



MEMORANDUM

November 20, 2023

To: Media and Other Interested Parties
From: Jeanne Massey and Erin Zamoff, FairVote Minnesota
Re: RCV Victory in Minnetonka & the Impact of Ranked-Choice Elections in Minnesota Cities

2023 Ranked Choice Voting Elections in Minnesota: Bloomington, Minneapolis, Minnetonka, St. Louis Park and St. Paul

Summary

This fall, Bloomington, Minneapolis, Minnetonka, St. Louis Park, and St. Paul all used ranked choice voting for their municipal elections and were among 21 cities in seven states using ranked choice voting across the country. Minnetonka voters also considered a City Charter amendment to repeal ranked choice voting (RCV), and [conclusively rejected that repeal, voting to save RCV by a margin of 59 percent to 41 percent.](#)

The 2023 municipal elections in Minnesota once again demonstrated the success of ranked choice voting (RCV). Voters were able to express their preferences across multiple candidates, voter turnout increased overall compared to similar elections prior to implementing RCV, the cities saved the cost of holding a city primary where only a small percentage of voters participated, and **RCV continued to demonstrate its ability to accelerate representation of women and people of color in elected office.** Under RCV, St. Louis Park elected Nadia Mohamed, the first Somali American mayor in the United States; St. Paul elected the first all women city council, the majority of which are women of color; Minnetonka elected its first all women city council (excepting the mayor who was not on the ballot); and Minneapolis continued its progress toward greater diversity where nine out of thirteen council members will be people of color, and once again, a majority will be women. These results are [consistent with other jurisdictions that have implemented RCV.](#)

RCV gives greater opportunity to women and BIPOC communities by opening the process to more candidates and new voices, incentivizing positive campaigns based on the issues, and eliminating the risk of vote-splitting between candidates with similar platforms or from the same community. It also eliminates the low-turnout and unrepresentative local primary that is a barrier to new voices in general and for underrepresented communities in particular. Since local

elections are a significant pipeline to state elected office, local voting systems can have a significant impact on the diversity and representation in our state legislative bodies as well.

While there were no exit polls of voters on RCV this year, we had an even better representation of voter attitudes towards RCV—a ballot measure in Minnetonka on whether to keep it. Minnetonka voters rejected repeal and voted in favor of RCV by a whopping 59 percent to 41 percent, an even bigger margin than when they first adopted it. [The vote to save RCV won every precinct.](#)

This memorandum will summarize the results of the 2023 RCV elections in Minnesota and highlight the impact and benefits of this voting system. We will continue to examine the election data to assess potential improvements needed to make the timing of results more efficient and the process even simpler for voters.

Overview of the 2023 RCV election results:

- There were a total of 103 candidates running for 34 seats across the five cities.
- All five cities showed strong voter participation.
 - In **Bloomington**, turnout was 36 percent, the highest-turnout city election in two decades.
 - While this was an unusual election in **Minneapolis**—the only time the city had elections for city council without the higher profile mayor's race on the ballot—voter turnout was a strong 32 percent, almost as high as the 33 percent turnout for the competitive mayoral race in 2013.
 - **Minnetonka** saw voter participation increase once again to a nearly historic 32 percent, more than double the turnout compared to similar cycles, and even exceeded the high turnout in the 2021 mayoral race using RCV.
 - In **St. Louis Park** voter turnout increased by more than four percent—from 19.9 to 24.2 percent—over 2019, the last similar election with the Mayor and both at-large council seats on the ballot. And turnout in 2019, the first election under RCV with a competitive at-large race, was 50 percent higher than in 2015 before RCV was implemented.
 - With several competitive elections in **St. Paul**, turnout remained high at 30.3 percent, nearly reaching the historic turnout level of 33 percent in 2019.
- With RCV, all five cities eliminated a high-cost, low-turnout city primary and consolidated two rounds of voting into one cost-effective election when turnout is higher and more representative of the community. This automatically increases effective voter participation and removes a barrier for candidates to run.
- In the 10 races that went to an instant runoff, eight resulted in winners with more than or close to 50 percent of initial ballots cast, demonstrating that most voters ranked their ballots, and in all of those races, the winning candidates earned a majority of the ballots continuing in the final round.
- A nearly 100 percent valid ballot rate.
- Diverse candidates running and winning in all five RCV cities:

- Of the total 34 RCV races across the five cities, 18 were won by BIPOC candidates and 31 were won by women, of which 14 were BIPOC candidates.
- Of the 10 races that went to an RCV runoff, eight were won by women and six by BIPOC candidates. Minneapolis Council Member Andrea Jenkins won with second choice votes, placing second in the initial round.
- In Bloomington, two additional people of color were elected to the city council, making half of the council people of color.
- In Minneapolis, the city council will have eight women and nine people of color.
- In Minnetonka, other than the mayor who was not on the ballot this year, all other members of city council will be women—for the first time in the city's history.
- St. Louis Park elected Nadia Mohamed, the first Somali American mayor in the U.S.
- In St. Paul, the city elected the first all-woman city council in St. Paul's history. It would also be the most racially diverse city council in city history, representative of the city's changing demographics.

Timing of ranked-choice election results

For all cities in races where a candidate reached a majority with first-choice votes on Election Day, officials announced those candidates as unofficial winners on election night. This was the case with 24 out of the total 34 city races using ranked choice voting. This timing is no different than any other election.

Races where no candidate reached a majority on Election Day, however, require additional rounds of counting. Since automated software used in other states has not yet been approved for Minnesota, each city used a manual tabulation process. Cities in Hennepin County that use RCV—Bloomington, Minneapolis, St. Louis Park, and Minnetonka—use the same process that Minneapolis and St. Louis Park have used for several election cycles, a spreadsheet-assisted manual tabulation using the cast vote record (a record of all voters' rankings). In contrast, St. Paul, which has different voting equipment and cannot produce a similarly styled cast vote record, conducted a hand count of the ballots as it has traditionally done, and that counting took place on Friday, November 10 for Wards 1 and 7 and Monday, November 13 for Ward 3.

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 Bloomington and Minnetonka since 2021. With five Minnesota cities using ranked-choice elections, the 2023 RCV elections provide a wealth of data about RCV and demonstrate the positive impact of this voting system.

RCV is having a positive impact on voter turnout

We are seeing the positive impact that competitive, multiple-candidate races—which RCV fosters—can have on voter turnout. When more candidates engage with more voters, and voters believe that their vote matters in determining the outcome, they engage at higher rates. At a time when turnout in municipal elections nationally is typically around 15-20 percent of eligible voters, most of Minnesota’s RCV cities had a turnout at 30 percent or higher, as outlined above.

Further, 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.

RCV fosters greater diversity

The 2023 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**. 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. 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 help shape the conversation about the future of their cities. And RCV demonstrated its power to not just encourage candidates with diverse backgrounds to jump in the race, but also to win.

In St. Louis Park, RCV helped elect Nadia Mohamed, the city’s first Black mayor and also the first Somali American mayor in the United States. Mohamed was first elected to the St. Louis Park City Council under RCV in 2019, and this year was elected mayor. While the mayor’s race in St. Louis Park did not require an instant runoff, her candidacy for city council under RCV and subsequent council experience paved the way for this historic win.

In Bloomington, almost half of the candidates were women or people of color, and voters elected two additional people of color to the city council, making half of the council people of color. In Minnetonka, voters re-elected Kissy Coakley, the city’s first Black city council member, and for the first time in history, all council members will be women, with the exception of the Mayor, who was not on the ballot this year. Minneapolis continued its progress toward greater diversity where nine out of thirteen council members will be people of color, and once again, a majority of city council members will be women.

St. Paul will have its first all-woman city council in the city's history, with women of color making up the majority.

Over several cycles of ranked-choice elections in Minneapolis and St. Paul, the diversity of the candidate pool has steadily increased, and we are now seeing city councils that represent and reflect the diverse array of communities, ethnicities and backgrounds in the Twin Cities, including immigrant communities, the Black community, the LGBTQIA+ community, and women.

In each of the five cities, there was also significant political diversity. Voters ranked candidates as second or third choices who may have differed from their primary political beliefs but who they found acceptable. RCV gives voters the opportunity to express more nuanced political preferences, while at the same time encourages candidates to reach out to more voters and have more fulsome conversations about the issues. The most successful RCV candidates will have reached out to the voters across their district to have those conversations, seeking not only first choice but also second and later choice support.

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

Voters understand and like Ranked Choice Voting

The 2023 municipal elections in the five metro cities showed the power of RCV to create a more inclusive, participatory and representative democracy. With strong voter participation, high levels of ranking and a nearly 100 percent valid ballot rate, voters demonstrated that they understood ranked choice voting. [Prior exit polls of Minnesota voters using RCV consistently show that voters like RCV and find it easy to use](#). While there were no exit polls on ranked choice voting this year, we had something even better—a ballot measure vote on RCV. Minnetonka voters resoundingly rejected a City Charter amendment to repeal ranked choice voting by a [vote of 59 percent to 41 percent](#), and for the second time in three years, Minnetonka voted in favor of ranked choice voting for its municipal elections, this time by an even bigger margin.

Voters ranked their ballots

While we are still analyzing cast vote records, it is clear from the results that most voters in most of the races ranked their ballots, resulting in RCV winners with more than or close to 50 percent of the initial ballots cast. Winners in ranked-choice elections will always have a majority of ballots continuing in the final round, but not always a majority of initial ballots cast. This is because some voters choose not to rank their ballot, which, in some cases, means their ballot will not have any candidates remaining in the final round. Of the 10 races that went to an RCV runoff, six resulted in winners with a majority of all ballots cast and two with more than 48 percent of all ballots cast. These results demonstrate that voters ranked their ballots and had their second or additional choices counted in the runoff or reallocation process.

In general, the more competitive the race with three or more candidates, the more voters were likely to rank. High rates of ranking consistently occurred across competitive, multi-candidate races, including socio-economically and multiculturally diverse wards. For example, in Ward 1 in St. Paul, Anika Bowie won with 50.7 percent of all ballots cast (63.5 percent of ballots continuing in the final round), with 70 percent of ballots for the eliminated candidates counting for one of the two candidates in the final round.

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 emerged with a majority of support outright, which occurred in 24 out of the 34 races this year. Of the 10 races that went to an RCV runoff and required additional rounds of counting, eight candidates finished with a majority or near majority of initial ballots cast; all finished with a majority of ballots continuing in the final round.

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. 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. While we have seen a trend of growing civility in candidate behavior under RCV, Independent Expenditure campaigns can, unfortunately, still go negative, often to the detriment of the candidates they support.

Conclusion

Election data from the 2023 RCV municipal elections continue to demonstrate that RCV works. It fosters healthy competition; enables participation from more—and more diverse—candidates, which in turn encourages more voters to turnout; disincentivizes 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 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 communities 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.