The Research Bureau

Choosing a Better Voting System

The Argument for Ranked Choice Voting in Worcester and Beyond

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Introduction

This year, Maine became the first state in the country to adopt ranked choice voting, in part because of a question: is the will of the people really counted correctly when nearly two-thirds of the state voted against the victor in an election, as was the case in their 2010 gubernatorial contest? Ranked choice voting, or RCV, is a system that allows voters to indicate a preference not just for their first choice for an office, but for their second and third choices, and so on. Much like runoff elections, the system ensures that no one wins without more than 50 percent of the final vote.

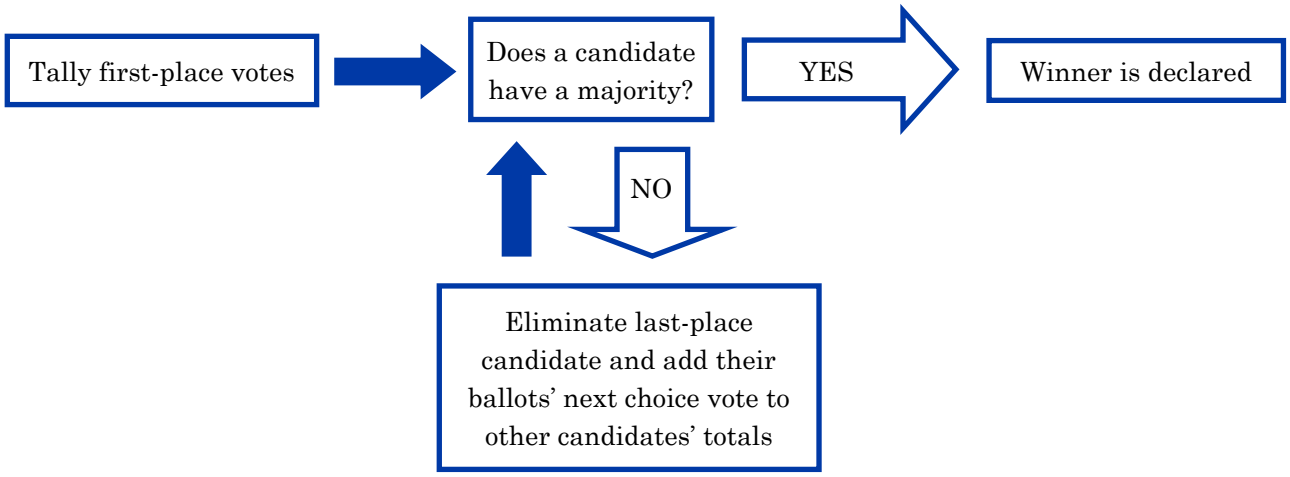
It may sound like an innovative idea, but it is not a new one. Around a dozen cities in the United States use RCV for local elections, and it used to be far more common. Worcester used the system to elect City Councilors and School Committee members from 1949 to 1959, and Cambridge, the first city in Massachusetts to adopt RCV, still uses it. It is also used in national elections overseas, including in Australia, Ireland, and India.

Maine's decision to upend their voting system was not a knee-jerk reaction. The last time a Maine governor was elected with more than 50 percent of the vote was in 1998. Nor are plurality victories limited to just Maine. In 2010, 10 governors were elected with less than 50 percent of the vote, and nearly 12 percent of gubernatorial elections since 1946 have resulted in a victor with the support of less than half the voting public, according to data compiled by FairVote, a nonprofit that advocates for electoral reforms like RCV.

Even in elections with a clear majority, critics have quibbles with the current "first past the post" method. Minor party and independent candidates have been accused of being "spoilers" in situations ranging from local city council contests to presidential elections—and those complaining have a point, as ideologically similar candidates can split an electorate, allowing an otherwise unpopular party or candidate to claim victory. Fear of causing such a scenario has caused potential candidates to stay out of a race, and may cause voters to vote for their second or third preferred candidate because they have a better real or perceived chance of winning.

RCV aims to solve these and other electoral problems. While no voting system is perfect, choosing the right candidates to lead our governments is important enough that if there is any way to improve how they are elected, it should be explored. This report will provide an overview of RCV, explain its advantages and disadvantages, and give context to how such a system could be reimplemented in Worcester, and what effects it would have.

Chart 1: Single-winner RCV Flowchart



The Methods

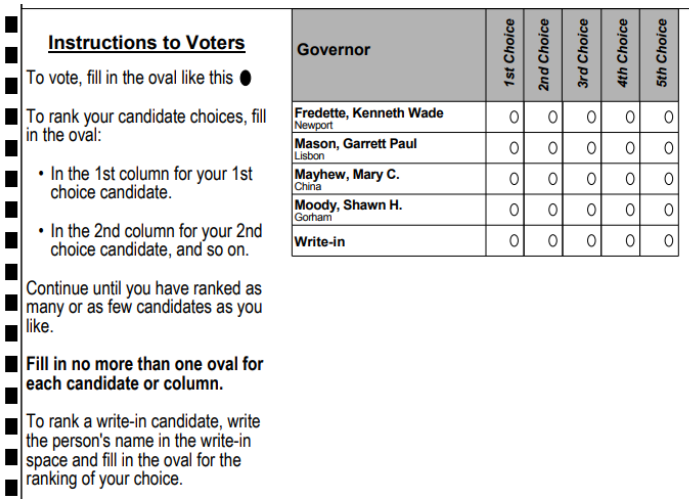
The study of elections is complex, and a number of election systems and variations on those election systems have been proposed. Some have used the term "ranked choice voting" interchangeably with phrases like "instant runoff voting" or "preferential voting." In multi-winner elections, like for Worcester City Council, the terms "single transferable vote" and "proportional representation" can be used. The legislative bill that introduced RCV in Maine defined it as "the method of casting and tabulating votes in which voters rank candidates in order of preference, tabulation proceeds in sequential rounds in which last-place candidates are defeated and the candidate with the most votes in the final round is elected." The current system of voting is referred to as "plurality voting," because winners need to capture more votes than any other candidate, whether or not that results in a majority of support.

In plurality elections with a single winner, like those for mayors, governors, and senators, voters are asked to choose one candidate from a number of options. The candidate who receives the most votes wins the seat. In multi-winner plurality elections, like those for most city councils and school committees, voters are given the opportunity to vote for as many candidates as there are open seats. When votes are tallied, the candidate with the most votes gets the first seat, followed by the candidate with the next-most, until all the seats are filled.

In an RCV race with a single winner, voters are asked to rank the candidates in order of preference. This differs from the current plurality system in which voters choose one candidate and ignore the rest of the options. An RCV ballot contains space for a voter to specify a preference for each candidate on the ballot, although this is not required; filling in a first choice only is a valid ballot, although it confers no strategic advantage for the candidate.

The ballots are then tabulated, and if a candidate has more than 50 percent of the vote, that candidate is elected—exactly the same as in the current plurality system. If no candidate surpasses the 50 percent threshold, however, tabulation continues. The candidate with the fewest first-place votes is eliminated from contention, and the ballots of the voters who chose that candidate are reallocated to other candidates based on their second-place choices. If this pushes another candidate above 50 percent, that candidate is declared the winner. If not, the process continues until one candidate gains 50 percent of the vote (see chart 1).

Image 1: Sample RCV Ballot, Maine Republican Primary



Instructions to Voters

To vote, fill in the oval like this ●

To rank your candidate choices, fill in the oval:

- In the 1st column for your 1st choice candidate.
- In the 2nd column for your 2nd choice candidate, and so on.

Continue until you have ranked as many or as few candidates as you like.

Fill in no more than one oval for each candidate or column.

To rank a write-in candidate, write the person's name in the write-in space and fill in the oval for the ranking of your choice.

Governor	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
Fredette, Kenneth Wade Newport	0	0	0	0	0
Mason, Garrett Paul Lisbon	0	0	0	0	0
Mayhew, Mary C. China	0	0	0	0	0
Moody, Shawn H. Gorham	0	0	0	0	0
Write-in	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Maine Secretary of State

In an RCV race with multiple winners, the process is slightly different. Currently, voters are asked to vote for one or more of the candidates, up to the number of seats available. In Worcester, for example, with six at-large city council seats, voters can choose between one and six candidates, in any order. In an RCV election, voters mark candidates in order of preference, offering an advantage to highly-placed candidates.

During tabulation, a candidate is elected not with 50 percent of the vote, but with a quota determined by the number of votes. For example, if there were nine seats available, and 100 voters, the quota would be 11, since it would be impossible for 10 candidates to get that number of votes. If a candidate reached the quota, they would be elected, and any surplus votes—those above the quota—would be redistributed proportionally to his or her voters' second choice candidate. If no one is elected in any given round,

the last-place candidate is eliminated, and their votes are redistributed according to the voters' second choices. This continues until enough candidates have met the quota, or until the number of candidates remaining matches the number of seats.

The Advantages of RCV

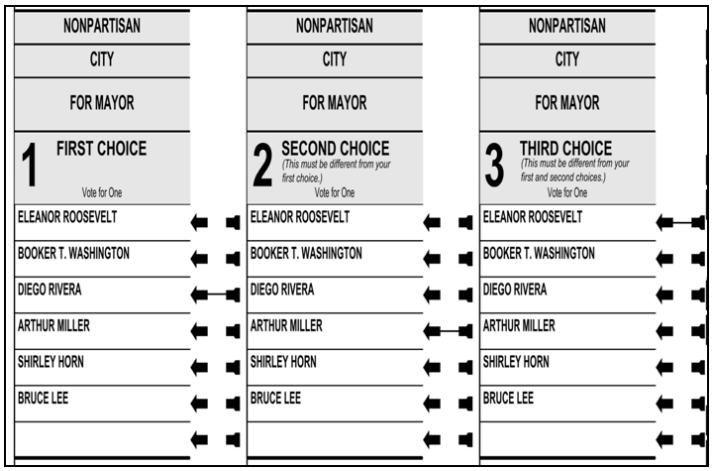
Eliminating the "Spoiler Effect"

The most cited and intuitive advantage of RCV is its ability to counter the "spoiler effect," the name given to the result of two or more candidates splitting an ideologically similar voter base, allowing another candidate who would have otherwise been defeated to win. For example, if 60 percent of voters in a district favor Party A, and 40 percent favor Party B, the logical outcome would be a representative from Party A. But if two candidates from Party A run for the seat, and draw equal support, the candidate from Party B would win. The most well-known real-world example is the 2000 U.S. presidential election. Green Party candidate Ralph Nader received nearly 100,000 votes in Florida, a state that Democratic candidate Al Gore lost by under 600 votes. Exit polls showed that 45 percent of Nader voters would have voted for Gore, while 27 percent would have voted for eventual winner George W. Bush, figures used to argue that Nader's candidacy "spoiled" the election for Gore.

RCV mitigates the problem by factoring in the preferences of voters who initially chose a non-frontrunner. Voters who chose a candidate outside the top two would not have (in effect) subtracted votes from another candidate—their second-place votes would be counted toward the candidate they viewed as the next most ideologically similar, and their voice would count just as much as voters who chose a front-runner as their first-place option.

Reducing the spoiler effect is important for that reason and because the current system can result in dishonest votes where voters choose "the lesser of two evils" rather than the candidate they truly support. People who currently vote for a

Image 2: Sample RCV Ballot, City of Berkeley



Source: City Clerk's office, Berkeley, California

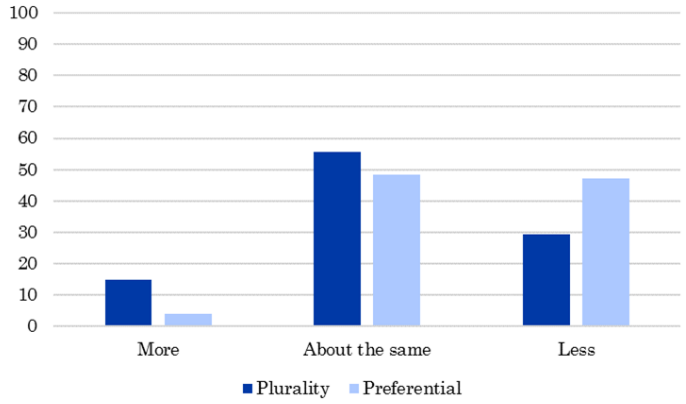
candidate they know has less support than others do so with the knowledge that voting idealistically may siphon votes from a candidate they view as mediocre, allowing a candidate they dislike more to prevail. This can result in voters choosing a candidate based on their perceived odds of winning, rather than an actual ideological preference. A Pew Research Center poll during the 2016 U.S. presidential election found the top reason voters gave for supporting either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump was opposition to the other, with 33 percent of Trump voters saying they supported him so Clinton would not be president, and 32 percent of Clinton voters saying the reverse. Reasons like support for their policy positions or ability to get things done ranked lower on the respective lists.

The specter of the spoiler effect can influence elections where, on the surface, there are only two candidates, or elections that end in a landslide. Potential candidates may use logic similar to voters who select their second-favorite candidate, and bow out of the running to ensure they do not inadvertently act as a spoiler. Organizations, especially political parties, may try to "clear the field," pushing candidates who would otherwise run to drop out so they do not split the vote of that group's base.

Reducing Negative Campaigning

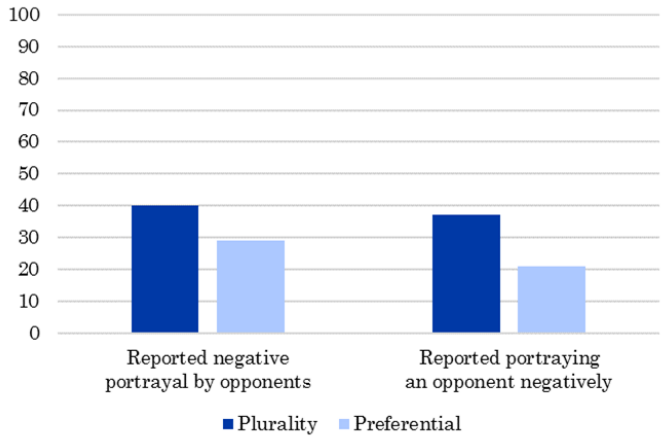
Many voters are wary of increasing hostility in politics. In a 2017 CBS News poll, 68 percent of

Chart 2: Perceptions of Negative Campaigning Relative to Other Elections



Source: Rutgers' Eagleton poll

Chart 3: Candidates' Perceptions of Negative Campaigning by Opponents



Source: Todd Donovan, "Candidate Perceptions of Campaigns under Preferential and Plurality Voting" poll

Americans said the "tone and civility" of political debate in the country was getting worse, and 73 percent said it was encouraging violence in some people.

RCV has long been seen as a mitigating factor in nasty political fights. Candidates are not just competing for one base of voters—they are trying to be the second or third choice for other candidates' bases. In the current plurality system, there is no difference between being a voter's second favorite choice or most hated option, leaving the door open to personal attacks or other negative campaign tactics targeting other candidates. If a voter's preferences matter beyond their first choice, candidates often seek to appeal to all voters, even if they know they are not those individuals' first choice, with the knowledge that placing second or third on a ballot rather than last can help them win an election.

Voters in the few American cities with RCV have confirmed this trend. A 2013 poll conducted by the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University found that around 84 percent of respondents in cities that used RCV or preferential voting were fairly or very satisfied with the conduct of candidate campaigns in that year's municipal elections, compared to 76 percent in cities using plurality voting. An even greater difference was found when respondents were asked to compare the level of negative campaigning in that election to other recent elections. In plurality cities, 15 percent of voters said there was more negative campaigning, while 29 percent said there was less. In preferential cities, using forms of RCV, 4 percent said there was more negative campaigning, and 47 percent said there was less (see chart 2). The survey was sent to residents of 10 cities, including Worcester, Lowell, Cambridge and Boston.

In another survey by one of the same researchers, focusing on an additional 22 cities (and the original 10), candidates for office also reported less negative campaigning in RCV cities than in plurality cities, with 40 percent of candidates in plurality elections saying an opponent had portrayed them negatively, compared to 29 percent who said the same thing in RCV cities (see chart 3).

Increasing Turnout

Worcester, like most of the United States, has a low rate of voter turnout compared to other cities or countries around the world. RCV advocates often claim that a better, fairer voting system will boost turnout, as it mitigates many of the reasons people give for not voting. Evidence for its success in this area, in the limited number of U.S. cities that have switched to RCV, is mixed.

It is true that one of the main reasons people give for not voting is because they do not think their vote counts. A Suffolk University and USA Today poll of nonvoters released in April found that the top reason given for not voting was "vote doesn't count/won't make a difference," with 15 percent of voters holding that view, a higher number than those who were apathetic or too busy.

A study conducted by a professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis that compared voting trends at multiple cities before and after the adoption of RCV and compared turnout there to comparable cities that use plurality voting (including Worcester), found that "RCV does not appear to have a strong impact on voter turnout and ballot completion." The report did note a significant increase in turnout compared to preliminary elections or runoff elections, both of which are rendered unnecessary by a ranked choice format. Preliminary and runoff elections historically have substantially lower turnout than regular elections, and several U.S. states already use RCV for overseas absentee ballots so that those voters, often members of the military, do not suffer depressed turnout as a result of the inconvenience of mailing in multiple ballots for one election.

RCV advocates have relied on anecdotes to show a correlation between preferential voting and more voter participation in elections. Maine Democratic party officials said they experienced the largest primary turnout in state history in the first RCV election. Analysis by FairVote showed voter turnout in Oakland, Santa Fe, Minneapolis, and St. Paul increasing in those cities' first elections using RCV or in the next election following adoption. However, comparing the reasons for higher or lower voter turnout across elections can be difficult. Voter turnout can increase because of an inspiring candidate, a pressing local issue, a change in demographics, or a variety of other factors that have nothing to do with the voting system employed, making the establishment of a correlation between RCV and voter turnout difficult without a larger sample size.

Boosting Underrepresented Populations

Advocates of RCV point to its effect on minority populations as another positive for the voting system. This can mean its effect on non-major political parties or unaffiliated candidates, as well as demographic groups, often in reference to people of color. By moving away from a system of "strategic voting," where voters often feel pressure to vote for a candidate with a better chance of winning than the one they truly prefer, and toward a system where people can vote their conscience without fear of spoiling an election, RCV advocates claim the system opens the door for more diverse political representation.

The benefit of plurality voting to a majority is most evident in multi-winner elections, like Worcester's selections for at-large City Council or School Committee. Because every resident gets six votes in these races, 51 percent of the population—voting for the same candidates—can elect 100 percent of the city's representatives. In a multi-winner RCV election, as long as a group of voters exceeds the quota necessary for election—the voting population divided by the number of seats available—that group can elect a representative of its choice.

Research into the effects of RCV has shown benefits to people of color. A FairVote study of elections for 53 local offices in four California cities, over multiple elections spanning a time period before and after each community adopted RCV, found that candidates of color won 62 percent of RCV races there, up from 38 percent in plurality systems. This more closely matched the demographic proportions of the area, since white residents were a minority in all but one of the cities. Underrepresentation of people of color in elected office—relative to their representation demographically—has been the subject of much consternation by election reformers. A 2014 study by Demos, a liberal think tank, found that of 438 municipalities in which a city council (or equivalent body) that reflected the demographics of the community would have at least one African American member, 175 had councils that underrepresented their African American population. This was equal to around 16.5 percent of African Americans in these communities being

underrepresented, compared to 1.5 percent of white residents in the same cities and towns.

Municipal elections in Worcester are nonpartisan, meaning there are no primaries or references to parties during the voting process, but the structure and resources of the two major political parties still play a large role. Currently, around 50 percent of Worcester residents are unenrolled or members of a third party, around 42 percent are Democrats, and around 8 percent are Republicans, but all 11 members of the City Council and all 6 members of the School Committee are members of the Democratic party, and in the last five municipal elections, there has never been more than one non-Democrat elected to either body. In the 2017 municipal election, 28 percent of ballots cast for the six-person at-large city council race, and 46 percent of ballots cast in the six-person school committee race, had a vote for a Republican candidate, but no member of that party was elected.

The idea that plurality voting leads to two dominant parties, while proportional representation leads to a multi-party system, is known as Duverger's Law. Because voters tend to want to influence the winner of the election—the main draw of voting, for most—under a plurality system, researchers have observed that voters will choose a frontrunner instead of a long-shot candidate in order to avoid "wasting" their vote. This is similar to the argument over the spoiler effect and its various consequences, and is thought to be a factor in why third parties have trouble competing with major organizations.

The Disadvantages of RCV

Education Requirements

One of the biggest complaints about changing to a new voting system, especially one like RCV where the changes affect the way people vote in addition to tabulation behind the scenes, is that citizens are familiar with the current "first past the post" method. Changing something that people have gotten accustomed to, critics say, causes errors in voting and could lead to lower turnout due to a new uneasiness with the system.

Voter confusion can be approximated by looking at spoiled ballots and exhausted ballots in any given election. Spoiled ballots occur when someone fills out a ballot incorrectly—selecting too many candidates in our current plurality system, for example, or marking more than one candidate as a first choice in an RCV election. Ballot exhaustion in RCV elections occurs when a voter marks fewer preferences than there are candidates, and those preferred candidates are eliminated from contention. At that point, since the voter did not select additional choices, their ballot would be discarded. Although some voters intentionally fill out their RCV ballots with fewer preferences than they are able, this is most often the result of confusion over whether there is a strategic advantage to doing so (there is not).

Studies in multiple cities have tracked a connection between increased racial diversity in an area and higher rates of mistakes on RCV ballots, and some have tracked the same correlation between lower education rates in a voting district and more mistakes on an RCV ballot, sometimes connecting the two, arguing that RCV has higher requirements for understanding how to vote, resulting in a decrease in turnout or valid ballots that falls disproportionately on people of color. A study of the 2013 Minneapolis municipal election, in a city that has used RCV since 2009, found that rates of both spoiled ballots and exhausted ballots were up to 4 percent higher in wards with higher proportions of racial minorities, and found similar results when comparing affluent areas with poorer neighborhoods. Studies in San Francisco have shown that precincts with higher percentages of African-American, Latino, foreign-born, elderly, or low-income residents made more errors than other areas of the city. In general, concluded one study from San Francisco State University, "asking voters to do more than pick a single candidate from a list leads to an increase in disqualifying errors."

While RCV advocates respond by pointing out that disparities in voter turnout among different demographic groups and educational levels are

not unique to RCV, there is a strong case to be made that RCV ballots are at least slightly more complex than plurality ballots, and any change in voting methods necessitates education to get voters comfortable with the system. Advocates have also made the case that, even in cities that have recently adopted RCV, confusion is low. A FairVote survey of around 1,300 voters in Santa Fe, which adopted RCV in 2018, found that around 15 percent said the new process was somewhat or very confusing, and around 4 percent said they were somewhat or very unsatisfied with their voting experience.

Chart 4: Example of RCV in Worcester:
Selected Tabulation Rounds from the 1951 RCV Worcester City Council Election

Round 1	
Andrew B. Holmstrom	14,752
George A. Wells	5,008
James D. O'Brien	4,408
Israel Katz	3,626
Thomas C. Sweeney	2,876
Peter D. Tomaiolo	2,521
Ralph E. Duffy	2,343
John J. Lawless	2,089
Paul E. Soulliere Jr.	2,024
James J. Marshall	1,979
Rene A. Brassard	1,957
Emile L. Rousseau	1,639
Thomas J. Early	1,570
C. Edwin Lofgren	1,537
Gene J. Balcom	792

33 others

Round 2	
Andrew B. Holmstrom	**5,858**
Ralph E. Duffy	5,654
George A. Wells	5,380
James D. O'Brien	4,584
Israel Katz	4,009
Thomas C. Sweeney	3,216
Emile L. Rousseau	2,878
Peter D. Tomaiolo	2,604
James J. Marshall	2,337
John J. Lawless	2,258
Paul E. Soulliere Jr.	2,232
Rene A. Brassard	2,011
C. Edwin Lofgren	2,007
Thomas J. Early	1,640
Esther Mary Wahlstrom	1,080

33 others

Round 35	
Andrew B. Holmstrom	**5,858**
Ralph E. Duffy	**5,858**
George A. Wells	**5,858**
James D. O'Brien	**5,858**
Israel Katz	5,297
Thomas C. Sweeney	4,617
Emile L. Rousseau	4,280
James J. Marshall	3,645
John J. Lawless	3,504
Peter D. Tomaiolo	3,489
Paul E. Soulliere Jr.	3,088
C. Edwin Lofgren	2,956
Rene A. Brassard	2,527
~~Thomas J. Early~~	~~0~~
~~Gene J. Balcom~~	~~0~~

Round 38	
Andrew B. Holmstrom	**5,858**
Ralph E. Duffy	**5,858**
George A. Wells	**5,858**
James D. O'Brien	**5,858**
Israel Katz	**5,858**
Thomas C. Sweeney	5,538
Emile L. Rousseau	5,487
Paul E. Soulliere Jr.	4,979
James J. Marshall	4,605
John J. Lawless	4,297
~~Peter D. Tomaiolo~~	~~0~~
~~Rene A. Brassard~~	~~0~~
~~Thomas J. Early~~	~~0~~
~~C. Edwin Lofgren~~	~~0~~
~~Gene J. Balcom~~	~~0~~

Source: Worcester Election Commission

In Round 1, the tally of voters' first place votes, Andrew Holmstrom exceeded the vote quota of 5,858. That left 8,894 excess votes, which were distributed proportionally to Holmstrom voters' second-ranked candidates. Some candidates, like Peter Tomaiolo, received less than 100 votes this way. Candidates more aligned with Holmstrom's views received larger boosts—Ralph Duffy, who was 7th in the initial tally, got around 2,300 second-place votes, putting him in second place in Round 2, while Tomaiolo, who was 6th in Round 1, fell to 8th place.

Between Round 2 and Round 35, a total of 35 candidates were eliminated, including anyone with fewer than 50 votes after Round 2, and the candidate with the fewest votes each round from that point. Nearly 12,000 voters picked one of these 35 candidates as their first choice, and the allocation of those voters' second-place votes—and sometimes, third or fourth place votes—put three more candidates over the top, getting the required 5,858 votes to meet the election quota. It reshuffled the order of the remaining 13 candidates.

When Rene Brassard was eliminated in Round 36, more than half his voters' next choice—1,427 out of 2,527 ballots—was Paul Soulliere Jr., giving him the boost he needed to eventually win election. Tomaiolo, who had the sixth-most first-place votes, ended up being few voters' second or third choice, and was eliminated in the penultimate round. The later rounds also saw more third, fourth, fifth, or higher votes come into play, and some ballot exhaustion, as more than 6,000 voters out of around 58,500 saw all of their ranked candidates eliminated.

Critics see ballot exhaustion as an outcome of voter confusion, and point to the fact that with high enough rates of exhaustion, winners of RCV elections do not actually receive a majority of ballots cast. One study analyzed more than 600,000 ballots cast in RCV election in four cities and found that between 10 and 27 percent of ballots with a valid first round choice had been discarded by the conclusion of tabulation, leaving the victor with less than 50 percent of total ballots cast (although still with a majority of valid, non-exhausted ballots). The study noted that the ballots they examined allowed ranking three candidates at most, and that expanding the field would result in less exhaustion. Advocates have also noted that many problems with RCV relate to its recent adoption in many cities, and that problems with confusion and ballot exhaustion may go down as people adjust to the new system. In Cambridge's 2017 municipal election, 0.3 percent of ballots were invalid and nearly 12 percent of ballots were exhausted.

Logistics and Timing

While the use of computers and software to tabulate ballots means the quotas and reallocation needed to make RCV work can be done in an instant, there are still complicating factors beyond the background calculations used to determine a winner. Critics of RCV have cited these concerns as evidence that RCV is not worth it, compared to the relatively simple and low-cost method of voting currently employed.

In Maine, returning all the ballots from each town to a central location so they could be tallied, and the secondary votes added to each candidate's total, took eight days from the day of the primary election vote to the announcement of the winners. In a plurality system, towns can tally ballots onsite, simply sending results to a main state office. The winner of the Republican nomination for governor had actually been announced earlier, because one candidate got more than 50 percent of the vote, but the Democratic party had to wait to see who would be the party's nominee—a small inequality, but one that could give one side an edge in the general election.

Worcester's voting machines are already capable of handling RCV ballots, but the cost of the necessary software upgrade could be up to $20,000, according to an estimate from the Election Commission. Other complications locally include needing to increase the physical size of the ballot to accommodate RCV options, planning for staff training in general and specifically for the possibility of a hand recount (something that would be much more time-consuming and expensive in an RCV system), and accounting for possible public confusion in using a mix of voting systems—RCV for municipal elections, but plurality voting for state offices. While education costs would be lower than in Maine's statewide efforts, which cost $100,000 between the primary and general elections, they could still cost the city $5,000 to $10,000.

Worcester's RCV History

In the 1940s, a confluence of political concerns in Worcester led to the formation of a group that would become known as the Citizen's Plan E Association. In 1947, the group successfully campaigned to change the city's charter through a ballot question. Around 65 percent of Worcester voters approved the new system of governance, which included RCV as the new method of electing city councilors.

The stated goal of switching to Plan E, which also introduced the city manager form of government to Worcester, was to de-politicize local government and thereby professionalize management. Cambridge had adopted Plan E in 1940, and it had received a largely warm reception. Many of Worcester's problems at the time had been blamed on partisan politics and infighting, and the hope was that RCV would mitigate, in combination with an apolitical city manager running municipal operations, the adverse effects of the previous ward-based, party-line system of control.

The first RCV election in Worcester in 1949 attracted more than 150 candidates for 9 at-large spots on the City Council, and 36 candidates for 6 spots on the School Committee. The more than 75,000 voters who turned out is also often cited as

a record. The initial excitement died down somewhat, but the City Council still saw fields of 48, 38, 29, and 27 in the next four elections under RCV, while the School Committee drew 21, 16, 14, and 12 candidates in those same elections. Voter turnout was between 56,000 and 61,000 for the remainder of the RCV period (compared to a turnout of around 16,000 in the most recent municipal election, in 2017—see chart 5).

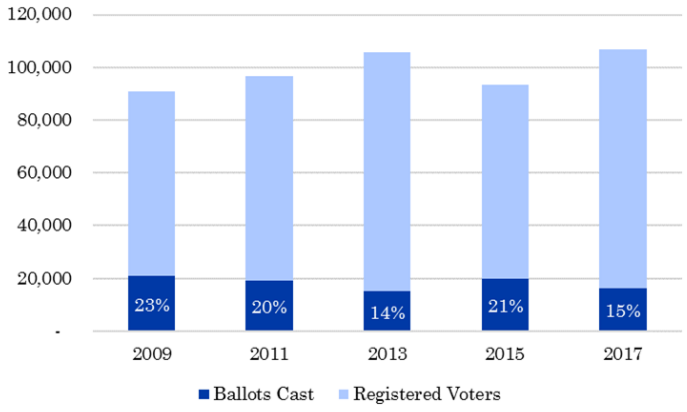
After several attempts to repeal the entire Plan E system failed, opponents of RCV and other features of Plan E—including the election of a mayor by their colleagues instead of directly by voters—succeeded in getting a referendum specifically revoking the RCV portion of Plan E on the ballot for the national election in 1960. Around 60 percent of voters elected to go back to a plurality system of voting, a system that remains in effect today.

Recommendations

A few bills have been proposed in the State Legislature that would begin the process of moving toward RCV. House Bill 719 and Senate Bill 768 would institute RCV for all state elections—state senators, state representatives, governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of the commonwealth, state treasurer and state auditor. A pair of bills, House Bill 635 and Senate Bill 1800, would allow municipalities to adopt RCV for local elections in a number of ways, including by ballot measure or charter amendment, and allows cities or towns to write their own ordinance or bylaw governing the process, within certain guidelines.

The idea of changing the method by which we elect politicians will be, naturally, politicized. The purported benefits of RCV—higher turnout, electoral diversity, increased decorum, and more powerful third parties—are not universally appreciated. Most importantly, they can even be seen as negatives by some crucial decision-makers—incumbent politicians, who gained their jobs through the current first-past-the-post election method, and for the most part, would be making it harder for themselves to win re-election in a different voting system.

Chart 5: Municipal Election Turnout in Worcester



Source: Worcester Election Commission

However, one thing that everyone should be able to agree on is that voters should be able to vote for the candidates they most want to see in office. The current plurality system rewards gaming the electoral process, both for candidates before and during the campaign, and for voters at the ballot box. Aspiring leaders should not be discouraged from running for office because of the risk of spoiling someone else's bid, and voters should not have to sacrifice idealism to choose the lesser of two evils.

The Research Bureau supports the idea that democratic elections are improved by more candidates, more voters, more civility, and more diverse points of view, and that Ranked Choice Voting is an exciting and effective way to work toward those goals. The fact that Worcester is a prime example of RCV in action is interesting, but coincidental, and more relevant endorsements come from other cities that use the system today. The Research Bureau recommends that Worcester residents and decision-makers review House Bill 635 as a way to secure local control over the municipal voting system. This would pave the way for a potential ballot measure, allowing the people of Worcester to decide if the current voting system is the best the city can do. Once informed of the research and evidence on the subject, most should agree that RCV is a more accurate system for understanding the will of the voters.

Worcester Regional Research Bureau, Inc.

The Research Bureau serves the public interest of Greater Worcester by conducting independent, non-partisan research and analysis of public policy issues to promote informed public debate and decision-making.

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