



Tips for Candidates in Ranked Choice Voting Elections

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Thank you for offering to serve your community by running for local office! Because your city uses Ranked Choice Voting for its municipal elections, you have the opportunity to run under an electoral system that rewards candidates who build broad majority coalitions, refrain from negative attacks and focus on the issues. While running for office can be challenging, many candidates find it rewarding to campaign in elections that are more inclusive, civil and representative and give voters greater choice and power.

FairVote MN provides this campaign strategy guide to educate and support all candidates running in Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) municipal elections. This information is based on analyses of ranked-choice elections and conversations with candidates and campaign consultants in the Twin Cities Metro and other cities that have used RCV over the past decade. We are providing the following information to all campaigns:

- How Ranked Choice Voting works
- Important features of Ranked Choice Voting that candidates should know
- What it takes to win in ranked-choice elections
- General campaign advice

How Ranked Choice Voting works

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) – sometimes called Instant Runoff Voting – is a simple change to the ballot that allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference: first choice, second choice, and so on. If a candidate in a single-seat receives a majority (50% + 1) of first-choice votes, that candidate wins. However, if no candidate earns a majority, or the winning threshold in a multi-seat election, then the candidate with the fewest first-choice votes is defeated, and these ballots now count for those voters' second choices. This process continues until one candidate reaches a majority or the winning threshold of continuing ballots.

Important features of Ranked Choice Voting

Ranking candidates — Voters complete their ballot by ranking candidates in order of preference: first choice, second choice, third choice, etc. A voter's second choice will count only if their first choice has the fewest votes and is eliminated. A voter's third choice will count if their first choice and second choices have been eliminated.

Bloomington, Minneapolis, Minnetonka and St. Louis Park allow voters to rank up to three choices, while St. Paul allows voters to rank up to six choices.

Value of ranking candidates — Voters do not have to rank three candidates, but are encouraged to do so. The more a voter ranks, the more power their ballot has in deciding the outcome of the election.

One election, not two — By allowing voters to rank candidates, RCV combines two rounds of voting — a nonpartisan municipal primary in August and a general election in November — into a single “instant runoff” election in November. Voters only have to make one trip to the polls, and candidates can focus on campaigning for one election instead of two. With one election in November, campaigns will be less expensive, the race will be open to more candidates, and voter turnout will be higher, more representative, and more diverse. It also saves cities both time and money.

Earning a first choice vote matters most, but second and third choice votes are crucial — Earning a voter’s number one ranking is the most important, but earning second and third choice rankings are necessary to get over the winning threshold. Think about your number one votes like the votes you would secure in a primary — you need as many as possible to make sure you make it through to the next round. Then you need to build a winning coalition with second and third choice votes to win the final round.

No vote splitting — Multiple candidates appealing to the same or similar bases of voters can run without worry of vote splitting or the spoiler effect, as long as like-minded voters rank candidates in order of preference. To avoid vote splitting, candidates should actively encourage voters to rank. Remember a voter’s first choice for you stays with you as long as you remain in the race. A voter’s second choice cannot harm you; it only comes into play if you are no longer in contention.

What it takes to win in ranked-choice elections

In a single-seat election, winning a ranked-choice election requires that a candidate earn a majority (50% + 1) of continuing votes in the final round. If no candidate is the first choice of a majority, then an “instant runoff” occurs – instant because voters do not need to return to the polls to determine the winner. In that instant runoff, the candidate with the fewest first-choice votes is defeated, and these ballots now count for those voters' second choices. This process continues until one candidate reaches a majority and wins.

In a multi-seat election, candidates must reach a threshold of votes to win, depending on the number of seats to fill, according to the formula $[1/(\#seats + 1)] + 1$ vote. In a two-seat election, the threshold is 33% + 1, in a 3-seat election, the threshold is 25% + 1.

With RCV, every voter gets one vote, which transfers in the instant runoff process according to the voter’s preference. A voter’s ballot counts for their first choice as long the candidate is still in the race. Their vote will count for their next ranked preference if their top-ranked candidate is no longer in contention.

To win a competitive ranked-choice election, a candidate must successfully earn a large number of first-choice votes but also receive additional support by being a second or third choice of voters who preferred defeated candidates. Accordingly, to be successful, candidates must reach out beyond their base to broad and diverse communities of voters to secure second- and third-choice support.

Candidates should ask themselves two important questions:

- 1) "How can I maximize my first-choice votes?" and
- 2) "How can I be the second and third choices of people who rank other candidates first?"

General campaign advice

Capturing first choices

The candidate with the most first choices has the greatest likelihood of winning, but the frontrunner in the first round does not always reach a majority, or winning threshold, in the final round. This is why it is so important to seek second and third choices and not solely rely on your base, even if that base is large.

In order to capture as many first choices as possible, you need to explicitly ask for them. Don't say "Vote for Me (Candidate X)," instead say: "Vote for me #1. If you are supporting another candidate for first choice, rank me #2." Your campaign literature should say: "Vote for [me] #1!"

Under RCV, it's impossible for a candidate to win with just second-choice votes, even if every single voter ranks that candidate second. Candidates who don't have enough first-choice votes will lose. So again, don't assume voters will rank you as their number one choice; you must be direct in asking for it.

Capturing second choices

After you have a plan for securing as many first choices as possible, determine your plan for earning second choices. Your goal is to be ranked number two or three on the ballots of candidates defeated in the opening rounds — as many as possible. You can earn these second and third-choice rankings by building coalitions with other campaigns and groups of voters. While you would not seek the support of voters supporting candidates in complete disagreement with your positions, there will likely be a range of candidates and supporters who have some shared values and positions on the issues. Your goal is to build a coalition of second and third choices to get over the winning threshold. This broadening of your coalition is similar to how campaigns work in capturing base votes in the primary and a broader set of votes in the general election, but under RCV, you do that in a single, less expensive, and more civil election.

To earn second-choice votes, you must be explicit in asking for them. Don't assume you have second-choice support simply because other candidates hold positions that are similar to yours. Voters expect to be asked for their votes and want to get to know you, your values and your positions.

The big DON'T

IMPORTANT: DO NOT say "vote for only me" or ask for number one votes and then discourage your supporters from ranking more choices. Not only do your supporters' second choices for other candidates in no way harm your chances, that strategy can hurt you.

Some candidates mistakenly believe that if their supporters rank a second or third choice, this might somehow work against you. It doesn't. Second choices only count when a voter's first choice is eliminated.

But what CAN hurt you is disempowering voters by discouraging them to rank. It hurts you in two specific ways:

- First, voters don't like it, and not only will you get fewer second choices, you'll likely receive fewer first choices. Voters want and deserve to be empowered in their elections and react negatively when told not to rank.
- Two, if your campaign urges your supporters not to rank other candidates, you run the risk of discouraging supporters of other candidates from ranking you as a backup choice as well. Voters will correctly perceive a "don't rank other candidates" or "don't rank candidate X" as negative campaigning, and the supporters of candidate X will be less likely to rank your campaign as a second choice.

Endorsements

When listing endorsements, accurately cite the endorsement ranking. If an organization endorsed only you, you can say that the organization endorsed you as their first choice. If they ranked their endorsement ballot, and you received an endorsement as a second choice, your campaign communications must indicate that second-choice ranking. To suggest that you have an organization's unequivocal endorsement when you have a second-choice endorsement is false advertising, which is a violation of Minnesota's campaign practices.

For more information or questions, see: <http://www.rankyourvote.org> and contact Karl Landskroener at karl.landskroener@fairvotemn.org.