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Voting and Democracy

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**Survey on Ranked Choice Voting in Bay Area Shows Promise for New System
Voters Support RCV and Perceive Differences in Behavior of Candidates**

Read this release online at: www.fairvote.org/assets/RCV-Civility-Project/DemocracyFund-NewsRelease-April-15-2015.pdf

Read the full report and associated data at:
www.fairvote.org/research-and-analysis/local-elections-2/ranked-choice-voting-civility-project

An independent telephone survey has good news for ranked choice voting (RCV).

- RCV is supported by a majority of voters in each of the four Bay Area cities using it.
- Voters in these cities understand RCV and the Top-Two Primary in equal numbers.
- Voters in these cities perceived less negative campaigning than in similar cities.

In November 2014, the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll, based at Rutgers University, surveyed a total of 1,345 likely voters (defined as registered voters who self-report being interested in local elections) from the four California cities using RCV. In Oakland, the site of a competitive mayoral race, 685 respondents were surveyed, and another 660 respondents were surveyed across Berkeley, San Francisco, and San Leandro. A total of 1,111 respondents were polled in seven control cities, all California cities that held local elections using plurality voting rules in November. The poll was the second large-scale independent poll conducted by the Eagleton Poll on voter experiences under RCV; the first, conducted in November 2013, involved more than 2,400 respondents from three cities with RCV and seven control cities.

The two polls, developed by Dr. Caroline J. Tolbert (University of Iowa) and Dr. Todd Donovan (Western Washington University) in conjunction with the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll's Dr. David Redlawsk, were made possible by a grant from the Democracy Fund. The grant mandated an independent study of the impact of RCV on the civility and substance of political campaigns in American cities, as well as content analysis of traditional and new media and detailed analysis of voter turnout and spoiled ballots. Drs. Tolbert and Donovan have presented academic papers on the 2013 survey results and plan to publish widely.

Drs. Sarah John (FairVote) and Caroline Tolbert report key demographic findings from the study at the [project's webpage](http://www.fairvote.org/research-and-analysis/local-elections/ranked-choice-voting-civility-project/2014-survey-results) [<http://www.fairvote.org/research-and-analysis/local-elections/ranked-choice-voting-civility-project/2014-survey-results>]. Highlights from the 2014 California survey include:

- **Ranked choice voting garners overall voter support:** Among all likely voters with an opinion about RCV in the four Bay Area cities that use RCV, 57 percent agreed that "ranked choice voting, where voters can rank candidates in order of preference with their first choice counting most, should be used in local elections." A majority backed RCV in each city, including 60 percent in Oakland.

- **RCV support is greatest among people of color, young people, and low-income voters:** While a majority of most demographic groups support RCV, the strongest support for RCV came from respondents aged under 30 years (61%), with a family income under \$40,000 (63%), and those who did not attend college (65%), as well as Asian (72%) and Latino (59%) respondents.
- **RCV is associated with less perceived criticism in campaigns:** Residents of RCV cities were more likely to respond that candidates spent little time criticizing opponents, when compared to the responses of residents living in non-RCV cities. In RCV cities, only 53 percent of respondents in RCV cities remembered candidates criticizing each other, compared to 65 percent in non-RCV cities. Similarly, more respondents in cities using RCV (17%) reported reduced negativity in local election campaigns than in cities without RCV (12%). These findings are consistent with similar patterns in the 2013 survey.
- **Self-reported understanding of RCV is high and compares favorably to the Top-Two primary:** An overwhelming majority (89%) of respondents in RCV cities found the RCV ballot easy to understand. More respondents (49%) in RCV cities reported understanding RCV extremely or very well than reported understanding the Top-Two primary extremely or very well (40%).

These findings are consistent with the fact that ballot error rates are lower in mayoral elections with RCV than top-of-the-ballot races in California in June primaries. In November 2010, the proportion of voters who invalidated their ballots in the first use of RCV in mayoral elections in Oakland and San Leandro was less than one tenth the proportion of voters who invalidated their U.S. Senate ballot in the June 2012 top-two primary. Reflecting high levels of voter understanding of RCV, more than eight in ten voters in Oakland's RCV mayoral elections successfully ranked at least two candidates and, of the city's 18 offices elected by RCV, 16 of the first RCV winners of these offices had more votes than the winner of the last non-RCV winner for those offices.

- **Understanding of RCV is high among African-Americans:** Ninety percent of African-American voters in RCV cities found ballot instructions easy to understand, compared to an abysmal 65 percent in non-RCV cities. Similarly, slightly higher proportions of African American voters understood RCV than understood plurality.
- **Respondents in non-RCV cities are less content with the status quo:** The four cities with the highest reported levels of candidate criticism were all plurality cities. Additionally, the three worst cities for reduced negativity were all non-RCV cities. Not surprisingly, then, cities using plurality to elect their local officials were home to four of the five constituencies least satisfied with the conduct of campaigns.
- **Independent voters are more satisfied under RCV:** Independent respondents in RCV cities expressed significantly higher levels of satisfaction with the conduct of the 2014 local campaign than did their counterparts in non-RCV cities.

Our analysis of voter turnout and voter behavior in these elections, posted at www.fairvote.org/research-and-analysis/local-elections-2/ranked-choice-voting-civility-project/rcv-vs-other-voting-systems-by-the-numbers, is consistent with the findings of the 2014 Rutgers-Eagleton Poll survey. These findings include:

- **Voter turnout:** Voter turnout in the 2014 mayoral election with RCV in Oakland was higher than turnout in the 2014 mayoral runoff in San Jose, even though San Jose had higher turnout than Oakland in the 2012 presidential election.
- **Voter understanding:** More than 99% of voters in each one of the Bay Area's 24 RCV contests in 2014 cast a valid ballot. In contrast, less than 96% of Oakland San Leandro voters cast valid votes in the first use of the Top Two primary in the June 2012 U.S. Senate election.
- **Effect on campaigns:** Independent expenditures dropped precipitously from the 2010 Oakland mayoral election, which was widely seen as a positive race. As typical of high-profile RCV races, about three in four voters in the Oakland mayoral race used all three of their rankings, and winner Libby Schaaf earned substantial second or third choice support from backers of every single candidate who earned at least two percent of the vote.
- **Women and people of color:** Women have a history of doing well in ranked choice voting elections. This year, women won 17 of 24 Bay Area seats, including nine of the 11 races that were open seats or in which an incumbent was defeated. Of the 52 seats in the Bay Area elected using RCV, 46 are held by women and people of color—this constitutes a large increase from the days before RCV elections.

In the coming weeks, FairVote will release additional reports from the findings of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll surveys. The next report planned explores voter experiences and perceptions of RCV city by city.

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FairVote is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that seeks to make democracy fair, functional, and representative by developing the analysis and educational tools necessary for our reform partners to win and sustain improvements to American elections.

For more information on this analysis or for more information on contacting Drs. Tolbert and Donovan, please contact FairVote Executive Director Rob Richie or FairVote Democracy Fellow Sarah John at (301) 270-4616, or by email at sjohn@fairvote.org.