

Ranked Choice Voting in Multi-Seat Local Elections: Pilot Program

2014 POLICY GUIDE



State Policy

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Ranked choice voting in multi-seat districts has a long history in the United States. New voting equipment makes local pilot programs even more sensible.

The Problem: States often regulate the manner in which their counties and cities conduct elections. Often, they are restricted to use of winner-take-all rules. When cities use winner-take-all elections at-large, they can become liable under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act or voters can complain of distortions in representation. But ward elections can have downsides like excessive parochialism, uncontested races, and low female representation. They may want to try other voting methods, but under state law may not have the legal or administrative support to do so.

The Solution: States should enact pilot programs to allow and ideally provide logistical support to cities and counties to elect their representative bodies by ranked choice voting in multi-seat districts (RCV). Elections conducted by RCV tend to result in more representative results. With this form of RCV, elections are at-large or from multi-member wards, and voters can

rank the candidates in order of preference. A majority of like-minded voters will elect a majority of seats, while a group comprising 25% of voters will elect about one in four seats. The use of rankings minimizes “wasted votes” that do not help elect a winner. With RCV, nearly every voter will help elect a preferred representative. This means that every election is meaningfully contested, and representation on the local body (be it a city council, school board or something else) more accurately represents the diversity within the town, city, or county.

Success Stories: Ranked choice voting's history of successful use in multi-seat races is drawing new interest with the arrival of better voting equipment. Cincinnati, Sacramento, Cleveland, Boulder, New York and Worcester have all elected city councils by RCV. It is used for local races in Cambridge (MA) and Minneapolis (MN), for most local elections in Australia, Ireland and Scotland.

Key Facts

Ranked choice voting in multi-seat districts has been historically used in about two-dozen cities throughout the U.S. and is currently used in Cambridge (MA) and Minneapolis (MN). Choice voting has repeatedly survived legal challenges, including unanimous rulings by the Supreme Court of Massachusetts in 1996 and Supreme Court of Minnesota in 2009.

Colorado in 2008 passed a law making ranked choice voting in multi-seat districts an option for local government elections.

Fiscal Impact

The pilot program itself will have no fiscal impact if simply creating a local election, although some costs if the state facilitates local administration of RCV elections. Cities and counties that choose to participate will likely incur some expense in transitioning to new election administration options or conducting voter education campaign, although may have savings if replacing two voting rounds with a single vote.

Related Reforms

- Ranked Choice Voting for At-Large Local Elections
- Ranked Choice Voting to Elect Legislatures

Part Two Resources

- Model statute