Campaigning under Ranked Choice Voting

Minneapolis Votes

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FairVote Minnesota provides this campaign strategy guide for candidates and their campaigns running under Minneapolis’ new Ranked Choice Voting system in 2009. It discusses what campaign strategies are effective, what are not and how candidates should ask voters to rank them on the ballot.

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On November 2009, the people of Minneapolis will be voting with a new voting system: Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). This is new for voters and candidates alike. Candidates have many questions about how they should campaign under the new system – what’s effective, what’s not and how they should ask voters to rank them on the ballot.

FairVote Minnesota provides this campaign strategy guide to help answer some of these questions for candidates running under the new system this year. It is based on the experiences of Ranked Choice Voting elections in San Francisco (CA), Burlington (VT) and Cambridge (MA), as well as in nations such as Ireland, Scotland and Australia. Candidates may find the following advice useful, but are wholly responsible for how they use the information.

This guide supplements information provided by Minneapolis Elections and FairVote Minnesota about Ranked Choice Voting. Please refer to these references for additional details about Minneapolis’ Ranked Choice Voting elections.

Key Features of Ranked Choice Voting

- Voters vote by ranking individual candidates in order of preference (1st, 2nd, 3rd choice). They do not have to use all the rankings, but are encouraged to rank as many candidates for whom they have a preference. Ranking a lower choice never will hurt the chances of one of your higher choices.

- With this ranking of candidates, RCV combines the municipal primary and general elections in a single election so that voters have to make only one trip to the polls in a higher turnout election in November.

- The proportion of votes – the “threshold” – needed to win depends on the number of seats there are to fill in the race. In single-winner elections (for Mayor, City Council members and Park and Recreation Board District members), the threshold to win is a majority (50% + 1) of the valid votes in that race. In multiple-winner, citywide at-large elections, the threshold is one-third of the votes plus one (a little over 33%) in the 2-seat race for the Board of Estimate and Taxation and one-fourth of the votes plus one (just over 25%) in the 3-seat race for the Park and Recreation Board.

- The number 1 choice is most important. But if a candidate has too few votes and is defeated, his or her voters’ subsequent choices will count in later rounds of counting. In the case of multi-seat elections, if a candidate already has more than enough votes to be elected, the “excess” votes will be used to help the next choices on that candidate’s ballots.

- In multi-seat elections, the main parties or other likeminded grouping of voters will be represented roughly in proportion to the votes they receive.

- The counting rules are more sophisticated than those of traditional two-round (primary-general) elections, but casting an effective ballot is very simple from the voters’ point of view.
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What it Takes to Win under Ranked Choice Voting

The threshold to win in a **single-seat RCV election** is a majority (at least 50% plus one) of the votes.

- If a candidate receives a majority of total first choices, that candidate wins.
- If no candidate is the first choice of a majority, an “instant” runoff is triggered – instant in that the voters do not need to return to the polls to determine the winner.
- In order for a candidate to win, he or she is typically among the top vote getters in round one and receives enough second and lower choices from voters who preferred defeated candidates.

Thus, to hit the 50% plus one threshold, successful candidates will gain a large number of 1st choices and also probably need to be ranked highly (2nd or 3rd) on enough ballots from voters who preferred losing candidates.

Two important questions to ask yourself are:
1) “How can I maximize my 1st choices?” and,
2) “How can I get 2nd and 3rd choices from people who rank other candidates as a 1st choice?”

The threshold to win in a **multi-seat RCV election** depends on the number of seats there are to fill.

- If a candidate receives at least one vote more than 1/4 of the first choices in the three-seat contest for the Park and Recreation Board or at least one vote more than 1/3 of the first choices in the two-seat contest for the Board of Estimate and Taxation, that candidate wins.
- For candidates who don’t win on first choices alone, those who are placed among the top vote getters in round one and who are also ranked highly on ballots of some other candidates stand the greatest chance of winning.
- Candidates can receive votes that are initially cast for a defeated candidate or for a candidate who is elected and has more votes than needed to win (in which case the “surplus” portion of each ballot cast for that candidate is counted for the next choice).
- This process of distributing surplus votes and eliminating last-place candidates continues until the right number of candidates remains and the election count is over.

Advice to Candidates

1) General strategies

You need 1st choices, so don’t just say “vote” for me (candidate X), as voters may consider that they have voted for you if they rank you 2nd or 3rd. While a candidate may indeed need some second and lower rankings in order to ultimately win, it is first preferences that are the main determinant of which candidates get into the final runoff count. Second and third preferences MAY be necessary, but FIRST preferences are ALWAYS essential. Usually, the candidate with the most first choices wins.
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*With RCV in a single-seat contest it is impossible for a candidate to win with just second choices ... even if every single voter ranks that candidate second, he or she cannot win.*

You should say something like “Rank Candidate X #1,” or “Give your 1st ranking to candidate X.” Note the photos below of campaign posters from Cambridge (MA), which has used multi-seat RCV since the 1940s. They urge voters to rank that candidate number 1.

Even if you think you could win by receiving the winning threshold of the 1st choices, pursue 2nd and 3rd choices by reaching out to supporters of other candidates, just in case. It is not very common that all seats are filled in multi-seat races based on first-choice rankings alone.

Whatever the particular strategy, energetic, imaginative campaigning and a popular message will be necessary for the individual candidate and the party they represent.

2) Special considerations for political parties in multi-seat elections

Multi-seat RCV is a proportional voting method. In other words, a majority segment of the electorate is assured the ability to elect a majority of seats (as long as the total number of seats is an odd number), while a substantial minority of like-minded voters also has the ability to elect a share of seats roughly in proportion to their numbers. Thus in a three-seat election, it is unlikely that one party will elect 100% of the seats unless that party has the loyal support of more than 75% of the voters. A majority party with less than 75% support is likely to elect two of the three seats. A party with the loyal support of 25% - 49% of the voters is likely to elect one of the three seats. A candidate can win who starts off with less than 25% if he or she is attractive as a second or third choice to backers of other candidates.

To maximize the number of seats a party elects, the party should encourage its supporters to rank all of its endorsed candidates ahead of any candidates from other parties. Thus, while the individual candidates have a primary interest in being ranked number one – and may campaign with a “vote for me #1” message – a party running three candidates has an interest in assuring its supporters treat its candidates as a team and rank its candidates 1, 2, 3 in any order the supporters wish. In this way, the supporters’ votes will end up coalescing for its two strongest candidates, if it can only elect two, and can even elect all three if the support is that strong. Supporters of that party should be informed that ranking additional candidates after a first choice does not affect the chances of that first choice in any way, but the second or third choice rankings may help defeat other candidates *not* on their list.

To win as many seats as possible as a party, each of the party’s endorsed candidates must earn as many first choices as possible. All of these candidates should be encouraged to develop loyal supporters ready to rank them first.

There are several possible models of how to organize a campaign with several candidates.

- Campaigning as a team helps minimize vote “leakage” to candidates of other parties – meaning some supporters of an endorsed candidate end up ranking a non-endorsed candidate ahead of other endorsed candidates. Ultimately, though, the way the votes fall between the candidates is the voters’ choice and there is a limit to how much the party can do to affect this.
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- Parties should promote a common identity through branding election materials. This may mean insisting on common colors, font, logos, design and so on that material promoting individual candidates must use. Candidates using personalized election material should use some of their space to promote their running mates.

- Publicity material may choose to promote the party’s team of candidates on equal terms. However, if one candidate is more energetic and does more canvassing than the other, he or she will probably attract more first preferences than the other candidates

- Candidates should also seek support as a first, second or third choice of non-party voters. Where a party knows an endorsed candidate is unlikely to capture first-choice rankings, it should consider from whom the candidate may be able to earn second of third choice rankings from supporters of non-endorsed candidates. For instance, if an independent candidate has a strong neighborhood base and one of the endorsed candidates has good connections in that area, it would be sensible for that candidate to campaign hard for second choices in that neighborhood.

3) Why “bullet voting” can’t help your election (and why it doesn’t hurt you if your supporters rank other candidates)

As mentioned above, some candidates may have the mistaken impression that if their supporters rank a second or third choice, this might somehow dilute the strength of that voter’s first choice or somehow hurt the chances of that favorite candidate getting elected. That dynamic can happen under the former system of voting in at-large elections, but this is not the case with ranked choice voting. With RCV, ranking alternate choices can never hurt the chances of a voter’s first choice.

If a voter has ranked you first, that ballot will ONLY count as a vote for you and provide no benefit to any other candidate, as long as you are still in the running. The alternate choices marked on a ballot are ONLY considered IF you, as their first choice candidate, have already been elected to a multi-seat office or been eliminated and are not continuing in the race. If you have been elected or eliminated, it obviously can’t help or hurt you if your supporters’ ballots indicate alternate choices for the RCV count.

Every voter gets one vote – and no more – with RCV. Some people who do not fully understand IRV suggest it gives some voters two votes, but not others. This is false. Each voter has one vote that counts for one candidate in each round of counting. In multi-seat contests, that single vote may end up being divided into partial votes if a voter helps elect a winning candidate who has more votes than needed to win. Part of his or her vote then goes on to help elect additional candidates based on his or her next preference.

4) Why urging voters to “bullet vote” may hurt your chances

You will need a lot of first-choice rankings to win outright, or to be placed among the top finishers in the initial round. However, to increase your chances of winning, you may also need the 2nd or even 3rd choice rankings from voters who preferred another candidate as their first choice. If your campaign urges your supporters NOT to rank alternate choices, you run the risk of discouraging voters who support those other candidates from ranking YOU as an alternate choice as well – a sort of natural quid pro quo retaliation.
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Some campaigns may see a strategic value in actively encouraging voters to rank a particular other candidate second as a way of suggesting that supporters of THAT candidate might be wise to rank YOU as their second choice. Such “you-scratch-my-back-I scratch-yours” strategic alliances are common in nations using RCV. However, even if no such alliance is agreed to, a campaign would be wise to not risk insulting their supporters by asking them to throw away their runoff votes (the effect of not ranking back-up choices).

In multi-seat elections, where a party promotes a slate of candidates, the party should encourage its supporters to rank all of its candidates ahead of any candidates from other parties in order to maximize the number of seats a party elects. A party can recommend voters to rank their candidates 1, 2, in any order the supporters wish.

Campaign Materials that Have Been Used in Places that Use RCV

In Cambridge, Massachusetts, which uses RCV in non-partisan multi-seat elections for city council and school board, nearly every campaign sign has the numeral, ‘1,’ on it to ask people for their 1st choice ranking. Below are some examples from the November 2005 municipal elections. While the political parties may promote its “team” of candidates in party literature or sample ballots, the candidates tend to promote themselves rather than just the team.

Because the idea of ranking candidate is new to voters, you may wish to remind voters on your campaign literature to rank candidates and to show them how it will look on the ballot.

You want people to rank you #1, and if they won’t do that, to rank you #2, or even #3. “I want your #1 ranking. But if you are committed to another candidate, please consider giving me your #2 ranking”

You may wish to publicly disclose your personal #2 and #3 rankings, especially those who are aligned with you on the issues because of political party affiliation or some other reasons. Or you may wish to explicitly request supporters of other candidates to rank you as #2 or #3.

In Scotland, which uses RCV in partisan multi-seat elections, some parties have used a “reversed” campaign strategy in their literature, meaning they promote one candidate as #1 and the other as #2 in one part of the ward and in reversed order in the other part of the ward.

The Scottish Labour Party literature below illustrates a “reversed” campaign strategy in a 4-seat ward contest in which the party nominated two candidates.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats likewise used a “reversed” campaign literature piece in a 3-seat ward contest in which the party nominated two candidates.
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Examples of campaign signs used in the 2005 Cambridge, Massachusetts, multi-seat elections for city council and school board.
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Example of a Labour Party literature piece used in a 4-seat 2007 Scottish ward election
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Example of a Liberal Democrat Party literature piece used in a 2007 3-seat Scottish ward election

Gordon's pledges

1. Gordon will keep in touch with local residents all year round through FOCUS.
2. Gordon will hold regular surgeries and make himself available to deal with local concerns.
3. Gordon is committed to working hard and doing his best for our community.

Margaret's pledges

1. Margaret will keep in touch with local residents all year round through FOCUS.
2. Margaret will hold regular surgeries and make herself available to deal with local concerns.
3. Margaret is committed to putting the needs of local children and families first.

Vote Gordon Macdonald - 1

Vote Margaret Morris - 1