

**TO:** Members of the Rhode Island State Senate

**RE:** Support for S-2590 (RCV Rules for Presidential Preference Primaries) and S-2951 (Municipal RCV via Charter Amendment)

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## **Introduction**

The two Senate bills under consideration, S-2590 and S-2951, represent a carefully structured, dual-track approach to electoral modernization. S-2590 would establish clear rules and regulations governing Rhode Island's presidential preference primary elections and create a framework for ranked choice voting tabulation and results reporting. S-2951 would establish ranked choice voting at the municipal level whenever a city or town's voters approve it through a charter amendment. Taken together, these bills are not a single sweeping mandate — they are a calibrated, evidence-grounded expansion of voter power at both the state and local levels. This testimony examines the policy rationale, the growing body of empirical evidence, and why Rhode Island is exceptionally positioned to lead on this reform.

## **Why the Current System Falls Short**

Rhode Island's existing plurality primary system produces an outcome that most voters do not consciously choose: it allows a candidate to win a multi-person primary with far less than a majority of support. A candidate can win an election with less than 40 percent of the vote, meaning more than 60 percent of voters preferred someone else. This is not a minor procedural footnote. It is a structural distortion that shapes candidate behavior, campaign strategy, and ultimately governance. Candidates in plurality primaries are incentivized to consolidate base support, not to seek broad consensus. The result is nominees who govern for a faction of their party rather than for the full electorate.

S-2590 directly addresses this distortion by replacing the plurality mechanism in presidential primaries — where multi-candidate fields are the norm — with one that requires a winner to accumulate majority support through the ranking of preferences.

## **The Evidence Base Is Growing and Favorable**

The analytical case for ranked choice voting has strengthened considerably in recent years, and the most current data is instructive for Rhode Island's deliberations.

In New York's 2025 Democratic mayoral primary, 96 percent of voters found the ranked ballot simple to use, and 76 percent wanted to keep or expand it to other races. This is not the result of a passive electorate — New York is one of the most diverse, high-volume electoral environments in the country. The fact that comprehension and satisfaction approached near-unanimity should put to rest concerns that ranked ballots are inherently confusing.

The effects on campaign culture are equally significant. Rather than attacking opponents to differentiate themselves, candidates in New York's RCV primary sought cross-endorsements and asked to be ranked second by opposing candidates' supporters — producing an issue-based campaign focused on ideas rather than on tearing down rivals. This is a structural consequence of the ranked ballot, not an accident of political temperament. When second-choice rankings matter, civility becomes a strategic asset.

Cross-national research finds that ranked choice voting changes elections from zero-sum contests to more positive campaigns, and that preferential systems have been recognized as a mechanism for reducing political tension and encouraging coalition-building across divided communities. A 2025 peer-reviewed study of Alaska's RCV system found it associated with more ideologically moderate candidates winning elections -a direct rebuttal to the concern that RCV merely advantages one partisan faction over another.

### **Rhode Island's Infrastructure Is Already There**

One of the most consequential — and underappreciated — facts in this debate is that Rhode Island faces no meaningful technical barrier to implementation. The state has received a 2025 RCV Readiness Score of 100 percent from the nonpartisan Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center, with all of its voting system vendors already certified as RCV-capable. S-2590's specific provisions establishing tabulation rules and results-reporting protocols are not creating new machinery — they are giving legal form to capabilities that already exist. The operational risk so often cited in RCV debates elsewhere is simply not present here.

### **On S-2951: Democratic Reform Through Democratic Process**

S-2951 deserves special recognition for its structural elegance. By requiring a locally approved charter amendment before any municipality may adopt RCV, the bill guarantees that no community is subjected to this reform without its own voters consenting to it. This is subsidiarity in practice — the state enabling local self-determination rather than mandating uniformity. Communities that wish to experiment with RCV for local offices may do so on their own timeline and according to their own civic judgment. In cities that have adopted RCV, including New York and St. Paul, the reform has contributed to electing more representative governing bodies, including the first female-majority city councils and, in Minneapolis, Salt Lake City, and St. Paul, councils where members of color held a majority of seats for the first time. Rhode Island municipalities should have the option to pursue these outcomes if their voters choose to.

### **Addressing Skepticism Honestly**

A credible analytical case requires engaging counterarguments. Some research has identified higher rates of ballot errors and, in limited studies, decreased voter confidence in certain early RCV implementations. These findings are genuine and must inform implementation — particularly with respect to voter education and multilingual outreach. However, as researchers have noted, voters understand RCV, and learn to like it, particularly with experience. The trajectory of the evidence, from early implementations to mature ones, consistently runs toward

greater comfort and higher satisfaction over time. The appropriate response to implementation challenges is rigorous preparation, not inaction.

## **Conclusion**

S-2590 and S-2951 together form a coherent, responsible reform package. One establishes the rules for a fairer presidential primary. The other creates a voluntary local option grounded in direct democratic consent. Both are technically feasible today. Both are supported by a growing and credible body of evidence. And both respond to the well-documented decline in public confidence in elections by giving Rhode Island voters a system in which more of their preferences count, more candidates are incentivized to build broad support, and winners must earn genuine majority backing.

This Senate has an opportunity to strengthen the democratic foundation Rhode Island stands on. The evidence, the infrastructure, and the moment all point in the same direction. These bills merit passage.

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*Submitted in support of S-2590 and S-2951.*