

Testimony from:
Deb Otis, Director of Research & Policy at FairVote Action

In SUPPORT of H-7981 and H-7788
March 26, 2026
Rhode Island House of Representatives
Committee on State Government & Elections

Dear Chair Shanley, Vice Chair Messier, members of the Committee,

I am writing to express FairVote Action's support for H-7981, a bill that would give cities and towns in Rhode Island the option to use ranked choice voting in local primary, general, and special elections for offices like mayor, city council, and school board. I would also like to share FairVote Action's support for H-7788, which would also bring ranked choice voting to Rhode Island's presidential primaries.

Ranked choice voting will: (1) allow Rhode Island voters to elect and nominate candidates who are supported by a majority of the people they represent; (2) offer voters in presidential primaries and in local elections more choices on their ballots; (3) promote more positive, issues-focused campaigns; and (4) create a more level playing field for women candidates and candidates of color.

FairVote Action is a national nonpartisan organization that educates and advocates for election reforms. We are seen as a leading national resource on ranked choice voting (RCV). I am the Director of Research and Policy for FairVote Action and, as part of my job, I study the impacts of RCV in the places that use it.

Approximately 14 million voters in approximately 50 jurisdictions across the U.S. use RCV in public elections. It is an increasingly popular, party-neutral electoral reform with successes including:

- New York City held the largest citywide RCV election in U.S. history in 2025. The city's successful voter education campaigns have resulted in much higher voter turnout than previous non-RCV primaries, a high use of rankings, and a low error rate.¹ In 2025, 96% of voters said voting with RCV was simple and 76% said they would like to keep or expand RCV,² with the 2021 RCV primaries seeing similar levels of voter understanding and support.³
- Alaska became the first state to elect its governor, state legislature, and federal offices using RCV. 84%⁴ of Alaska voters said the system was simple to use and 60%⁵ said it resulted in more competitive races than past elections.

¹ [Ranked choice voting in New York City's 2025 primaries: an in-depth analysis](#). FairVote. (2025).

² [96% of NYC Democratic Primary Voters Say Ranked Choice Ballots Were Simple to Fill Out; ¾ Want to Keep or Expand Ranked Choice; 8 of 10 Say They Understand RCV Extremely or Very Well](#). SurveyUSA. (2025).

³ [Rank the Vote NYC Releases Edison Research Exit Poll on the Election](#). Rank the Vote NYC. (2021).

⁴ [Exit Polling Shows Alaskans Found Ranked Choice Voting Simple](#). Alaskans for Better Elections. (2024).

⁵ [Polling Shows Alaskan Voters Received Clear Instructions on the System, Found Ranking to be "Simple," and saw more Competitive Races](#). Alaskans for Better Elections. (2022).

- Legislatures in 14 states have passed RCV bills since 2020, including “local options” legislation that allows municipalities in Maine, Virginia, and Colorado to use RCV.⁶
- Five Democratic presidential primaries and caucuses used RCV ballots in 2020. In 2024, voters in Maine used RCV ballots in both major parties’ presidential primaries, and the U.S. Virgin Islands Republican Party used RCV in its presidential primary.⁷
- Voters have approved RCV ballot measures in 33 of the last 34 cities to vote on it, and in Maine and Alaska.⁸

In RCV elections, voters may rank candidates in order of preference: first, second, third, and so on. If a candidate receives more than half of the first choices, they win, just like any other election. If not, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and voters who picked that candidate as “number 1” will have their votes count for their next choice. This process continues until one candidate wins a majority.

At a time when national polling shows that nearly nine in ten Americans are dissatisfied with our political system, ranked choice voting offers voters greater choice, creates space for both voters and candidates to express a wider range of views, and rewards candidates who earn support from a majority of voters.

Voter Support and Understanding of Ranked Choice Voting

With RCV, voters may rank as many or as few candidates as they like but, in practice, most voters choose to use multiple rankings in order to express their full preferences.

A median of 68% of voters choose to rank multiple candidates.⁹ In highly competitive or highly publicized elections, the rate is even higher. In 2024, for example, 85% of Portland voters ranked multiple candidates for mayor and 91% ranked multiple candidates for city council.¹⁰ In 2025, 78% of New York City voters ranked multiple candidates for mayor.¹¹ Of those who reported only ranking one candidate, 87% said “That was the only candidate I liked.”¹²

Voters like and understand RCV. Exit polling finds that voters in RCV cities overwhelmingly report that they like RCV and prefer it to their previous voting method.¹³

In Utah, 82% of RCV voters said RCV is easy to use and 94% were satisfied with the method they used to cast their ballot.¹⁴

⁶ [Ranked choice voting legislation](#). FairVote. (2025).

⁷ [The 2024 presidential primaries and ranked choice voting](#). FairVote. (2024).

⁸ [Ballot measures](#). FairVote. (2025).

⁹ [Research and data on RCV in practice](#). FairVote. (2026).

¹⁰ [Ranked choice voting debuts in Portland: Vast majority ranked their ballots and elected a candidate of choice](#). FairVote. (2024).

¹¹ [Ranked choice voting in New York City's 2025 primaries: An in-depth analysis](#). FairVote. (2025).

¹² [96% of NYC Democratic Primary Voters Say Ranked Choice Ballots Were Simple to Fill Out; ¾ Want to Keep or Expand Ranked Choice: 8 of 10 Say They Understand RCV Extremely or Very Well](#). SurveyUSA. (2025).

¹³ [Exit Surveys: Voters Love Ranked Choice Voting](#). FairVote. (2025).

¹⁴ [An Evaluation of the Ranked Choice Voting Pilot in Utah](#). Parry, A., Kidd, J., Erickson, M., & Scott, A. (2024).

In New York City, 96% of poll respondents found the ballot simple and 76% want to keep using RCV.¹⁴ In Alaska, 92% of voters said they received instructions on how to rank their choices,¹⁵ and 84% said RCV was “simple,” including supermajorities of every ethnic group.¹⁶

Voters not only find RCV easy to use, but they understand it intuitively, especially compared to other electoral reforms. Survey data shows that more voters understand RCV than the “top-two” systems used in California and Washington.¹⁷ Research has found no evidence of racial or ethnic differences in understanding of RCV.¹⁸ Voter support for RCV tends to increase over time, as voters get more chances to use it.¹⁹

Ranked Choice Voting Improves Campaigns & Delivers Representative Outcomes

Research shows that RCV decreases negative campaigning because candidates need to reach beyond a single base of voters – and connect with more voters in order to win. Sometimes, this means appealing to be the second or third choice of voters who support a different candidate as their first choice. Studies have found that candidates use more positive language in debates,²⁰ voters in RCV cities perceive less negativity compared to voters in non-RCV cities,^{21,22} and newspaper articles in RCV cities are more positive than in non-RCV cities.²³ As seen in the 2025 New York City mayoral primary, candidates may also “cross-endorse” and campaign together in RCV elections.²⁴

RCV is particularly well-suited for elections with crowded fields, like those often seen in many local primaries and presidential primaries in Rhode Island. RCV ensures that elections are won with majorities without the need for costly runoff elections – where turnout drops by a median of 41%.²⁵

Importantly, RCV addresses the problems of vote-splitting and “spoiler” candidates that sometimes result in election winners who lack majority support. In our current system, a majority of voters may support a particular ideology or party, but split their votes among candidates who support that ideology – allowing a candidate to win with a *minority* of the vote. For example, Green Party candidates Jill Stein and Ralph Nader won enough votes to affect the outcomes in key swing states in the 2016 and 2000 presidential elections.^{26,27} Had

¹⁵ [Alaska Exit Poll Results – New Election System](#). Patinkin Research Strategies. (2022).

¹⁶ [Exit Polling Shows Alaskans Found Ranked Choice Voting Simple](#). Alaskans for Better Elections. (2024).

¹⁷ [Poll shows Bay Area voters like ranked choice voting and are interested in proportional representation](#). FairVote. (2025).

¹⁸ [Self-Reported Understanding of Ranked-Choice Voting](#). Donovan, T., Tolbert, C. and Gracey, K. Social Science Quarterly. (2019).

¹⁹ [The 2017 Municipal Election: An Analysis & Recommendations](#). Minneapolis City Council. (2018).

²⁰ [Effect of Instant Run-off Voting on Participation and Civility](#). McGinn, E. (2020).

²¹ [Socioeconomic and Demographic Perspectives on Ranked Choice Voting in the Bay Area](#). FairVote. (2015).

²² [Santa Fe Voters Support Ranked Choice Voting and Have High Confidence in City Elections](#). FairVote. (2018).

²³ [Using Campaign Communications to Analyze Civility in Ranked Choice Voting Elections](#). Kropf, M. Politics and Governance. (2021).

²⁴ [Ranked choice voting in New York City's 2025 primaries: an in-depth analysis](#). FairVote. (2025).

²⁵ [Low Turnout and High Cost in primary runoffs, 1994-2024](#). FairVote. (2024)

²⁶ [Federal Elections 2016: Election Results for the U.S. President, The U.S. Senate, and the U.S. House of Representatives](#). Federal Election Commission. (2017).

²⁷ [November 7, 2000 General Election](#). Florida Department of State. Division of Elections. (2020).

RCV been used in those states, voters could have ranked the Green candidate 1st and then ranked either the Democratic or Republican candidate as their 2nd choice. The spoiler problem became relevant in the 2024 presidential election as well – with these concerns raised about Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.; Jill Stein; and a possible “No Labels” candidate throughout the campaign.

Recent research has found that RCV tends to result in greater election rates for women and candidates of color.^{28,29,30} Research also points to several RCV elections where voters of color were more likely to rank multiple candidates on their ballot.^{31,32,33}

This has played out in practice in cities across the country – in RCV elections, voters elected the first-ever majority-women City Council in New York City,³⁴ the first all-women City Council in Las Cruces, New Mexico;³⁵ the first Alaska Native member of Congress;³⁶ and the first City Councils in Minneapolis³⁷ and Salt Lake City³⁸ that are majority-people of color. In 2023, St. Paul elected an all-women city council where all members were under the age of 40 and 90% of are women of color.³⁹ In 2025, the city elected its first woman and Hmong American mayor.⁴⁰

Ranked Choice Voting Improves Party Primaries

RCV is particularly beneficial in party primary elections as it ensures the nomination of a candidate who has the broadest support and will be a strong candidate in the general election.⁴¹

In June, 2025, Democrat Zohran Mamdani won the highly competitive New York City mayoral primary, which featured eleven candidates. Mamdani earned the most first-choice support, and consolidated support during the RCV count until he eventually prevailed with a majority win. 96% of voters reported that they found RCV simple, 76% said they wanted to keep or expand RCV, and voter turnout was the highest since 1989.

²⁸ [In Ranked Choice Elections, Women Win, RCV in the United States: A Decade in Review](#). Represent Women. (2020).

²⁹ [The alternative vote: Do changes in single-member voting systems affect descriptive representation of women and minorities?](#) John, S., Smith, H., & Zack, E. Electoral Studies. (2018).

³⁰ [Election Reform and Women's Representation: Ranked Choice Voting in the U.S.](#) Terrell, C., Lamendola, C., & Reilly, M. Politics and Governance. (2021).

³¹ [Ranked Choice Voting Elections Benefit Candidates and Voters of Color: 2024 update](#). FairVote. (2024)

³² [Whose Votes Count?: Undervotes, Overvotes, and Ranking in San Francisco's Instant-Runoff Elections](#). Neely, F. and Cook, C. American Politics Research. (2008).

³³ [Ranked Choice Voting Elections Benefit Candidates and Voters of Color](#). FairVote. (2021).

³⁴ [The Next City Council Will Look More Like New York](#). The New York Times. (2021).

³⁵ [Women set to represent all six Las Cruces city council districts](#). Las Cruces Sun News. (2021).

³⁶ [Peltola to become first Alaska Native, first female Alaska congresswoman](#). KTUU. (2022).

³⁷ [A Minneapolis first: Candidates of color win a majority of City Council seats](#). The Minnesota Star Tribune. (2021).

³⁸ [Historic Salt Lake council majority LGBTQ, people of color](#). The Associated Press. (2022).

³⁹ [St. Paul makes history with all-female city council, a rarity among large US cities](#). The Associated Press. (2024).

⁴⁰ [Kaohly Her, first woman and Hmong St. Paul mayor-elect shares plans for office](#). Minnesota Public Radio. (2025).

⁴¹ [Ranked choice voting can promote stronger political parties](#). FairVote. (2025).

Additionally, many candidates ran more positive and collaborative campaigns. Notably, Mamdani “cross-endorsed” and held joint-campaign events with opponent Brad Lander.⁴² Mamdani went on to win the general election in November. That election did not use RCV and the tone between candidates was noticeably more negative.⁴³

RCV would also be ideal for both major parties in Rhode Island’s future presidential primaries. RCV lets primary voters navigate a crowded field of candidates, ensures every voter’s voice is heard even if their first-choice candidate withdraws just before the primary, and incentivizes presidential candidates to speak to issues important to Rhode Island voters in order to build the broadest coalition of support.

In the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries alone, nearly 3 million early voters in states without RCV cast ballots for candidates who had already withdrawn by the time ballots were counted. But several states used RCV to make more votes count.

Five state Democratic parties used RCV for presidential primaries in 2020, including Kansas, Alaska, Wyoming, and Hawaii for all voters and Nevada for early voters only. In 2024, voters in Maine used RCV ballots in presidential primaries for both parties, and the U.S. Virgin Islands GOP used RCV in its presidential caucus. These states found that RCV preserves key benefits of caucuses – like allowing voters to “realign” with a second choice if their first-choice candidate does not earn enough support to remain in the delegate race – while also modernizing the process with a primary that allows for greater participation.

Voters in these states took advantage of the opportunity to rank multiple candidates, made very few ballot errors, and turned out in large numbers.

RCV’s simplicity, representative outcomes, and positive experience for voters have made it an increasingly popular election method. It is recommended by Robert’s Rules of Order and used in hundreds of private association elections.⁴⁴ RCV is also fully constitutional, having been twice upheld in federal courts, including in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in 2011 and in federal district courts in Maine in 2018 and 2020.⁴⁵

The issue of RCV has come before the legislature in Rhode Island in previous years. With so many more prominent examples of its impact and a greater understanding of how to administer RCV effectively, the evidence in its favor has never been stronger.

Voters like RCV and engage with the ranked ballot. Parties can produce strong nominees with RCV. And implementation is a smooth process.^{46,47} In most cities using RCV, preliminary results are produced on election night or the day after – the same timeline as in single-choice elections.⁴⁸ Case studies of two Colorado cities that recently implemented ranked choice

⁴² [Ranked choice voting in New York City's 2025 primaries: an in-depth analysis](#), FairVote. (2025)

⁴³ [New York mayoral election shows need to expand ranked choice voting](#), FairVote. (2025).

⁴⁴ [Instant runoff voting used for major organizational elections based on Robert's Rules of Order](#), FairVote. (2009).

⁴⁵ [Ranked-Choice Voting: Legal Challenges and Considerations for Congress](#), Congressional Research Service. (2022).

⁴⁶ Additional resources on RCV implementation are available from the Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center at www.RCVResources.org.

⁴⁷ [Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Implementation Considerations for Policymakers](#), NCSL. (2022).

⁴⁸ [79% of jurisdictions release RCV results within 24 hours](#), FairVote. (2025).

voting – Boulder in 2023 and Fort Collins in 2025 – offer best practices on smooth RCV implementation.^{49,50}

Given the evidence of ranked choice voting's success and the benefits it could bring to Rhode Island, we respectfully ask that you support both H-7981 and H-7788.

FairVote Action is available to answer any other questions from the committee or provide additional data. FairVote Action can also advise the legislature as it deems fit and be a resource for RCV implementation. You can reach me at dotis@fairvoteaction.org and my FairVote Action colleagues at info@fairvoteaction.org.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,



Director of Research & Policy at FairVote Action

⁴⁹ Boulder Ranked Choice Voting. Citizen Data. (2023)

⁵⁰ Larimer County 2025 Coordinated Election Results. Larimer County. (2025).