



Tips for Candidates in Ranked Choice Voting Elections

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

1. Key Features of Ranked Choice Voting
2. What it takes to win in RCV elections
3. General candidate advice

Key Features of RCV

Ranking candidates — Voters complete their ballot by ranking candidates in order of preference: 1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice, etc. A voter's 2nd choice will count only if their 1st choice is eliminated. A voter's 3rd choice will count if their 1st choice and 2nd choices have been eliminated.

At present, St. Paul allows voters to rank up to 6 choices while Minneapolis and St. Louis Park allows voters to rank up to 3 choices. The number of rankings may increase in Minneapolis and St. Louis Park as the cities consider technology improvements in 2021. The ordinances setting out the number of rankings in Bloomington and Minnetonka are currently under development.

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 primary and a general) into a single "instant runoff" election. 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 more competitive and voter turnout will be higher, more representative, and more diverse.

Getting a 1st choice vote matters most, but 2nd and 3rd choices are also essential — Earning a voter’s #1 ranking is the most important, but earning a #2 and #3 ranking is necessary to get over the winning threshold. Think about your #1 votes like the votes you’d chase 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 #2 and #3 votes to win the final round.

No “split voting” — multiple candidates appealing to similar bases of voters can run without worry of the “spoiler effect” as long as like-minded voters rank candidates in order of preference. This requires candidates to actively encourage voters to rank. Remember a voter’s first choice for you stays with you as long as you are 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 under RCV

In a single-seat election, winning an RCV election outright requires that a candidate receive a majority (at least 50% +1) of continuing votes in the final round. If no candidate is the first choice of a majority, an “instant” runoff is triggered – instant meaning that voters do not need to return to the polls to determine the winner.

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 as 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.

In a close RCV contest, then, a candidate needs to do well in first choices and then receive additional votes from being a second or third choice of voters who preferred defeated candidates.

To win in competitive races, candidates must reach out to various communities of voters to secure their support as a second or third choice.

As a candidate seeking to win, two important questions to ask yourself are:

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

General Campaign Advice

1) Capturing first choices.

The candidate with the most first choices has the highest likelihood of winning, but it is not always the case that the top-placed vote getter in the first round wins in the final round. This is why it is so important to seek second and third choices and not rely only 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. So don't just 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!"

With 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 choices will lose. So again, don't assume voters will rank you as their #1 choice; you must be direct in asking for it.

2) Capturing second choices.

After you have a plan for securing as many first choices as possible, determine your plan for second choices. Your aim is to be #2 on as many of the ballots of the candidates who get defeated as possible. This will encourage you to build coalitions with other campaigns and groups of voters. Of course, you will not want to seek votes from voters who support candidates who are in complete disagreement with your positions, but there will be a range of candidates and their 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. That's 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, again, you must be explicit in asking for them. Don't assume you have them by virtue of the fact that other candidates are similar to you. Voters expect to be asked for their votes and want to get to know you and what you stand for.

3) The big DON'T

IMPORTANT: DO NOT say "vote for only me" or ask for #1 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:

- **One**, voters don't like it and not only will you get fewer second choices, you'll get fewer first choices. Voters want and deserve to be empowered in their elections and react strongly 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.

4) 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, you must indicate that. 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 Katie Humphrey at katie.humphrey@fairvotemn.org.