

Frequently Asked Questions

About Minneapolis' Use of Ranked Choice Voting

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1. *What is Ranked Choice Voting?*

Ranked choice voting (also called Instant Runoff Voting) is a ranked ballot method of voting in which voters can rank candidates according to their preference – 1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice, etc. This ranking of candidates allows us to combine our municipal primary and general elections in a single election so that voters have to make only one trip to the polls.

Under Ranked Choice Voting, the votes cast for a candidate who lacks the support to win can still count toward another candidate with a better chance of winning. Or, in multi-seat elections, if a candidate has more than enough votes to win, part of each vote will go to help elect additional candidates. As a result, every vote counts and very few votes are “wasted.”

2. *When did Minneapolis switch to Ranked Choice Voting?*

Minneapolis voters approved a charter amendment in 2006 by a nearly two-to-one margin (among those voting on the question) mandating the use of Ranked Choice Voting for municipal elections. The first opportunity for Minneapolis voters to use RCV is in the November 2009 elections. The date of the elections is November 3rd.

3. *Why was this change made? What was wrong with the old method?*

Under the old system for city elections voters were asked to make two trips to the polls – once in September and again in November. The problem was that very few voters turned out to vote in the September primary— fewer than half of the voters who turned out for the November 2005 city election turned out to vote in the September primary that year. Under RCV, we accomplish in one election what used to be accomplished in two, with a single election in November. This means that tax payers and candidates only have to pay for one election, voters have more choice on the ballot and the ultimate decision will be made with the greatest level of citizen participation. RCV achieves an elected body that more accurately represents voters' preferences, giving fair representation to voters in proportion to their voting strength.

Finally, RCV does away with “strategic” voting – people are free to vote for who they like most and need not fear ‘letting in’ who they like least.

4. *So, there will be no primary in September?*

That's correct. Voters will only make one trip to the polls on November 3rd and all candidates will have only one election for which to campaign.

5. *What races are on the ballot in November?*

Ranked Choice Voting will be used to elect all city officials, which occur every four years, in odd years. On November 3rd voters will elect a mayor, 13 council members, 6 Park Board District members, 3 at-large Park Board members and 2 at-large Board of Estimate and Taxation members. All of these elections are governed by the city's charter.

Voting for school board, state legislators and state and federal elected offices in even years has not changed and the primary and general election will be the same in those years. All of these elections are governed by state election law.

6. *How do I mark my ballot?*

You simply fill in the 1st choice oval next to your favorite candidate, the 2nd choice oval next to your 2nd favorite, and so on. You can rank as many or as few candidates as you like (up to three), but the more candidates you rank, the greater the chance that your vote will help to elect someone you like and prevent the election of a candidate you dislike.

7. *Do I rank more than one first choice in the at-large multi-seat races?*

No. You rank your 1st choice, 2nd choice, etc. for all races, including the 3-seat Park Board and 2-seat Board of Estimate and Taxation races. Your vote always counts for your highest ranked candidate until he or she is elected or eliminated and your vote continues to count once your favorite candidate is elected or eliminated until all the seats are filled. This helps ensure that more voters than ever are represented by someone they voted for and provides greater opportunity for more diverse representation.

8. *Why are there only 3 rankings?*

Typically a ranked ballot offers as many rankings as there are candidates and you can rank as many candidates as you wish. The ballot is limited to three rankings this year because existing machines can only read three rankings. While this is not a problem as voters typically do not rank more than three candidates, machines may be available to provide for more rankings in the next scheduled election in 2013.

9. *How are the votes counted?*

The vote counting begins by tallying first choices. In single-seat elections (Mayor, City Council and Park and Recreation Board district races), if the leading candidate has a majority of votes (50% + 1 vote), he or she wins, just as would happen in a traditional two-step (primary-general) election.

If no candidate garners a majority of votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and the votes cast for this candidate are reallocated to the remaining candidates as indicated by the 2nd choice on those voters' ballots, and the ballots are counted again. This process is repeated until one candidate receives a majority.

When there are more seats to fill in the at-large elections for the Board of Estimate and Taxation and the Park and Recreation Board, the threshold for winning is lower (depending on the number of seats). A candidate running for one of the two seats on the Board of Estimate and Taxation must attain 33 percent of the votes; a candidate running for one of the three seats on the Park and Recreation Board must attain 25 percent of the votes.

If no candidate reaches the applicable threshold after counting all first choices, then the candidate with the fewest votes is defeated and the votes cast for this candidate are redistributed to remaining candidates according to the second choice on each of those voters' ballots.

If a candidate surpasses the applicable threshold (i.e. has more votes than he or she needs to win), then the "surplus" portion of each vote for that candidate is redistributed to the voters' next choices. These votes are reallocated proportionally to each ballot's next choice. For example, if the winning threshold is 1,000 votes and a candidate gets 2,000 votes, half a vote from every ballot for that candidate is redistributed to each voter's second choice.

The process of eliminating and electing candidates and recounting the ballots continues until the right number of candidates has reached the winning threshold.

This procedure can be done manually or by using ballot scanners and computers.

10. Will new voting equipment be used?

Not for this first-time RCV election. The voting equipment and the basic form of the ballot have not changed: voters fill out paper ballots and feed them into an optical scan voting machine. For the 2009 election, these voting machines will record first choices, but are not programmed to record each ballot's set of rankings.

When you receive your ballot, you will also receive an explanation of how to use the RCV ballot. The voting machine will be programmed to notify you if you make errors on the ballot and "kick-back" the ballot to give you an opportunity to correct the error. For example, if you pick two or more candidates as a first choice, the voting machine will return the ballot and give you the opportunity to fill out a new ballot and correct the error.

The current voting equipment can tally first choices at the polling locations and winners who reach the required threshold among first choices will be reported on Election Night on a preliminary basis. The ballots will then be transported to a central counting center and be manually sorted and tallied beginning the following day. Final results will be reported following the conclusion of this process. The Minneapolis Elections Department is currently preparing for the hand count process and will provide a schedule of time estimates for the count of the various races.

New voting equipment that is capable of counting an RCV election may be in place for the next scheduled municipal election in 2013.

11. What happens if I rank only one candidate?

You are free to vote for only one candidate. However, if that candidate is less popular than the other candidates and is eliminated in the first round, you will not have a back-up candidate to count in the next round. This choice would be analogous to voting in a primary but not in the general election if your favorite candidate doesn't make it through the first election. That's why it's in your best interest to rank as many candidates as you have a favorable opinion about, rather than "bullet" voting for just your favorite candidate.

12. Indicating 2nd and 3rd choices will not count against your 1st choice; they are only considered if no candidate achieves a majority of votes (in a single-winner election) and your 1st choice has been eliminated.

In traditional multi-seat elections, voters often "bullet vote" or select only one candidate even when having the option to select more in order to increase the chances that their favorite candidate will win. Under RCV, bullet voting is not effective. Additional ranked choices will not harm your 1st choice as they are only considered if an instant runoff occurs and your 1st choice has more than enough votes to win or has been eliminated.

13. What happens if I vote for the same candidate twice?

Marking the same candidate twice doesn't help this candidate. Your ballot will count for your 1st choice as long as that candidate remains in the race. When and if that candidate doesn't continue in the next round because he or she has been eliminated or because he or she has been elected (as can happen in the multi-seat races), your vote will count for your 2nd choice, and if your second choice gets eliminated or elected, your ballot will count for your third choice, etc.

14. Can I give the same ranking to several candidates if I like them equally well?

No. If you mark an oval for more than one candidate in the 1st choice column or subsequent columns, your ballot will be invalid when that ranking is reached.

15. What happens if I skip a ranking?

You must vote for your 1st choice in the 1st choice column, 2nd choice in the 2nd choice column and 3rd choice in the 3rd choice column, if you decide to rank that many candidates. If you inadvertently skip a ranking, the next ranked candidate will be counted as your next choice. For example, if you don't mark a 1st choice, but mark a 2nd choice, your 2nd choice will count as your first choice. Or if you mark a 1st and 3rd choice, but not a 2nd choice, your 3rd choice will count as your 2nd choice.

16. Does RCV give some voters more votes than others? Does it violate the "one person – one vote" principle?

No. Every voter gets an equal vote. In every round of counting, every ballot counts as one vote for the highest-ranked candidate still in the running. If your candidate is still viable, your vote will count for your favorite candidate in the runoff round. If your candidate has been eliminated, just as in a traditional runoff election, you need to settle for one of the remaining candidates. Your vote automatically counts

for whichever continuing candidate you prefer. The mistaken impression that some voters get more votes than others was the basis for a legal challenge to RCV in Minneapolis. The Minnesota Supreme Court has ruled that RCV fully complies with the principle of “one person, one vote” giving equal weight to each voter.

17. I’ve heard that a candidate who comes in second can win. Is this true?

No. Just like a regular runoff election, the winner of an RCV election is the candidate preferred by a majority (more than half) of the voters who express their preference. In a traditional two-round election (and under RCV) it is certainly possible that a candidate who was not ahead in the first round, might turn out to be the most popular choice after the field of candidates is reduced to two (in a single-winner race). A candidate who was in first place in the first round of a traditional runoff (let’s say with 35% of the vote), might not be the majority choice. In fact, that candidate could be the least preferred choice by 65% of the voters. What matters with RCV (and traditional primary-general elections), is which candidate is preferred most among all voters once the field is reduced to two finalists, and the candidate in first place at the end is always the winner.

18. If candidates with the fewest votes are dropped first, does that mean the supporters of the weakest candidates get extra clout?

No. The supporters of the most popular candidates determine which candidates advance and which candidates are eliminated. Once the weakest candidates are eliminated, every voter has a single equal vote that can count for the final contenders. . . meaning everyone has an equal voice in deciding the election.

19. Where else is RCV used?

Ranked Choice is used in eight U.S. jurisdictions – San Francisco (CA), Burlington (VT), Takoma Park (MD), Cary and Hendersonville (NC), Cambridge (MA), Pierce County (WA) and Aspen (CO). Strong voter education has resulted in high approval ratings in these jurisdictions. Ranked Choice is also used in democracies such as Australia, Ireland, Scotland and London.

20. How will voters become educated about Ranked Choice Voting?

The City of Minneapolis is partnering with FairVote Minnesota and other community organizations to develop and implement a full-scale education program leading up to the November election.

For additional information:

- FairVote Minnesota: www.fairvotemn.org; info@fairvotemn.org; 763-807-2550
- City of Minneapolis Elections Department: <http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/elections/>; rcv@ci.minneapolis.mn.us
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