

Testimony from:
Deb Otis,
Director of Policy and Research

In **SUPPORT** of Ranked Choice Voting

Friday, November 8, 2024

**Governor's Ranked Choice Voting Working Group
Public Hearing**

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

I am writing to express FairVote Action's support for ranked choice voting in state and federal primary and general elections, as well as in municipal elections.

Ranked choice voting will improve Connecticut's elections by ensuring fairer, more representative outcomes. It will: (1) help parties nominate more consistently viable candidates who bring the party together; (2) accommodate voters having more choices on their ballots; (3) promote more positive, issues-focused campaigns; and 4) create a more level playing field for female candidates and candidates of color.

FairVote Action is a national nonpartisan organization that educates and advocates for electoral system reforms that improve our elections. We are seen as a leading national resource on ranked choice voting (RCV). I am the Director of Policy and Research for FairVote Action and, as part of my job, I study the impacts of RCV in the places that use it.

Approximately 13 million voters in 50 jurisdictions across the U.S. use ranked choice voting (RCV). It has become the fastest-growing nonpartisan electoral reform in the country, with successes including:

- Voters have approved RCV ballot initiatives in 31 cities in a row.
- Washington, D.C., just voted overwhelmingly (over 70%) to adopt RCV for future elections, along with Oak Park, Illinois, as the latest additions, plus Bloomington, MN, reaffirming their desire for RCV by defeating a repeal measure.
- New York City held the largest citywide RCV races in U.S. history in its 2021 primaries and conducted a successful voter education campaign which resulted in much higher voter participation than recent primaries, high use of rankings, and a low error rate. 95% of voters said voting with RCV was simple, and New York City successfully used RCV again in 2023.
- Legislatures in 13 states have passed RCV bills, including "local options" legislation that allows municipalities in Maine, Utah, Virginia, and Colorado to begin using RCV.
- Five Democratic presidential primaries and caucuses used RCV ballots in the 2020 presidential election.
- Alaska became the first state to elect its governor, state legislature, and federal offices using ranked choice voting. 80% of Alaska voters said the system was simple to use and 60% said it resulted in more competitive races than past elections.

One of the most powerful aspects of RCV is that it offers voters greater choice, creating space for both voters and candidates to express a wide range of views. Voters may rank as many or as few candidates as they like but, in practice, most voters choose to use multiple rankings in order to express their full preferences.

Typically, over 70% of voters choose to rank multiple candidates.¹ In highly competitive or highly publicized elections, the rate is even higher. For example, 89% of New York City voters ranked multiple candidates for mayor in 2021; of those who didn't rank, most said they only liked one candidate and didn't want to rank anyone else.

Voters like and understand RCV. Exit polling results find that voters in RCV cities and states overwhelmingly report that they like RCV and prefer it to their previous voting method.² Exit polling in Utah found that 81% of first-time RCV voters found it easy to use and 88% were satisfied with the method they used to cast their ballot.³

The numbers are even higher in New York and Alaska. In New York City, 95% of poll respondents found the ballot simple and 77% want to keep using RCV.⁴ In Alaska, 92% of voters said they received instructions on how to rank their choices and 79% said RCV was "simple."⁵

Voters not only find RCV easy to use, but they understand it intuitively, especially compared to other electoral reforms. Survey data shows that more voters understand RCV than the "top-two" systems used in California and Washington.⁶ Researchers have found no evidence of racial or ethnic differences in understanding of RCV.⁷ Voter support for RCV tends to increase over time, as voters get more chances to use it.⁸

Research shows that RCV also decreases negative campaigning because candidates need to reach beyond a single base of voters – and talk to everyone in order to win. Sometimes, this means appealing to be the second or third choice of voters who support a different candidate as their first choice. Studies have found that candidates use more positive language in

¹ Data on Ranked Choice Voting. FairVote. (2023).

https://www.fairvote.org/data_on_rcv#research_ballotuse

² FairVote. 2023. Exit Surveys: Voters Love Ranked Choice Voting.

<https://fairvote.org/report/exit-surveys-report-2023/>

³ Survey shows positive response to ranked choice voting. The Daily Herald. (2021).

<https://www.heraldextra.com/news/local/2021/nov/18/survey-shows-ranked-choice-voting-got-positive-response-in-pilot-test/>

⁴ Rank the Vote NYC Releases Edison Research Exit Poll on the Election. Rank the Vote NYC. (2021).

http://readme.readmedia.com/RANK-THE-VOTE-NYC-RELEASES-EDISON-RESEARCH-EXIT-POLL-ON-THE-ELECTION/17989282?utm_source=newswire&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=media_pr_emails

⁵ Alaska Exit Poll Results – New Election System. Patinkin Research Strategies. (2022).

https://alaskansforbetterelections.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Patinkin_Alaska_Exit_Poll.pdf

⁶ 2014 Eagleton Poll California RCV Survey Results. FairVote. (2021).

<https://www.fairvote.org/2014-survey-results>.

⁷ Self-Reported Understanding of Ranked-Choice Voting. Donovan, T., Tolbert, C. and Gracey, K. (2019), Social Science Quarterly, 100: 1768-1776. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12651>.

⁸ The 2017 Municipal Election: An Analysis & Recommendations. Minneapolis City Council. (2018).

<https://iims.minneapolismn.gov/Download/RCAV2/4684/2017-Municipal-Election-Report.pdf>

debates,⁹ voters in RCV cities perceive less negativity compared to voters in non-RCV cities,^{10,11} and newspaper articles in RCV cities are more positive than in non-RCV cities.¹²

Ranked choice voting is particularly well-suited for elections with crowded fields, like those often seen in primary elections. RCV ensures that elections are won with majorities without the need for costly runoff elections – where turnout drops by an average of 40%.¹³

Most RCV winners earn even more than majority support. Most RCV winners are ranked in the top 3 choices by two-thirds of voters or more, demonstrating a measure of broad consensus among voters. Winners of RCV races usually earn the most first choices as well. When the winner is someone other than the leader in first-choice preferences, RCV has prevented an unfair outcome due to the majority splitting the vote.

Importantly, **RCV addresses the problems of “vote-splitting” and “spoiler” candidates** that sometimes result in election winners who lack majority support. In our current system, a majority of voters may support a particular ideology or party, but split their votes among candidates who support that ideology – resulting in a winner whose views reflect the *minority* of voters.

For this reason, **RCV would be an ideal choice for both parties in Connecticut’s presidential primaries** in future years. RCV lets primary voters navigate a crowded field, ensures every voter’s voice is heard even if their first-choice candidate withdraws just before the primary, and incentivizes presidential candidates to speak to issues important to Connecticut voters in order to build the broadest coalition of support.

Five state Democratic parties used RCV for presidential primaries in 2020, including Kansas, Alaska, Wyoming, and Hawaii for all voters and Nevada for early voters only. These states found that RCV preserves key benefits of caucuses, like allowing voters to “realign” with a second choice if their top choice candidate does not earn enough support to remain in the delegate race, while also modernizing the process with a primary that allows for greater participation. Voters in these states took advantage of the opportunity to rank multiple candidates, made very few ballot errors, and turned out in large numbers. In a year when nearly 3 million early voters in states without RCV cast ballots for presidential candidates who had already withdrawn by the time ballots were counted, RCV made more votes count.¹⁴

⁹ Effect of Instant Run-off Voting on Participation and Civility. McGinn, E. (2020).

http://eamonmcginn.com.s3-website-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/papers/IRV_in_Minneapolis.pdf

¹⁰ Socioeconomic and Demographic Perspectives on Ranked Choice Voting in the Bay Area. John, S. & Tolbert, C. (2015). <https://fairvote.app.box.com/v/perspectives-on-rcv-bay-area>

¹¹ Santa Fe Voters Support Ranked Choice Voting and Have High Confidence in City Elections. FairVote. (2018). <https://fairvote.app.box.com/v/SantaFeExitReport>

¹² Using Campaign Communications to Analyze Civility in Ranked Choice Voting Elections. Kropf, M. (2021). <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/4293>

¹³ Primary Runoff Elections and Decline in Voter Turnout, 1994-2022. Rose, J. (2022) <https://fairvote.org/report/primary-runoffs-report-2022/>

¹⁴ Ranked Choice Voting in 2020 Presidential Primary Elections. FairVote. (2020). Available at https://www.fairvote.org/ranked_choice_voting_in_2020_presidential_primary_elections

Recent research has found that RCV tends to result in greater election rates for women and candidates of color.^{15,16} A 2024 FairVote report also found that voters of color are more likely to rank multiple candidates on their ballots.¹⁷

This has played out in practice in cities across the country. RCV elections helped lead to the first-ever majority-female City Council in New York City and just its second Black Mayor; the first all-female City Council in Las Cruces, New Mexico; the first Alaska Native member of Congress, and the first City Councils in Minneapolis and Salt Lake City that are majority people of color. In 2023, St. Paul elected an all-female city council; 90% of councilors are women of color.

RCV's simplicity, representative outcomes, and positive experience for voters have made it an increasingly popular election method. Recommended by Robert's Rules of Order and used in hundreds of private association elections, RCV is fully constitutional, having been twice upheld in federal courts, including in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in 2011 and in federal district courts in Maine in 2018 and 2020.

With so many more prominent examples of its impact and a greater understanding of how to administer RCV effectively, the evidence in its favor has never been stronger. Voters like RCV and engage with the ranked ballot. Parties can produce strong nominees with RCV. And implementation is a smooth process.^{18,19} In most cities using RCV, preliminary results are produced on election night or the day after – the same timeline as in single-choice elections.

For example, Boulder, Colorado successfully used RCV to elect its mayor for the first time in 2023. Boulder election administrators communicated with voters, the media, and stakeholders about what to expect; released RCV results on election night with visualizations of the round-by-round results; and performed a risk-limiting audit. The winner in the RCV mayoral race was called before the winners in Boulder's plurality city council races – directly contradicting some opponents' claims that RCV contests take longer to count or call. 86% of Boulder voters said it was easy to complete their ballot, and 77% said they were satisfied with their voting experience.²⁰ Following the election in Boulder, Colorado Gov. Jared Polis endorsed RCV – citing how smooth the process was.²¹

¹⁵ In Ranked Choice Elections, Women Win, RCV in the United States: A Decade in Review. Represent Women. (2020). https://www.representwomen.org/research_voting_reforms.

¹⁶ The alternative vote: Do changes in single-member voting systems affect descriptive representation of women and minorities? John, S., Smith, H., & Zack, E. (2018). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0261379417304006>

¹⁷ Ranked Choice Voting Elections Benefit Candidates and Voters of Color: 2024 update. Otis, D. & Laverty, S. (2024) <https://fairvote.org/report/communities-of-color-2024/>

¹⁸ Additional resources on RCV implementation are available from the Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center at www.RCVResources.org.

¹⁹ Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Implementation Considerations for Policymakers. NCSL. (2022). <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting-in-practice-implementation-considerations-for-policymakers>

²⁰ Boulder Ranked Choice Voting. Citizen Data. (2023) <https://drive.google.com/file/d/19Jz5dUo5JYv2kq9Hb8AQM11J57sW1ytz/view>

²¹ Colorado Governor Jared Polis endorses ranked choice voting. Oberstaedt, M. (2023) <https://fairvote.org/colorado-governor-jared-polis-endorses-ranked-choice-voting/>

FairVote Action is available to answer any other questions from the committee or provide additional data. FairVote Action can also advise the legislature as it deems fit and be a resource for RCV implementation. You can reach me at dotis@fairvoteaction.org and my FairVote Action colleagues at info@fairvoteaction.org.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Deb Otis

Director of Policy and Research at FairVote Action