

Ranked Choice Voting in Action in 2017 and 2018

Ranked choice voting(RCV) is accelerating in adoption and use. The jurisdictions holding major elections with RCV in 2017 and 2018 were:

- Minneapolis (MN),
- St. Paul (MN),
- Cambridge (MA),
- Takoma Park (MD),
- Santa Fe (NM),
- San Francisco (CA),
- Oakland (CA),
- Berkeley (CA),
- San Leandro (CA), and
- Maine

These elections had demonstrated high turnout, few ballot errors, and effective and inexpensive election administration. As election officials and candidates come to better understand RCV, we are seeing how it consistently results in better elections.

Consider the RCV elections in 2018. In March, Santa Fe held its first RCV elections, including an open contest for mayor. In June, San Francisco held a hotly contested special election for mayor, the first open mayoral contest in the city conducted with RCV. It then joined the other three Bay Area cities in conducting RCV general elections in November. All had surpassed turnout projections with low error rates.

The biggest RCV story of 2018 was its first use in statewide partisan primaries and general congressional elections in Maine. Maine's Democratic primary for governor attracted seven candidates, all of whom ran strong RCV campaigns. Janet Mills led in first choices with just over 33 percent of the

vote and increased her lead each round to ultimately win with 54 percent of the final

round vote. Maine voters also voted to keep RCV for future elections by a higher margin than the initial 2016 adoption.

In the general election, the U.S. Senate elections and both congressional elections allowed candidates at least four rankings; turnout was up, and "blank votes" in these races were sharply down. Maine's 2nd Congressional District drew the most money of any congressional race in the nation. Considered a bellwether for the House as a whole, the first-round results showed a very close contest between incumbent Republican Bruce Poliquin and challenger Democrat Jared Golden, with two independents earning a total of eight percent of the first-round vote. Although Poliquin narrowly led in the first round, the independent voters favored Golden, who won a slim but decisive majority in the final round. Poliquin filed a lawsuit to stop the count before it could be finished, but was rebuffed by a federal district court judge who reaffirmed the decision of the people of Maine to use RCV. (Note: a prior decision in Maine state court limited general election use of RCV to federal congressional races.)

Turnout Surpasses Expectations

2017 established the pattern of high turnout, with Minneapolis and St. Paul both seeing higher turnout in their mayoral elections than any recorded in the last 20 years. In 2018, it became even more apparent, with turnout in San Francisco reaching 52.6 percent in a special election for mayor that

coincided with the state and federal primaries, far surpassing the state average of 38 percent. Over 6,000 more San Francisco voters voted in the mayoral election than in the top-of-the-ballot gubernatorial primary and over 13,000 more than in the U.S. Senate primary.

Maine's Democratic primary saw more votes cast than any prior Democratic primary election in Maine history. Turnout exceeded 60 percent of registered voters, higher than that of the 2014 or 2010 midterm elections. Far fewer voters skipped the RCV races for U.S. Representative and Senator in 2018 than in 2016 or 2014 as well: the median number of undervotes in those contests in 2014 and 2016 was more than 5,000 more votes than in 2018.

Effective use of rankings

When given the opportunity to rank their choices, most voters do. In Santa Fe, 65 percent of voters ranked all five candidates on the ballot for mayor. In San Francisco's special election, nearly 70 percent of voters used all three rankings (the San Francisco ballot limited voters to three rankings). In Maine's Democratic gubernatorial primary, 86 percent of voters ranked two or more candidates, and more than three times as many voters ranked six candidates than ranked only one. Fewer chose to rank in the general election for Maine's 2nd District, as expected in a partisan election between a Democratic and Republican frontrunner, but 97 percent of voters ranked one of the two finalists on their ballot, meaning very few ballots were "exhausted" during the count.

Error rates in RCV races have consistently been low. No RCV election in the United

States has had a greater than 1 percent invalidating error rate since 2010, and those low rates are generally declining. In Maine's 2nd District, 99.8 percent of voters cast valid ballots, a number generally consistent with error rates from other jurisdictions.

Vote-for-one elections can sometimes have much higher error rates than RCV. In general, error rates are more likely to increase with larger number of candidates, not due to RCV, which San Francisco's special election in June shows. In San Francisco's mayoral contest, only 0.2 percent of ballots were invalidated due to an overvote. On the other hand, the same San Francisco voters had a 0.5 percent overvote rate in the state's senatorial single-choice primary and a 2 percent overvote rate in the gubernatorial single-choice primary.

Smooth election administration

Two places implemented RCV in 2018 for the very first time - Santa Fe and Maine. Both conducted successful RCV elections with few issues. Maine's story of effective implementation is particularly notable. Statewide implementation in Maine imposes logistical and administrative requirements that make election administration difficult under any system, and the state legislature failed to appropriate any additional funds for RCV implementation, despite requests from the Secretary of State for them to do so.

Even so, a Bangor Daily News exit survey showed that 74 percent found ranking choices somewhat or very easy, and less than 10 percent at all hard. Over 60 percent of voters wanted to keep or expand use of RCV. While state law and practice delayed results, the count went smoothly.