

Dear Chair Shanley, First Vice Chair Messier, Second Vice Chair Corvese, and Honorable Members of the State Government & Elections Committee,

My name is Michael Garman, I serve on the board of Ocean State Ranked Choice Voting, and I write to express my strong support for House Bills 7788 and 7981, which would allow for the use of ranked choice voting (RCV) in, respectively, presidential primary elections and local elections in municipalities wishing to use the system. House Bill 7981 would not *force* any community to use RCV; it would simply authorize interested municipalities to do so, carrying on our state's centuries-old tradition of home rule.

In my view, one of the most positive impacts of ranked choice voting implementation is that it promotes a more civil, issue-oriented style of campaigning. None of you, I presume, chose to go into politics because you found the prospect of having your character – and that of your loved ones – assassinated an appealing one. Yet, as you know well, campaigns often revolve around mudslinging rather than constructive, intelligent debate on the issues that matter most to candidates and the communities they serve.

RCV creates a strong incentive to *avoid* negative campaigning. It is unwise for a candidate seeking to earn an opponent's supporters' second choices to run a campaign with a message anchored in insults against that opponent's character. Instead, they are incentivized to identify areas of common ground and broaden their appeal, promoting consensus rather than division. At the same time, a candidate must still stand by their principles to be elected under RCV. Someone who seeks to be "everyone's second choice" without committing to a core set of principles will be eliminated in the first round due to a lack of top choices. Thus, RCV promotes the election of candidates with both *breadth* and *depth* of support.

Evidence from the dozens of U.S. jurisdictions that have already adopted RCV shows that this effect is significant. After Santa Fe, New Mexico, switched to RCV in 2018, 67% of voters reported that the tone of the next mayoral campaign was more positive than that of the last one conducted under the old pick-one system, while just 3% said it was more negative. A 2021 study by linguists at the University of North Carolina found that candidates in RCV elections were more likely to engage with each other than their counterparts in non-RCV contests in comparable jurisdictions – and that the media coverage of their races was more positive.

Beyond the benefits of allowing voters to more clearly see where their candidates stand on the issues, reducing negative campaigning also has the potential to expand the electorate. Decades of political science research have produced a robust body of evidence showing that negative campaigning reduces voter turnout; one study by Harvard scholar Stephen Ansolabhere found that roughly *six million* citizens who would otherwise have voted in the 1992 presidential election chose to stay home because of negative advertising. (For context, only 104.4 million Americans voted in that election). Given that RCV reduces negative campaigning, it should come as no surprise that its adoption is associated with increased turnout. A 2024 study found that voters in RCV jurisdictions are 17% more likely to turn out for local elections than their peers in non-RCV jurisdictions, and a 2025 report found that those increases apply across the board to voters of all races and ethnicities.

It is more important now than ever before that we commit to protecting our democracy and strengthening rather than weakening it. Implementing ranked choice voting in presidential primaries and authorizing its use in local elections, as H7788 and H7981 will do, is one of the most important steps we can take to strengthen our democracy here in Rhode Island. Therefore, I strongly encourage you to support and advance these crucial pieces of legislation.

Thank you very much for your consideration and for your commitment to public service.

Sincerely,  
Michael Garman  
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