

Has ranked-choice voting lived up to expectations?

St. Paul group requests a referendum on its possible repeal

By KEVIN DRISCOLL

Ranked-choice voting (RCV) has been used in three St. Paul city elections since it was approved by voters in 2009. And according to St. Paul Votes Smarter, it has not lived up to expectations. The ad hoc group is now pushing for a return to the traditional method of holding a primary and general election. It is lobbying the St. Paul Charter Commission to hold a referendum in November asking voters whether or not the city should repeal RCV.

The Charter Commission's Charter Review Committee discussed the referendum request on February 27, but tabled the matter while it sought more information. The committee will consider the matter again at its meeting on March 27.

Shawn Towle, executive director of St. Paul Votes Smarter, a West Side resident and publisher of the online political magazine *Checks & Balances*, believes that if given the chance, St. Paul voters will repeal RCV because it has "never reached its promised goals. Also, the 2009 referendum was tainted because (RCV advocate) Better Ballot St. Paul put out false information and was fined for it."

The Better Ballot group claimed in campaign literature that the Minnesota DFL, the Minnesota and St. Paul chapters of the League of Women Voters, President Barack Obama, U.S. Senator John McCain and Green Party activists Ralph Nader and Cynthia McKinney had all endorsed the adoption of RCV in St. Paul. However, all of those claims were made without getting the written permission of those entities, a violation of state campaign law.

Ellen Brown of Better Ballot St. Paul acknowledged that the group paid a \$5,000 fine for distributing an inaccurate campaign flyer. However, she added, "the same court disagreed that the election was tainted and it let the results of the referendum stand."

RCV was approved in 2009 by a vote of 17,083 to 15,486, or 52.5 to 47.5 percent. However, the mayoral race that year between first-term incumbent Chris Coleman and challenger Eva Ng drew just 21.6 percent of registered voters, and only 20.4 percent cast a vote in the RCV referendum.

RCV eliminates the need for a primary election. All candidates automatically advance to the general election where voters are asked to rank them in their order of preference. Only the voters' first choice is counted in the first round of balloting. If nobody receives a majority of votes in the first round, the candidate with the fewest first-choice votes is eliminated and the ballots that chose that candidate first

- Follow these Ranked Voting instructions carefully:**
- Select only one candidate for each of your choices
 - You are not required to choose more than one candidate
 - Do not select the same candidate for more than one choice
 - To vote, completely fill in the oval next to the candidate of your choice, like this: ●

CITY OFFICES			
COUNCIL MEMBER WARD 2 VOTE FOR ONE			
1st choice	2nd choice (if any)	3rd choice (if any)	
Select one	Select one	Select one	
<input type="radio"/> REBECCA NOECKER	<input type="radio"/> REBECCA NOECKER	<input type="radio"/> REBECCA NOECKER	
<input type="radio"/> DARREN TOBOLT	<input type="radio"/> DARREN TOBOLT	<input type="radio"/> DARREN TOBOLT	
<input type="radio"/> BILL HOSKO	<input type="radio"/> BILL HOSKO	<input type="radio"/> BILL HOSKO	
<input type="radio"/> PAT FEARING	<input type="radio"/> PAT FEARING	<input type="radio"/> PAT FEARING	
<input type="radio"/> MICHAEL C. JOHNSON	<input type="radio"/> MICHAEL C. JOHNSON	<input type="radio"/> MICHAEL C. JOHNSON	
<input type="radio"/> SHARON ANDERSON	<input type="radio"/> SHARON ANDERSON	<input type="radio"/> SHARON ANDERSON	
<small>WRITE IN, IF ANY</small>			
4th choice (if any)	5th choice (if any)	6th choice (if any)	
Select one	Select one	Select one	
<input type="radio"/> REBECCA NOECKER	<input type="radio"/> REBECCA NOECKER	<input type="radio"/> REBECCA NOECKER	
<input type="radio"/> DARREN TOBOLT	<input type="radio"/> DARREN TOBOLT	<input type="radio"/> DARREN TOBOLT	
<input type="radio"/> BILL HOSKO	<input type="radio"/> BILL HOSKO	<input type="radio"/> BILL HOSKO	
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<input type="radio"/> SHARON ANDERSON	<input type="radio"/> SHARON ANDERSON	<input type="radio"/> SHARON ANDERSON	
<small>WRITE IN, IF ANY</small>			

Ranked-choice voting was used in 2015 in the race for the open seat on the St. Paul City Council in Ward 2, an election that attracted six candidates and 24.4 percent of registered voters, up from 17 percent of registered voters in the general election in 2007, which featured the top two vote-getters in the primary election held earlier that fall.

are then recounted for their second choice. That process continues until a candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote or there are just two candidates remaining.

Voter turnout in primary elections in St. Paul was low in the years prior to RCV, and that left just two candidates in the general election where voter turnout is generally higher. RCV was touted as a way to increase voter participation with more candidates on the ballot in November and with less negative campaigning since candidates might not want to offend voters who could select them as their second choice.

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DFL activist Roy Magnuson questioned whether RCV has made political campaigns more positive. With RCV, "the candidates campaign to the middle," he said. "When candidates blend their stances on issues, that confuses voters, especially immigrants. In the primary system, candidates are much better defined." And despite all of the promises of RCV, "voter turnout has not been significantly affected," Magnuson said.

"Any voting system that you need to have explained to you...is inherently unfair," said Chuck Repke, a member of the Charter Commission who was speaking as a private citizen. According to Repke, RCV has not only failed

to increase voter participation, it has served to decrease it when so many voters fail to indicate a second, third or fourth choice and their ballots become inactive in the second, third, fourth or fifth round of counting.

"If you look at the results of any RCV runoff," Repke said, "you'll find that anywhere between 25 and 50 percent of the voters who are in the pool to have their vote reassigned to their subsequent choice end up with their ballot being discarded" because they did not make that subsequent choice.

Ramsey County elections manager Joe Mansky confirmed that voter turnout in the city's RCV elections in 2011, 2013 and 2015 was not significantly higher than in previous general elections under the traditional voting system.

The St. Paul mayor's election in 2013, with four candidates on the RCV ballot, drew just 19.4 percent of registered voters, compared to 21.6 percent under the traditional voting system in 2009. Even in those City Council elections where multiple candidates appeared on an RCV ballot, voter turnout was relatively low.

Consider the experience in Ward 1. In the City Council election in 2007 when just two

candidates were on the traditional general election ballot, voter turnout was 22 percent. In 2011, with four candidates on the RCV ballot, turnout was 12 percent. In a 2013 special election, with seven candidates on the RCV ballot, turnout was 17 percent. And in 2015, with two candidates on the RCV ballot, turnout was 11 percent.

In Ward 2, voter turnout under RCV has been mixed: In 2011, with five candidates on the RCV ballot, voter turnout was 17 percent, the same as it was under the traditional voting system in 2007. However, in 2015, with six candidates on the RCV ballot, voter turnout was 24.4 percent.

Voter turnout is affected by how competitive the race is for a particular seat, according to Brown. "But if you think of (a low-turnout) primary as the first round of ranked-choice voting, you'll see that voter participation is much higher under RCV," she said.

Former City Council candidate Bill Hosko, who lost to Dave Thune in an RCV election in Ward 2 in 2011, opposes RCV. "Most people still don't understand it," he said, "and those who do want it repealed. RCV hasn't significantly increased voter participation, and it hasn't made it more difficult for incumbents to retain their seats. At the same time, it has allowed people to pay the candidate filing fee and then not campaign but still take votes away from active candidates."

Five of the seven members of St. Paul's City Council sent a letter to the Charter Commission earlier this winter asking the commission to honor the 2009 referendum and not put a possible repeal of RCV on the ballot. Council members Dai Thao, Rebecca Noecker, Russ Stark, Amy Brendmoen and Jane Prince stated in the letter that RCV discourages attack-style politics and encourages positive campaigns focused on the issues and on building coalitions.

Far from being confusing, RCV removes many of the barriers immigrants face in voting by consolidating the election on a single day, allowing voters to select their candidate from the entire field.

Thao disagreed with Magnuson's and Repke's assertion that RCV is confusing for immigrants. Far from being confusing, said Thao, who is an immigrant, RCV "removes many of the barriers immigrants face in voting by consolidating the election on a single day and allowing voters to select their preferred candidate from the entire field."

"In a city (like St. Paul dominated by a single political party), RCV prevents a low-turnout primary from effectively deciding the race months before the general election," Thao said.

"It was a democratic referendum in 2009," said Noecker, who like Thao was elected to the City Council after multiple rounds of RCV counting. "And with an open seat and a competitive race for mayor, 2017 will be a good year to watch how RCV performs."

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