Each constituency is represented in proportion to its size, so the majority still wins a majority of seats and the minority is properly represented.

RCV Discourages Strategic Voting

*RCV eliminates the incentive to gamble with a strategic “bullet vote.”*

Another problem with at-large block voting is its high vulnerability to *bullet voting*, a form of strategic voting where a voter insincerely chooses fewer candidates on the ballot than they truly want. Consider a Boston voter deciding how to vote in their at-large city councilor race. Each voter is allowed up to four votes for the four at-large seats, but should that voter use all four of their votes for the four candidates they like best? Or would it be best for that voter to use only three or two, or maybe just one?

With block voting, a vote for your second choice candidate hurts the chances your first choice will win. And a vote for your third choice hurts the chances your first and second choices win, and so on, a fact which makes voters reluctant to use all their votes. In the 2017 Boston city election, for example, 39% of the total at-large votes simply went unused. Determining how many candidates to vote for is a strategic calculation, and to do this accurately requires knowing the relative likelihood of each candidate being elected. It’s like a game, but one perhaps better suited to a casino than a voting booth.

With RCV, ranking a later choice *never* hurts the chances an earlier choice will be elected, so there’s no incentive for an insincere bullet vote. Just rank the candidates in order of preference — no need to gamble with the ballot.

RCV Truly Engages Voters

*RCV creates more exciting campaigns, where every voter feels empowered.*

The many benefits of Ranked Choice Voting for municipal elections are not merely theoretical. More than 10 cities and towns in the US use RCV today, from big cities like San Francisco and Minneapolis, to small towns like Telluride, Colorado. And recent studies show that it is getting results and engaging voters in meaningful way.

First and foremost, voters who have used it like it and prefer it to plurality voting. A 2014 survey by Professor Caroline Tolbert of 11 Bay Area cities in California — four with RCV and seven without — found that majorities in all 11 preferred RCV to plurality voting.11 Importantly, support for RCV was highest among voters who were under 30 (61%), with family income under $40,000 (63%), Asian (72%), and Latino (59%). These are populations with historically low voter turnout, so expanded use of RCV bodes well for longer term efforts to increase their turnout relative to the rest of the electorate. Perhaps not surprisingly, cities in which Ranked Choice Voting replaced a traditional

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two-round runoff system saw a marked increase in voter turnout. Professor David Kimball found a 10% increase in turnout when RCV was adopted in these jurisdictions (Figure 4). We expect a similar improvement in turnout over the traditional preliminary-general city election model in Massachusetts should RCV be adopted.

![Voter Turnout When RCV Replaces Traditional Runoffs](image)

**Figure 4.** Voter Turnout When RCV Replaces Traditional Runoffs

Lastly, results from the Bay Area demonstrate RCV’s ability to broaden the diversity of those elected to office. In cities that switched to RCV, people of color won 60% of elections, up from 41% prior to RCV. In San Francisco alone, the number of elected offices held by a person of color increased from 8 to 13. While the percentage of races won by women increased only slightly in cities using RCV, from 40% to 42%, in cities not using RCV that same metric fell by more than 5% over the same time period. Women candidates of color in the Bay Area have had particularly strong gains under RCV, increasing their share of elections won from 13.5% to 22.4%.

Around the US, Ranked Choice Voting is truly engaging voters and empowering them in the political process. It could work for your city or town elections, too.

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14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.