

RCV testimony by Caleb Kleppner

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Senator Osten, Senator Hwang and distinguished members of the Governor's Ranked Choice Voting Working Group:

My name is Caleb Keppner from New Haven. I am a principal of MK Election Services, and I've been involved with educating about, advocating for and implementing ranked choice voting in public and private elections since 1998. I was a co-author of San Francisco's ranked choice voting charter amendment that voters adopted in 2002 and have been using ever since.

I conducted the count of the first public RCV election in San Francisco in 2004. A week ahead of the general election that used RCV, students elected a student member of the San Francisco Board of Education. A team of 12 volunteers hand counted over 10,000 ballots in just a few hours. Not bad for a bunch of untrained volunteers.

I have also conducted ranked choice voting elections with kindergartners who haven't yet learned to read and write. But they can point to pictures of their first, second and third choices for student body president, and older students can help them write down their choices.

So when I hear skeptics say that RCV is too complicated for voters, I try to be polite when I point out that the speakers doesn't know what they're talking about. Voters all over the world, of all different backgrounds of language, literacy, culture, education, have easily used ranked choice voting for over a century.

It's really pretty simple: you vote for your favorite candidate and, if you want, you can choose a second choice, a third choice and so on.

In a sense, it's easier than picking one: you don't have to make a tactical decision between voting for your true favorite candidate versus a candidate who has a chance of winning.

I've also heard why RCV is bad for practically every group. It gets amusing because the list of groups who were convinced that RCV is bad for them includes:

- Incumbents and non-incumbents
- Democrats, Republicans and the Working Families Party
- Progressives, moderates, and conservatives
- Political consultants
- Pretty much every ethnic and racial group

When you look at RCV elections in over 50 places including 2 states over the past 20 years, you can cut through the hype and see what RCV really does (and does not do):

- It elects the candidate preferred by a majority of the electorate
- It eliminates the need for costly and time-consuming runoff elections,
- It allows voters to vote sincerely rather than tactically

- It eliminates the spoiler problem
- It reduces negative campaigning, and it encourages coalition-building
- It lowers barriers to entry for new candidates and this, at least in San Francisco and New York City, has been associated with an increase in the representation of women.

It does not:

- Lead to the second coming or the end life as we know it

But I think it makes our elections a little bit better.

Let me give an example. I just returned from Portland, Maine, where I performed the RCV tabulation for four municipal races with more than 2 candidates. In two of the races, a candidate won with an outright majority. But in the other two races, if you had elected the candidates with the most first choices, you would have elected two candidates with unimpressive mandates: 23% and 34% of the vote (check figures).

And you wouldn't have known if the large majorities who didn't vote for the winners liked them, hated them, or were indifferent.

Instead, with RCV, the winning candidates entered office over 53%, and they knew not only who the winning coalition consisted of, but also knew what the opposition looked like.

RCV is a better way to pick a winner. So let's start by trying it in primaries and municipal elections, and then if it works like it has worked elsewhere, you all can think about when to bring it to general elections.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

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PS If you would like to see displays of the RCV election results from Portland, please visit:

Static election results

<https://content.civicplus.com/api/assets/972fb470-9422-4b96-b112-b1660fdb9ff>

Data visualization

<https://revis.com/v/2024-portland-city-council-at-large>