

# 2021

## Ranked Choice Voting Election Overview

### **Executive Summary for Bloomington, Minneapolis, Minnetonka, Saint Louis Park, and St. Paul**

2021 has been a historic year for Ranked Choice Voting in Minnesota. Bloomington, Minneapolis, Minnetonka, St. Louis Park, and St. Paul all used RCV for their municipal elections. Never before have we had five Minnesota cities—representing 16 percent of Minnesota voters—conducting ranked-choice elections at the same time. These elections were among the more than 30 cities across the country using RCV for local elections this year.

The 2021 municipal elections in the five metro cities greatly exceeded expectations. The elections showed the power of RCV to create a more inclusive, participatory and representative democracy. With stronger than expected voter participation, high levels of ranking among voters of all ages, ethnicities, income and education levels, and a nearly 100 percent valid ballot rate, voters demonstrated that they understood RCV, they liked it and—based on consistent exit polling interviews—they want to continue using it. These trends have become more pronounced with each consecutive election in which RCV is used.

The 2021 RCV elections demonstrated the power of giving voters more choice. In all five cities, there were diverse and deep slates of candidates that would not have been possible under the old primary-general election system. Candidates presented diversity on all levels—ethnicity, gender, age, and political beliefs. By opening up and leveling the playing field, RCV elections make it possible for more, and more diverse, candidates to run and to help shape the conversation about the future of their cities. The competition fostered engaging, rich, complex, and important conversations about key issues across all local races. And RCV demonstrated its power to not just encourage candidates with diverse backgrounds to jump in the race, but also to win. For the first time in history, a majority of Minneapolis city council members will be people of color.

### An overview of the 2021 election results reveals:

- A historic surge in turnout in Minneapolis, with 145,337 (54 percent) of voters casting a ballot in 2021—the highest for a municipal election in over 45 years—and more than 20 percent higher than 2013 and 11 percent higher than 2017, both years with competitive mayoral races with relatively high turnout compared to earlier elections without RCV. Minnetonka saw voter participation increase to a nearly historic 28 percent. In Bloomington, turnout was 26 percent, up slightly from 25 percent in the previous at-large city council election in 2017. Over 59,900 voters weighed in on the St. Paul election, a turnout of 34.6 percent.
  - The vast majority of voters ranked their ballots—73 percent in Minneapolis, 71 percent in the Minnetonka at-large B race, and roughly 70 percent in Bloomington in the citywide mayoral or at-large races. In the St. Louis Park Ward 3 race, the only race in St. Louis Park with three or more candidates, 83 percent of voters ranked their ballots. The consistently high degree of ranking indicates voters were well-educated and prepared to rank their ballots.
  - A nearly 100 percent valid ballot rate.
  - Edison Research polled voters in Bloomington and Minneapolis and, as voters have in each election cycle to date under RCV, an overwhelming share of voters—77 percent in Bloomington and 88 percent in Minneapolis—said RCV was “simple to use.”
  - Supermajorities of voters in both cities said they want to continue using RCV.
  - 87 percent of Bloomington voters and 80 percent of Minneapolis voters said they were satisfied with their candidate choices. RCV improves voter satisfaction by offering voters more choice at the ballot box.
- The election of the most racially and gender diverse Minneapolis City Council in history, where for the first time, a majority of city council members will be people of color. Council will have seven Black councilmembers, including a Somali councilmember, along with Pakistani councilmember and Latino councilmember.
  - Among the 103 total candidates running in Minneapolis this year, 33 were women and 35 were people of color.
  - The reelection of Melvin Carter, Saint Paul’s first Black mayor elected under RCV in 2017.
  - In Bloomington, more than half of the candidates were women or people of color, and voters elected a woman and the first openly gay member to the District 3 open seat on the Bloomington City Council.
  - In each of the five cities, there was also a significant range of political diversity, from very progressive to moderate to conservative candidates in races. Voters ranked candidates as second or third choices who may have differed from their primary political beliefs but who they found acceptable. The opportunity for voters to express non-binary political preferences in this way and requiring candidates to appeal to a broad majority of voters to win is important at a time of growing political polarization in Minnesota and around the country.

## The Bottom Line

The 2021 municipal elections proved once again that voters:

- Like RCV
- Understand RCV
- Want to keep using RCV

### See Highlight Summaries

- ▶ Minneapolis RCV By The Numbers
- ▶ Bloomington RCV By The Numbers

## Trends and Lessons Learned

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) is a tried and true voting method in Minnesota. It has been used in Minneapolis since 2009, in St. Paul since 2011, St. Louis Park since 2019, and in Bloomington and Minnetonka for the first time this year. With five Minnesota cities, the most ever, using ranked-choice elections this year, the 2021

RCV elections provided a wealth of data and polling about RCV, along with key trends and lessons learned.

## RCV is having a positive impact on voter turnout

By adopting RCV, these cities eliminated costly, low-turnout summer primaries, voters only had to go to the polls once, and a larger, more representative segment of the community weighed in on a more diverse slate of candidates in a single election in November. Consolidating the primary and general elections, not only saves time and money, it also increases effective voter participation.

Beyond eliminating the municipal primary, RCV has had a positive impact on voter turnout in the general election.

## Minneapolis

This year, we saw a huge surge in Minneapolis turnout due in large part to a diverse slate of candidates and robust, highly competitive campaigns, including two open seats on city council and six open seats for the independent boards, and a mayoral race in which the incumbent was challenged by a coalition of candidates supporting Ballot Question 2. Turnout was high, and races were competitive, despite eleven out of the thirteen council races featuring incumbents. None of these competitive multi-candidates races, including the mayor's race, would be possible without RCV. Under the old primary system, all but the top two candidates would have been eliminated after the primary, while others may never have run in the first place, without the leveling opportunity that RCV allows.

At a time when turnout in municipal elections nationally is typically around 15–20 percent of eligible voters, more than 145,337 voters came out to cast a ballot in Minneapolis, a turnout of 54 percent, up from 43 percent in the last election cycle, which was up 10 percentage points from the election cycle in 2013, which exceeded turnout by 13 percentage points from the cycle before that.

While the Minneapolis ballot measure on policing (City Question 2) certainly had an impact on voter turnout, the robust competition and wide array of candidate choices made possible by RCV, as well as elimination of the primary, helped drive this surge in voter participation. Indeed, there were more votes for mayor than for the ballot measure, showing that RCV and the competition it encourages were a critical factor in turnout as well. By eliminating the primary,

RCV levels the playing field, allowing more candidates and a more diverse array of candidates to jump in the race, fostering competition and allowing all sides of the political spectrum on policing and a whole host of issues to be represented and have their voices heard, without fear of spoilers or splitting the vote.

## Suburban Cities

Minnetonka, which used RCV for the first time this fall and for years had municipal general election turnout rates typically in the teens, saw voter participation increase to a nearly historic 28 percent, up from 20.5 percent in 2017 and the highest since 2001, when voter participation soared in the wake of September 11th. In Bloomington, turnout was 26 percent, up slightly from 25 percent in the previous at-large city council election in 2017.

St. Louis Park did not see increased participation, likely attributable to the lack of competition in all but the Ward 3 race, which was the only race featuring more than two candidates and decided by RCV.

Of course, effective voter participation increased for all of these five cities—including St. Louis Park—in comparing turnout before RCV was implemented since RCV eliminates the low-turnout August primary, and more voters participate in a single, decisive general election in November.

## RCV fosters greater diversity

In all five cities, there were diverse and deep slates of candidates that would not have been possible under the old primary-general election system. Simply by eliminating low-turnout, unrepresentative local primaries, a source of structural inequity, RCV encourages a broad and diverse spectrum of candidates to run and build winning coalitions. Multiple candidates appealing to the same community or similar bases of voters can run without worrying that they will split votes. And RCV demonstrated its power not just to encourage candidates of color to jump in the race, but also to win. In 2021, RCV helped re-elect St. Paul's first Black mayor. In Bloomington, more than half of the candidates were women or people of color, and voters elected a woman and the first openly gay member to the open seat on the Bloomington City Council. In Minnetonka, voters elected the second Black city council member under RCV this year. In Minneapolis, for the first time in history, a majority of Minneapolis city council members will be people of color.

Over four cycles of ranked-choice elections in Minneapolis, diversity of the candidate pool has steadily increased, and we are now seeing a city council that represents and reflects the diverse array of communities, ethnicities and backgrounds in Minneapolis, including immigrant communities, the Black community, the LGBTQIA+ community, and women. The incoming Minneapolis City Council will have seven Black councilmembers, including a Somali councilmember, along with Pakistani councilmember and Latino councilmember. Women will represent a majority of city council (7 out of 13 councilmembers), including Andrea Jenkins, a Black transgender woman who was reelected and subsequently elected council president.

In each of the five cities, there was also significant political diversity, from very progressive to moderate to conservative candidates. Voters ranked candidates as second or third choices who may have differed from their primary political beliefs but who they found acceptable. The opportunity for voters to express non-binary political preferences in this way and ensuring candidates campaigned beyond their base and built broad coalitions to win is important at a time of growing political polarization in Minnesota and around the country.

With RCV elections, candidate pools and elected leaders are becoming more reflective of the populations they serve.

## Voters understand, like and support Ranked Choice Voting

Edison Research conducted exit polling of voters in Bloomington and Minneapolis in the 2021 municipal elections, and results show that RCV continues to be popular with voters.

### Ease of Use

An impressive 88 percent of Minneapolis voters—across all incomes, ethnic groups, and ages—said that RCV was simple to use. This was an increase from 85 percent eight years ago, which was the first big test of RCV in an open mayoral race. This level of competence existed despite the fact that a large share of voters were new voters and had not used RCV previously. We believe the increased confidence and understanding is attributable to several factors that have improved over time, including more familiarity and practice with the voting process, better educated and trained candidates, greater

familiarity among reporters who are writing about RCV, and more effective voter education tools and processes.

In Bloomington, which used RCV for the first time, 77 percent of voters found RCV easy to use; this percentage is similar to the level of understanding in Saint Paul eight years ago. We expect that Bloomington voters will show a similar increase in confidence in future RCV elections.

### Voters ranked their ballots

The vast majority of voters ranked their ballots, including 73 percent in Minneapolis, 71 percent in the Minnetonka at-large B race, and roughly 70 percent in Bloomington's citywide at-large race. In the St. Louis Park Ward 3 race, the only three-way race implicating RCV, 83 percent of voters ranked their ballots. In general, the more competitive the race with three or more candidates, the more voters were likely to rank. The large number of voters ranking their ballots shows that very few voters chose to vote for only one candidate and that voters understood the power of ranking. High rates of ranking consistently occurred across competitive, multi-candidate City Council and Park Board races in Minneapolis, including wards that are highly diverse and where a large percentage of residents have lower incomes.

Voters for the second and third place finishers in the Minneapolis mayoral race ranked their ballots at an incredibly high rate—93% and 95% respectively. 88% of voters who chose someone other than the incumbent ranked their ballots. This data shows that voters are sophisticated in completing their ballot, ranking when they believe that their favorite candidate may be eliminated in the runoff and that their second and potential third choice will matter. It's not surprising to see that fewer of the incumbent's voters ranked as they anticipated he would remain viable in the final round.

Valid ballot rates in all three cities with Cast Vote Records to ascertain accuracy were near or at 100 percent—with 99.96 percent in Minneapolis, 99.99 percent in Minnetonka, and 100 percent in St. Louis Park. These valid ballot rates demonstrate high voter proficiency in using ranked-choice ballots.

## Support for RCV

The exit polling clearly showed that voters support RCV. 76 percent of Minneapolis voters like RCV and want to continue using it for municipal elections, up from 68 percent in 2013. 61 percent of Bloomington voters showed support for RCV, ten points higher than when the ballot measure passed just over a year ago. 69 percent of Minneapolis voters want to see RCV expanded statewide, up from 65 percent in 2013.

### *RCV rewards candidates who focus on the issues and build broad coalitions of support.*

The candidates who win ranked-choice elections are those who build the broadest coalitions of voter support. In most cases, the winning candidate emerges with a majority of support from initial ballots cast, and in some cases, the winning candidate will have a majority of support in ballots continuing in the final round. In the Minneapolis mayoral race, for example, Mayor Jacob Frey received 56 percent of the votes continuing in the final round, and over 49 percent of the vote among initial ballots cast. The value of RCV is that candidates must reach beyond their base for second and third choice votes and campaign towards that majority, and they do that by focusing on the issues important to voters, presenting their positive vision for the city and refraining from attacking their opponents.

### *RCV improves the tenor of campaigns, even in a divisive election cycle.*

This election year must be placed in the context of the overall political environment. While we have seen increasing polarization in American politics in recent years, we may have reached our most polarized period yet, with extreme division on the pandemic, public safety and even elections themselves. RCV combats polarization by changing the incentives for candidates who must campaign for a broad majority of voters, not just their base, and who benefit from not only first but also second choice votes. Candidates who engage in negative attacks may alienate their opponents' supporters and are less likely to earn second and later choice votes. RCV promotes civility, but ranked-choice elections are also not immune from the political ecosystem which, unfortunately, has become toxic. There have been reports, for example, [in Minnesota](#) and [across the country](#) of school board members and candidates being

attacked on a personal level in ways that are threatening and damaging to the political process. Thankfully, we did not see that level of vitriol in the Minnesota RCV elections, likely because RCV has an ameliorative effect on campaigning, even in the most competitive elections.

The Minneapolis elections were also impacted by a high-stakes ballot measure on the city's approach to public safety which likely had spillover effects on the ranked-choice elections. Ballot measures present a binary choice which, just like the plurality system, result in a more polarized electorate and more divisive campaigning. Despite rancor from the ballot measure campaigns, however, most candidates ran issue-oriented campaigns and focused on building coalitions. Those with the largest coalitions won and by and large, negative campaigning didn't work.

Moreover, meaningful progress on public safety, police reform and a whole host of issues is much more likely to result from the constructive, issue-based politics that RCV encourages than the divide-and-conquer politics that thrive in a plurality system. As noted above, RCV has encouraged and allowed a diverse field of candidates to run, which would not have been possible under the old system, and these candidates helped shape the important conversation about the future of the city.

## *Recommended Improvements*

As successful as the 2021 RCV elections were, there's still work to be done. We recommend improvements and education in three key areas:

### **Improved ballot design and tabulation capability, including:**

- More efficient and user-friendly ballot design with more available rankings. Minneapolis, St. Louis Park, and Minnetonka should adopt the six ranking requirement used in St. Paul and Bloomington;
- A ballot design and flexible design rules for cities with even-year municipal elections;
- Certified RCV tabulation software that provides accurate, transparent and instant results.
- Most RCV cities in Hennepin County use the tried and tested spreadsheet method which allows results to be reported the very next day, even when tabulation is required. Bloomington chose to use the hand count tabulation process over the spreadsheet method to ensure that voters could see how the tabulation process works. Both methods are smooth,

transparent and fully accurate but the hand count did cause a brief delay in reporting. In the future, Bloomington may use the spreadsheet method which will ensure faster results. The best solution would be for the state to adopt certified RCV tabulation software that can be used by all municipalities.

#### Additional education in the following areas:

- The use of RCV in multi-seat elections like the Minneapolis Park Board at-large race. We saw increased interest in the park board race this year because it was an open race, highly competitive, and yet voters are less familiar with multi-seat elections because park board races do not typically receive a lot of attention. As such, there was higher than usual demand for information about how RCV works in multi-seat races, and we recommend more education on this topic next cycle.
- Earlier and more frequent candidate training sessions would help ensure campaigns use effective ranked-choice campaign strategies from the start of and throughout their campaigns.
- Ongoing education should be done as there are always new voters and campaigns each cycle to ensure all voting communities rank their ballots. Any encouragement of voting for just a single candidate is harmful to candidates and voters alike, and it's important to address it before each election cycle.
- Ongoing education is also needed to promote greater use of ranking among endorsing organizations, including media and Independent Expenditure groups.

## The 2021 Rank Your Vote Education Campaign

In 2021, we embarked on an ambitious education campaign to ensure all voters were prepared to rank their ballots, that all campaigns were prepared to run effective coalition-building campaigns, and that the media and city officials received accurate information about ranked-choice elections.

### Educating Voters

We know that the more voters hear about RCV, the more they understand it, like it, and are more likely to rank their ballots. We repeatedly told voters at community events, on social media, at the doors and over the phone to rank their ballot. That message resonated with voters: 73 percent of Minneapolis voters, 71 percent of Minnetonka, and roughly 70 percent of

Bloomington voters ranked their ballots. Moreover, 88 percent of Minneapolis voters and 77 percent of Bloomington voters found RCV easy to use. This polling underscores that our voter education efforts worked.

### Educating Campaigns

We held two multi-day training sessions for candidates. You can see Day 1 highlights [here](#), and Day 2 [here](#). Our training focused on how to build a large core base of supporters, and then ask for second and third choice support. Nearly all candidates had strategies that included reaching voters for second and third choice support and the high percentage of voters ranking reflected their strong efforts.

### RankYourVote.org Website

The FairVote Minnesota RankYourVote.org website was the go-to site for information about the 2021 Ranked Choice Voting elections, candidates running for office, and tips and tools for voters, candidates, the media and the general public.

#### Our RCV education efforts also included the following:

- Emailing all candidates running in ranked-choice elections in the five cities to provide them a [Candidate Tip Sheet](#) and other RCV education;
- Providing an [educational statement](#) on RCV for the introduction of candidate forums in all five cities;
- Phone banking and door knocking to provide voter education;
- Conducting voter outreach and education at events and community locations throughout the five cities;
- Launching a Rank Your Vote Day of Action with FVMN volunteers and staff on Saturday Oct. 30 to canvass and educate voters;
- Providing outreach at the polls on Election Day in Bloomington, Minneapolis, and Minnetonka for a last touch of voter education;
- Educating Somali and Latino voters through social media, tv and radio;
- Educating voters in Bloomington and Minneapolis through digital videos and other ads;
- Participating in Facebook Live and other virtual events with community partners to educate voters;
- Updating our educational [RankYourVote.org](#) website;
- Participating in media interviews to educate

voters and the public about RCV and the upcoming ranked-choice elections, including segments on [KSTP](#) and [KARE11](#);

- Providing updates to the media and other interested parties in [three RCV media memos](#) leading up to the election;
- Submitting and helping volunteers to submit LTEs across the five cities encouraging voters to rank their ballots and providing RCV education;
- Conducting video exit polls with voters on Election Day in Bloomington, Minneapolis and Minnetonka to gather information on voter experience with RCV;
- Creating, producing and sharing voter education videos for [Bloomington](#), [Minneapolis](#) and [Minnetonka](#), including a [Somali version](#) for voters in Minneapolis.

## Our Team

The success of our education efforts was made possible by our #RankYourVote staff team and hundreds of volunteers.

Jeanne Massey, *Executive Director*  
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Grace Ramsey, *Strategy Consultant*  
New Publica, *Latinx and Somali Media Consultant*  
Hukun Dabar, *Afro American Development Association, Somali Outreach*  
FairVote Minnesota Board  
115 volunteers who contributed a combined 510 hours!

## Conclusion

Election data and polling from the 2021 RCV municipal elections further demonstrate that RCV works. It fosters healthy competition; enables participation from more—and more diverse—candidates that represent more constituents, which in turn encourages more voters to turnout; punishes attack campaigning; and eliminates the anti-democratic specters of spoilers and wasted votes. In a ranked-choice election, candidates are motivated to reach out for second and third choice votes, and voters express their preferences by ranking their ballots. This process gives the winner a stronger mandate with which to govern and holds the winner accountable to a much broader constituency.

Ranked Choice Voting has proven to be an easy, fair and preferred method of choosing leaders by a broad swath of the Twin Cities' electorate, and cities across the state would like to have the ability to use it for their local elections as well. We will continue our efforts to educate voters across the state to help bring RCV to voters statewide.

