

# Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Candidate Civility in Bay Area Elections, November 2014

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RANKED CHOICE VOTING CIVILITY PROJECT  
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In a ranked choice voting (RCV) election, voters rank candidates in order of preference. The tally of RCV votes simulates a series of “instant runoffs.” In each “runoff,” the last-place candidate is defeated and ballots cast for that candidate are added to the tally of the next-ranked candidate on each ballot. The runoffs continue until a winner emerges. This process means that RCV rewards candidates who can win second and third choices from a broad range of voters *in addition to* first choices from a large core of supporters.

In theory, RCV incentivizes campaign civility because, in order to win second and third choice rankings, a candidate needs to appeal to other candidates’ supporters. The increasing use of RCV in the United States enables rigorous empirical testing of RCV’s civilizing effects.

As part of a broader project funded by the Democracy Fund, the Eagleton Poll at Rutgers University has conducted two polls—one in 2013 and another in 2014—that explore the impact of RCV on city elections in the United States. Each poll surveyed a random sample of more than 2,400 likely voters,<sup>1</sup> the great majority of whom had voted in their local election that year. The surveys were conducted in English and Spanish and on cell and landline telephones.

*Established in 1971, the Eagleton Poll at Rutgers University is a widely-respected source of rigorous university-based public interest polling. For over 40 years, the Eagleton Poll has conducted the premier statewide poll measuring New Jersey public opinion.*

In November 2013, the Eagleton Poll surveyed respondents in three cities holding RCV elections (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn. and Cambridge, Mass.) and seven non-RCV control cities. In November 2014, the Eagleton Poll conducted a similar survey in 11 California cities: four Bay Area cities with RCV (Berkeley, Oakland, San Francisco, and San Leandro) and seven control cities. In 2014, 1,345 likely voters in one of four cities holding elections with RCV were surveyed: 685 from Oakland, which used RCV to elect a new mayor and half of its city council and school board; 395 from San Leandro, which used RCV to elect a new mayor and three city councilors in citywide races; 151 from San Francisco, which adopted RCV first in the Bay Area and in 2014 used RCV in one competitive city council election and five less competitive elections in its 11 wards; and 114 from Berkeley, where there were two competitive RCV city council races among its eight wards. The 2014 survey also included 1,111 likely voters in control cities with demographics and social structures comparable to a surveyed RCV city.<sup>2</sup>

*In 2013, FairVote received a \$300,000 grant from the Democracy Fund to coordinate a research project on the impact of ranked choice voting on the civility and substance of election campaigns in American cities.*

*As part of the project, the Eagleton Poll surveyed more than 4,800 likely voters in 21 cities after their local city elections (in November 2013 or November 2014). This report centers on the November 2014 survey in 11 California cities: four with ranked choice voting and seven without it.*

<sup>1</sup> Likely voters are defined as currently registered voters who, when asked, expressed interest in local affairs.

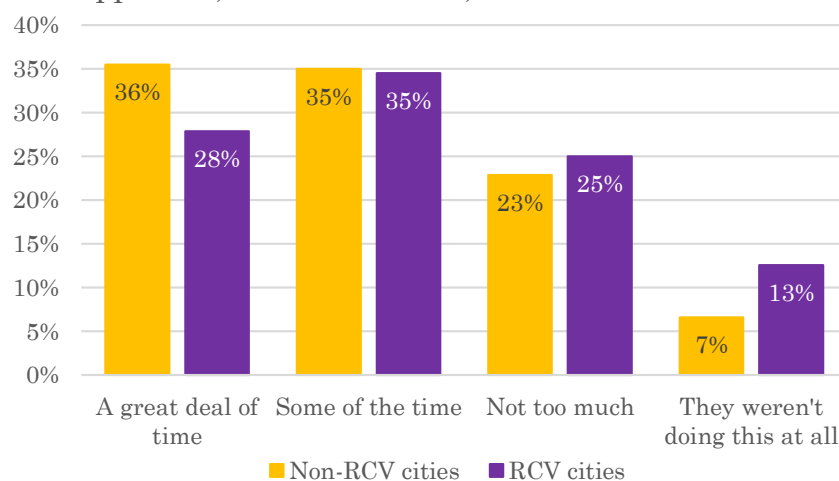
<sup>2</sup> The 2014 control cities, all in California, were Alameda (101 respondents), Anaheim (100 respondents), Richmond (349 respondents), Stockton (111 respondents), San Jose (203 respondents), Santa Ana (100 respondents) and Santa Clarita (147 respondents). Each held city elections in Nov. 2014.

## Summary of Survey Findings on Civility

- **Fewer respondents in cities with RCV reported candidates spent “a great deal” of time criticizing opponents** than in non-RCV cities. 28% of RCV-city respondents reported candidates criticized each other “a great deal” compared to 36% of non-RCV city respondents.
- **More respondents in cities using RCV reported less negative campaigns** than in cities that did not use RCV. 18% of RCV-city respondents perceived the 2014 campaign as less negative than recent local campaigns compared to 13% of respondents in non-RCV cities.

Respondents from RCV cities reported lower levels of criticism among candidates than those in non-RCV cities. In RCV cities, 28% responded that candidates criticized one another “a great deal”.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, 36% of respondents from non-RCV cities reported a great deal of criticism between candidates. The contrast between candidate-on-candidate criticism levels in RCV and non-RCV cities (Figures 1A and 1B) is not as stark as it was in the cities surveyed in 2013 (in which 5% of voters in RCV cities reported candidates criticized each other a great deal compared to 25% in non-RCV cities, Figure 2). However, likely voters in Californian cities using RCV consistently perceived less candidate-on-candidate criticism than likely voters in non-RCV cities.

Figure 1A: Time Candidates Spent Criticizing their Opponent, November 2014, Select Californian Cities



<sup>3</sup> All percentages reported are percentage of valid responses. Responses of “don’t know” and refusals to answer are excluded from the data.

Figure 1B: Time Candidates Spent Criticizing their Opponent, November 2014, Select Californian Cities

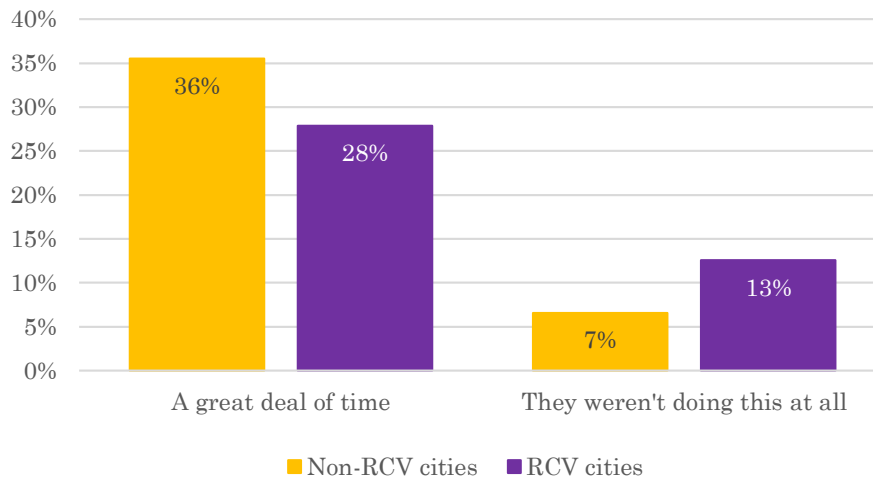
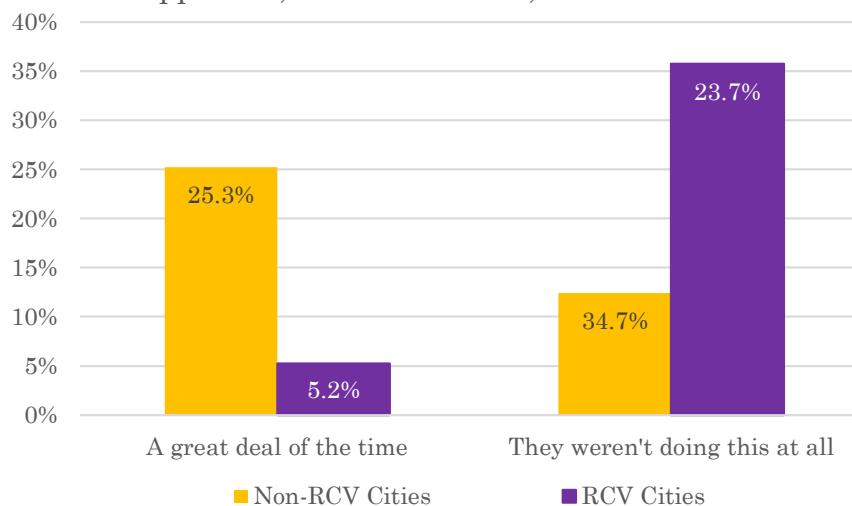


Figure 2: Time Candidates Spent Criticizing their Opponent, November 2013, Select Cities\*



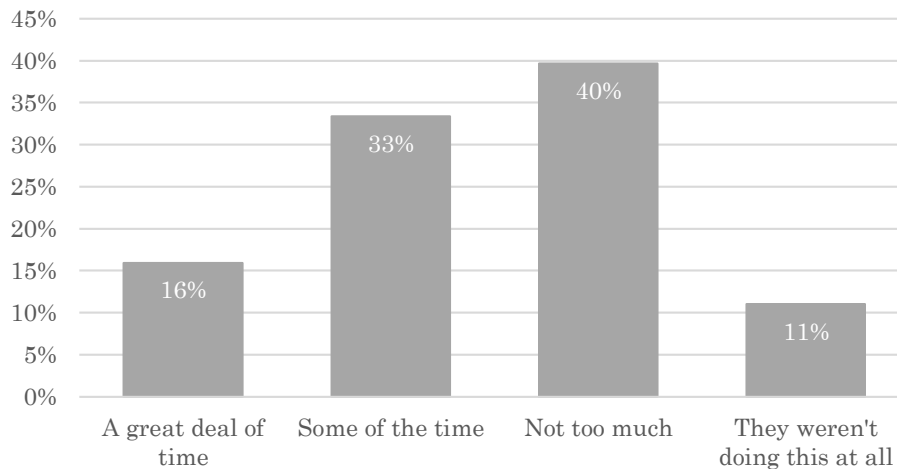
We can report city numbers with the greatest degree of certainty in Oakland due the larger sample size there (685 respondents).<sup>4</sup> In Oakland in 2014, there was a potentially divisive contest in which several strong challengers took on an incumbent mayor. Challenger, city councilor Libby Schaaf, ultimately won. Despite the competitive nature of the contest, only 16% of Oakland respondents reported that candidates criticized each other a great deal (Figure 3). Indeed, ballot analysis shows Schaaf was ranked second or third by more than 30% of the backers of her six strongest challengers, which suggests that Schaaf won

<sup>4</sup> Oakland's sample was larger than in other RCV cities because of its relatively large population and because it was holding a highly competitive *citywide* election. Other cities held elections in only some wards, and so only some of the population was involved in an RCV election.

\* The 2013 RCV cities were Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota and Cambridge in Massachusetts. The 2013 non-RCV control cities were Boston, Lowell and Worcester in Massachusetts, Des Moines and Cedar Rapids in Iowa, Seattle in Washington and Tulsa in Oklahoma.

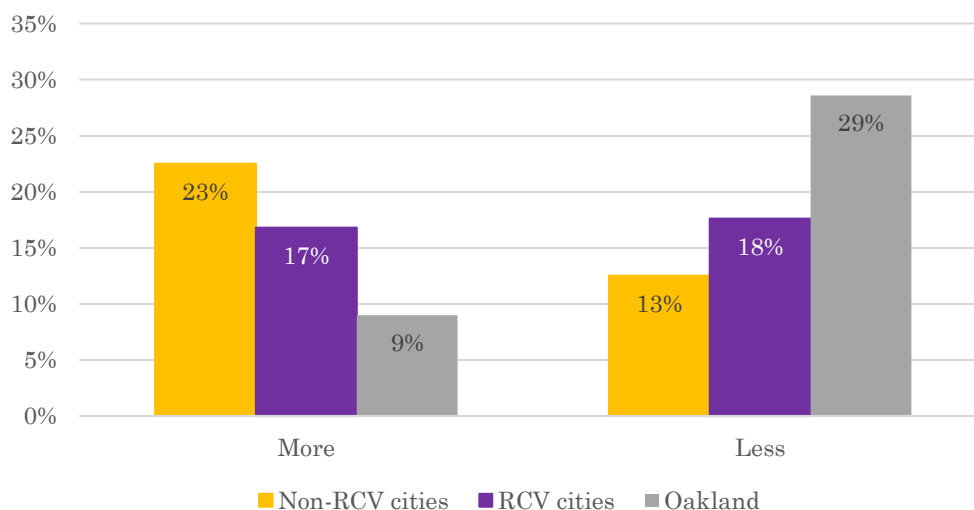
by appealing to other candidates' supporters for second and third choices—a process that requires civility and restraint from unjustified negativity and criticism.

Figure 3: Time Candidates Spent Criticizing their Opponent, Oakland 2014



The proposition that a less negative campaigning style accompanies RCV is bolstered when we consider respondents' views on whether the 2014 campaign was more or less negative than other recent local political contests. More respondents in RCV cities reported that the 2014 election was less negative than prior contests (Figure 4). In RCV cities, 18% of respondents thought that the campaign was less negative than in the recent past. In non-RCV cities, only 13% of respondents believed the 2014 local campaign was less negative than recent contests. Similarly, only 17% of respondents in RCV cities believed the 2014 local campaign was more negative, compared to 23% in the non-RCV cities. Most voters in both RCV (66%) and non-RCV cities (65%) thought the 2014 campaign was about as negative as those in recent memory.

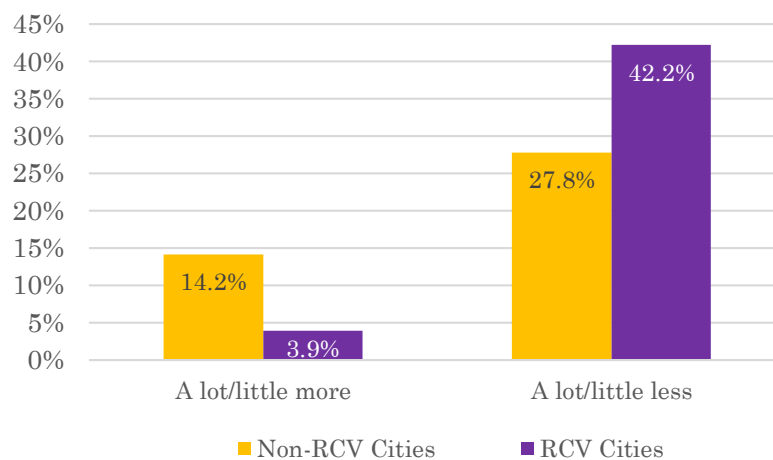
Figure 4: Negativity of 2014 Campaigns Compared to Previous Local Campaigns, Select Californian Cities



In Oakland, 29% of respondents thought the 2014 campaign was less negative than in recent local contests. Only 9% of Oakland respondents believed the 2014 campaign was more negative than recent local campaigns, while 62% reported that the level of negativity was about the same.

The tendency for likely voters in RCV cities to report less negative campaigning was statistically significant in both the 2013 and 2014 surveys, even though each survey focused on a different set of city elections. In the 2013 survey, respondents in non-RCV cities were over three-times more likely to report that campaigns in their city elections were more negative than in past contests than were respondents in RCV cities (Figure 5). In 2014, respondents in non-RCV cities were 35% more likely than respondents in RCV cities to report that campaigns in their city elections were more negative than in past contests.

Figure 5: Negativity of 2013 Campaigns Compared to Previous Local Campaigns, Select Cities\*



One potential reason for the smaller difference between RCV and non-RCV respondents' perceptions of negativity in the 2014 survey is that RCV is well-established in the Bay Area. San Francisco has used RCV to elect city leaders since 2004, and Berkeley, Oakland and San Leandro previously used RCV in competitive elections in 2010 and 2012. As a result, any reduced negativity caused by the use of RCV would have mostly been perceived in campaigns before the 2014 campaign. By contrast, in 2013, one of the three surveyed RCV cities (Minneapolis), was holding its first serious citywide contest with RCV – a competitive mayoral election – and St. Paul was holding its first citywide election using RCV.

The 66% of respondents in the 2014 survey who reported “about the same” level of negativity were in cities now well familiar with RCV and were, therefore, likely reporting that a lower level of negativity was remaining the same. This claim is supported by the discussion above outlining the lower levels of perceived candidate-on-candidate criticism in Californian RCV cities (Figure 1). The data from the 2014 and 2013 surveys suggests that a consistently less negative campaigning style accompanies RCV.

### **Conclusion**

The results of the 2014 survey of RVC and non-RCV cities in California confirm the findings of the 2013 survey in Minneapolis, St Paul and Cambridge. Voters perceive less criticism between candidates and observe lower levels of negative campaigning in elections conducted using RCV than do those voters in elections using the more adversarial plurality system.

**About the Author:** Sarah John is a 2014-2015 Research Fellow at FairVote. She has a Ph.D. and has authored several academic articles on electoral systems and history.

### Information about the Ranked Choice Voting Civility Project

The Eagleton Poll survey data presented here are part of a larger project investigating ranked choice voting in local elections. The project is funded by the Democracy Fund, conducted with Professors Caroline Tolbert, Todd Donovan, Martha Kropf, and David Kimball and assisted by FairVote's staff and its Ranked Choice Voting Academic Advisory Committee.

Professors Tolbert and Donovan are responsible for developing and evaluating the telephone survey. Tolbert is a professor of political science at the University of Iowa, where she focuses on voting, elections, public opinion, and representation. She is the co-author of eight books and nearly 50 articles in academic journals. Donovan is a professor of political science at Western Washington University, where he studies the relationship between representation and electoral systems, public opinions, political behavior, direct democracy, and American state politics. He is the author of 10 books on elections and campaigns, and over 50 peer reviewed journal articles.

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FairVote's **Research Report** series analyzes American and international elections and election practices, studying the effect on voter participation, fairness in representation and competitive choice.