

Ranked Choice Voting for At-Large Local Elections

2014 POLICY GUIDE



Local Policy / State Option

August 2014

Ranked Choice Voting promotes good government and fair representation for municipal councils and school boards.

The Problem: Most cities and counties in the U.S. elect their legislative bodies in winner-take-all elections. The use of at-large winner-take-all elections means the largest group of voters can elect all representatives. Even in single-member wards, however, winner-take-all rules can shut out minority opinion and leave most races uncompetitive. The winner-take-all system also results in lower levels of representation for women and racial minorities. Meanwhile, the use of wards or districts opens the door to gerrymandering, in which politicians manipulate district lines to ensure favorable results.

The Solution: Ranked choice voting results in more representative democracy, especially in elections with multiple open seats. In this case, elections are at-large (or in multi-member wards), and voters can rank the candidates in order of choice. A like-minded majority of voters will elect a majority of seats, and any group comprising 25% of voters will elect about 25% of seats. The power to rank

candidates minimizes “wasted vote” and frees voters to indicate their sincere first choice, second choice and so on.

Nearly every voter ultimately will help elect preferred representatives. Every election is likely to be meaningfully contested, and representation more reflective of the electorate. The latest voting technology can accommodate ranked choice voting, thus removing a historic barrier to its use. Cities can enact the system or request their state to allow them to enact it.

Success Stories: Ranked choice voting has a long history of use in at-large local elections. The National Civic League’s model charter lists it as an option. Cities once using it for council elections include Cincinnati, New York, Cleveland and Sacramento. It is used to elect the Cambridge (MA) city council and at-large local offices in Minneapolis (MN). It is widely used in local elections in Ireland, Scotland, Australia and New Zealand. *Note: The single-winner variation of ranked choice voting is more widely used in the U.S.A.*

Key Facts

Ranked choice voting in multi-seat elections (also known as the “single transferable vote”) has been used in 25 cities throughout the U.S., with current uses in Cambridge (MA) and Minneapolis (MN).

In 2009, the Minnesota Supreme Court unanimously rejected a legal challenge to ranked choice voting. The Massachusetts Supreme Court in 1996 also unanimously upheld its constitutionality in Cambridge.

When New York City attempted to remove ranked choice voting for community school board elections, the Department of Justice denied preclearance under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act.

Fiscal Impact

Implementing ranked choice voting may require an upgrade to voting machines or use of hand counting. It will likely require new ballot design and pollworker training. Its first use often is accompanied by additional voter education efforts.

Related Reforms

- Ranked Choice Voting for State Legislatures
- Ranked Choice Voting Equipment
- Democracy Index

Part Two Resources

- Model statute
- Ranked Choice Voting History
- Choice voting graphics