

The Boulder County Voter



League of Women Voters of Boulder County * *Article Reprint*

RCV: Two Better Ways to Vote

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RCV. RCV. Everywhere you go in the voting reform world, you hear about RCV.

What the heck is Ranked Choice Voting (RCV)? Good question! To start with, RCV refers to a voting method (or two).

Vote for one option

- Joe Smith
- John Citizen
- Jane Doe
- Fred Rubble

The voting method used in most US elections is a form of plurality voting, where you vote for as many candidates as are to be elected - 1 for a single-winner contest, n for an n -winner contest. Plurality voting restricts a voter's expressiveness, often encouraging people to vote for the "lesser of two evils" in order not to "split the vote."

In ranked voting methods such as RCV, the voter can express an opinion about multiple candidates, limited only by the number of rankings allowed on the ballot. In Minneapolis voters are limited to 3 rankings. In Cambridge, MA, the number of rankings equals the number of candidates - 26 in the 2017 city council election! Voters give different rankings to different candidates starting with 1 for the first choice, 2 for the second choice and so on.

"Ranked Choice Voting" (RCV) is the language advocated by FairVote, a 501(c)(3) organization that promotes various electoral reforms with a primary focus on adopting RCV for use in elections.

The directions for voters on RCV ballots for a single-winner contest (such as governor) and a multi-winner contest (such as elect-5-to-city-council) are exactly the same. If people describing RCV stopped at this point, there wouldn't be much confusion with the term RCV.

Ranked Choice Voting Example

To vote, RANK the desserts in order of preference.

Fill in the box in the 1st-choice column which is in the row of your preferred dessert.

You may also rank the other dessert candidates in order of preference.

Fill in no more than one box per candidate (row) or per ranking (column).

	1 st choice	2 nd choice	3 rd choice	4 th choice
brownie	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
banana split	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
sugar cookie	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
lemon bar	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Note: This could be a ballot for a single-winner (IRV) contest or a multi-winner (STV) contest.

The problem arises when people talk about tallying the results, *which we naturally want to do*. We wouldn't want to hold an election and not learn the results! How the results are tallied is an important part of a voting method.

Single-winner RCV = Instant-Runoff Voting (IRV)

Instant-runoff voting (IRV) is the best-known version of RCV. It was used in Maine's recent primary to choose party nominees for governor and a few other elected positions. If only two candidates competed in a single-winner contest, plurality was used rather than IRV.

How an IRV winner is determined: If a candidate receives a majority of 1st-choice votes, that candidate wins. Otherwise, the candidate with the fewest 1st-choice votes is eliminated. If your first choice gets eliminated, your vote will be transferred to your next-higher choice that has not yet been eliminated. The elimination-and-transfer-to-next-ranking process continues in sequential rounds until one candidate remains and is declared the winner.

If all the choices on a ballot have been eliminated, we call the ballot an exhausted or non-transferable ballot. In the 2017 Minneapolis mayoral contest with 16 candidates but only 3 rankings allowed, over 20% of the ballots were exhausted by the time a winner was declared. Preferably, by the time there are two candidates remaining, one candidate has a majority of votes from the valid ballots cast, but sometimes the winning candidate only has a majority of the non-exhausted ballots, as in the 2017 Minneapolis mayoral contest.

IRV provides voters with more expressiveness but, since the winner is based on a majority of votes, minority parties or voices rarely achieve representation. Single-winner voting methods - not only IRV - tend to maintain the two-party lock on our political system.

Multi-winner RCV = Single Transferable Vote (STV)

The multi-winner version of RCV has the same added expressiveness as the single-winner version. Single transferable vote (STV) has been used in 25 US cities, including Cambridge since 1941 where it is called PR for proportional representation. The city of Boulder used STV from 1917 to 1947.

Voters in Minneapolis elect three Parks and Rec Board commissioners using STV. A candidate who receives just over ¼ of the vote wins a seat. For example, with 80,000 valid ballots, the quota to win a seat is 20,001 votes, much less than a majority.

The emphasis on the quota is a big feature of STV. If a candidate receives more votes than the quota, the surplus is transferred to the next-higher choices on the surplus ballots. There are different ways to do this transfer: this article won't discuss those options. If not enough candidates make quota with 1st-choice votes to fill all the seats, then the following cycle continues until the number of candidates remaining equals the number of seats: 1) transferring the surplus, 2) eliminating the candidate with the lowest vote total and transferring the votes on those ballots to the next-higher choice that has not been eliminated.

Under current plurality forms of voting, just over 50% of the electorate voting as a block can elect their preferred slate of candidates, preventing minority voices on a multi-member board. Alternatively, STV promotes proportional representation because a candidate can win with a fraction of the votes. The more

seats to be filled in the contest, the smaller the fraction of the vote needed to win a seat and the more chance that the elected board will be proportionally representative of the electorate.

House Resolution 3057 – The Fair Representation Act

Most efforts to adopt RCV focus on IRV, the single-winner version, but there is an effort at the national level to pass the Fair Representation Act (FRA) which would change the way we elect members of the US House of Representatives. FRA proposes using IRV for states with only one congressional representative and using STV with multi-member districts for states with two or more representatives. If FRA were applied to Colorado today, we would have two multi-member districts, one with 4 congressional representatives and the other with 3 representatives. FRA is a possible solution to gerrymandered districts! Consider asking your member of Congress to support FRA or, better yet, to co-sponsor FRA.

Confusion in the Media

Recently, as the media have tried to explain FRA, they insufficiently or incorrectly explain the tallying process, e.g., *The Economist*, July 14-20, and David Brooks, *NY Times*, June 1. As a League with a strong position on voting methods, it behooves us to get the details right, but keeping track of all the details of RCV is probably more than a regular Leaguer should be expected to do.

The main points for Leaguers to keep in mind are

1. The tallying of single-winner RCV (aka IRV) is different from that of multi-winner RCV (aka STV).
2. Multi-winner RCV promotes proportional representation and single-winner RCV does not.
3. Direct people to the Voting Methods Team webpage or to a Voting Methods Team member for more information.

RCV advocates across Colorado are pursuing citizen initiatives and referenda for municipalities to adopt RCV – primarily (or entirely?) IRV. As you engage in discussions on this topic, find out more about these efforts. In addition to more expressiveness via ranking candidates, would the advocates consider promoting proportional representation via STV for multi-member councils? Both IRV and STV are allowed in municipalities under Colorado House Bill 2008-1378.

Voting reform is a hot topic now and for the foreseeable future. The League is well positioned and has the expertise to be influential in voting reform efforts.

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