

2017. RCV Election Overview - Minneapolis and St. Paul

Executive Summary

The 2017 municipal elections in Minneapolis and Saint Paul greatly exceeded the expectations of Ranked Choice Voting advocates. The elections showed the power of RCV to create a more inclusive, participatory and representative democracy. With stronger than expected voter participation, high levels of ranking among voters of all ages, ethnicities, income and education levels, and a nearly 100 percent valid ballot rate, voters in both cities demonstrated that they understood RCV, they liked it and -- based on consistent exit polls interviews -- they want to continue using it. These trends have become more pronounced with each consecutive election in which RCV is used.

Moreover, the campaign seasons in both cities were notable for their lack of vitriol and "mudslinging," with a few limited attempts at sullying a mayoral candidate in Saint Paul and council candidates in Minneapolis backfiring and harming the candidates these efforts were intended to help.

The other positive result of these elections were the outcomes: more diverse leadership than ever before, including the re-election of the city's first Somali-American and Latina members and two transgender council members, both of whom are people of color. In Saint Paul, the first African-American mayoral candidate, Melvin Carter, was elected with a 51 percent majority in the first round. But RCV didn't just foster a more diverse set of winners. By opening and leveling the playing field, RCV elections make it possible for more, and more diverse, candidates to run and to help shape the conversation about the future of their cities.

Despite the increasingly hollow claims of RCV detractors, Ranked Choice Voting has been decisively proven to be an easy, fair and preferred method of choosing leaders by a broad swath of the Twin Cities' electorate in the Twin Cities. Not surprisingly, cities from Saint Louis Park to Rochester now are pursuing a switch to RCV.

A quick glance at the 2017 elections results reveals:

- A surge in turnout in Minneapolis, with 105,928 (43%) of voters casting a ballot in 2017 -- the highest for a municipal election in 20 years and a more than 32 percent increase over 2013. In Saint Paul, 61,646 (27%) voters turned out on election day, also the highest participation in nearly twenty years.
- Higher-than-ever numbers of voters ranked their ballots -- nearly 90 percent in Minneapolis and 76 percent in Saint Paul -- indicating voters were well educated and prepared to rank their ballots.
- A nearly 100 percent valid ballot rate.

- An overwhelming share of voters (92 percent in Minneapolis and 83 percent in Saint Paul) who said RCV was “simple to use.”
- Supermajorities of voters in both cities who said they want to continue using RCV locally and statewide.
- Widely noted civility across the campaigns. In Saint Paul, only 9.6 percent of voters said that candidates spent most of their time criticizing their opponents. In Minneapolis, this percentage was 8.4 percent. Thus, an overwhelming percentage of Saint Paul (90.4 percent) voters and 91.6 percent of Minneapolis voters perceived that candidates did not spend most of their time criticizing opponents.
- While some criticism and critique of opposing candidates will always happen (and we did see independent negative attacks on social media and by PACs), these numbers confirm another well-known benefit of RCV elections: overall candidates themselves overall focus on positive, solutions-based campaigns versus denigrating their opponents.
- In Saint Paul, 90 percent of voters and 88 percent of Minneapolis voters said they were satisfied with their mayoral choices. It seems logical to surmise that voter satisfaction would be substantially lower if voters felt “turned off” by a mean-spirited campaign season. It also seems possible that the overall lack of negativity helped boost turnout as the corollary is true, negative campaigning is explicitly designed to suppress voter turnout.
- The election of Melvin Carter, Saint Paul’s first African American mayor.
- The election of the most diverse City Council in history, including an African American councilmember, two transgender people of color and the re-election of the first Somali-American and Latina.
- The election of an African American Park Board Commissioner and the first Somali-American elected to the Park Board.

The Bottom Line:

The 2017 municipal elections in both Minneapolis and Saint Paul proved once again that voters:

- Like RCV
- Understand RCV
- Want to keep using RCV
- Want to see RCV expanded to state elections

Trends and Lessons Learned

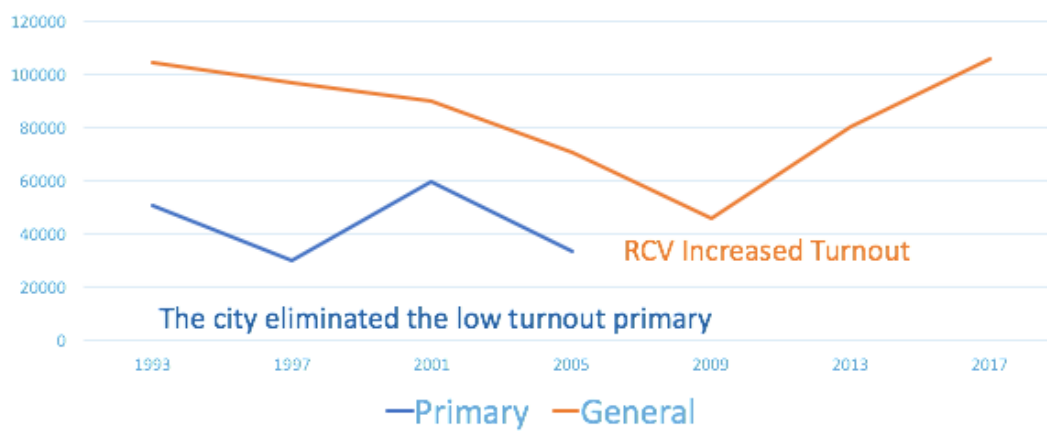
The 2017 elections represent the third use of RCV in Minneapolis and the fourth use in St. Paul. With two highly competitive mayoral elections, an open at-large Park Board election and several open and challenged council seats, these elections were by far the most competitive and robust overall. They provided a great number of lessons and opportunities to build from as we continue to

use RCV in the Twin Cities and elsewhere in Minnesota. Here are the key trends and lessons we learned we experienced in 2017.

1. RCV is having a positive impact on voter turnout.

- Since the adoption of RCV, we've seen an increase in effective voter participation by holding one decisive election in November. We've also seen upticks in voter turnout in races where RCV was used, including the 2013 Minneapolis mayoral election and Ward 2 elections in St. Paul.
- This year, we saw a huge surge in turnout due in large part to the diverse, competitive and engaging campaigns -- mayoral campaign in both cities and the council and park district campaigns in Minneapolis -- that were only possible because of RCV.

Minneapolis Voter Turnout Over Time Primaries and General Elections



2. RCV fosters greater diversity.

- Candidate pools are becoming more reflective of the populations they serve; after three cycles, we now are seeing many more communities represented directly including candidates from immigrant communities, the African American community, the LGBTQIA+ community, and women. Several of the candidates embody multiple underrepresented communities.
- Elected leaders are becoming more reflective of the populations they serve. In 2017, RCV helped elect St. Paul's first African American mayor. In Minneapolis, it has steadily helped elect the city's most diverse city council in history.

3. Candidate education is as important as voter education.

- The pushback against RCV often comes from candidates and campaigns that are fearful of how the change in the process may impact their campaigns. These concerns are greatly reduced by providing education and training to provide candidates and their teams with confidence and knowledge of best practices under RCV. This year, we co-designed the first-ever Wellstone training for candidates and their campaigns, and we provided ongoing support and resources throughout the election cycle. We believe this work was successful and well worth the investment. The testimony provided by candidates, both those who won and those who lost, following the election was evidence that candidates are not just acclimating, but embracing RCV as a more open and inclusive way of campaigning.
- Examples of how candidates campaigned differently:
 - Most of the candidates were effective in asking for second- and third-place rankings after receiving RCV campaign training. Most candidates included ranking language on their social media and printed literature.
 - The candidates themselves and their teams often provided effective information to voters.
 - More than ever before, we saw that candidates included a clear and strong field strategy of asking for second and third choices. This allowed them to talk to a broader range of people, and engage on a wider number of issues. In turn, this garnered them second- and third- choice votes, in addition to a greater number of first choices. This was seen with both multiple-round winners and first-round winners.

4. Going negative hurts the candidates that it intends to help.

- We've seen in previous years how negative campaigning tended to work against the candidates who engaged in this behavior. This year showed more clearly than ever just how engaging in negative attacks hurts campaigns rather than help them.
 - In the St. Paul mayoral campaign, candidate Pat Harris received negative attention because a PAC supporting him released an "attack" mailer against Melvin Carter in the last weeks before the election. This likely pushed Melvin above 50 percent in the first round of voting by changing first-place votes and swaying undecided voters.
 - In Minneapolis, candidates supported by the Minneapolis Works PAC, which distributed mostly negative mailers, lost in six of the eight races the PAC attempted to influence.

5. RCV is changing how campaigns are raising and spending money.

- We're still analyzing campaign fundraising and spending for this election cycle, but in general, we continued to see that money played a different, if not less important, role in the RCV campaigns. This is, in part, because it is no longer advantageous to raise money for expensive mailings or TV ads designed to attack opponents. In fact, those tactics severely backfire in 2017.
- In the 2013 Minneapolis mayoral race, Mayor Hodges was outspent more than 3 to 1 by her leading opponent. This year, among the top five mayoral candidates, the best-financed mayoral candidate placed fourth, while one of the least well-financed candidates finished in second place. Once again, this election showed that an effective grassroots fieldwork that focuses on securing first, second and third choices beats money as a winning strategy under RCV.
- While more research is needed to understanding the role of money in RCV campaigns, the initial impact we're observing shows a promising trend of reducing, or at least changing, the role of money in campaigns.

6. With each cycle used, understanding for and support of Ranked Choice Voting is increasing.

- This year, an impressive 92 percent of polled Minneapolis voters -- across all incomes, ethnic groups, and ages -- said that RCV was simple to use. This was an increase from 85 percent four years ago, which was the first big test of RCV in an open mayoral race. This level of competence existed despite the fact that a large share of voters were new voters and had not used RCV previously. The increase in confidence and understanding we believe is attributable to several factors that have improved over time, including more familiarity and practice with the voting process, better educated and trained candidates, greater familiarity among reporters who are writing about RCV, and more effective voter education tools and processes.
- Understanding among St. Paul voters this year, which was the first competitive mayoral race there, was similar to the level of understanding in Minneapolis four years ago. We expect that St. Paul voters will show a similar increase in confidence in future RCV elections.

7. Endorsing organizations are beginning to rank their endorsements.

- FairVote Minnesota has encouraged endorsing organization to endorse a ranked slate of candidates. We have explained that it's to their advantage to inform voters of their second and third preference in the event their first choice be eliminated. This year, more endorsing entities saw the value in doing this and provided their supporters with a ranked

slate in at least some of the races. These included, notably, the Star Tribune, Minneapolis Ward 4 DFL, Sierra Club-North Star, Minnesota Daily.

- We also saw candidate supporters, and voters generally, identify their ranked list of candidates on social media which was powerful in setting an example for other voters. By mid-October, we were seeing a flurry of voters posting their ranked preferences.

Recommended Improvements

As successful as the 2017 RCV elections were, there's still work to be done. We recommend improvements and education in three key areas:

1. Improved ballot design and tabulation capability, including:

- More efficient and user-friendly ballot design with more available rankings.
- A ballot design and flexible design rules for cities with even-year municipal elections.
- Certified RCV tabulation software to provide for accurate, transparent and instant results.

2. Additional education in the following areas:

- The use of RCV in the Minneapolis' Park Board at-large race. We saw increased interest in this race this year because it was an open race and was highly competitive, yet there was less familiarity because voters often don't participate in the Park Board elections. As such, there was higher demand than usual for information about how RCV works in the multi-seat races. This area needs expanded education in the next cycle.
- More education also is needed in the Somali community, both among candidates and voters, to counter the dynamic among Somali candidates to encourage bullet voting. This tactic is harmful to candidates and voters alike and it's important to address it before the next election cycle.
- This year we began to work more closely with endorsing organizations to provide education on how to conduct ranked endorsements, and more organizations did rank their endorsements. But more education is needed to continue to promote greater use of ranking among endorsing organizations.
- Last, but not least, education is needed among Independent Expenditures groups on the harmful impact of negative attacks and how to effectively advocate on behalf of their candidates.

3. Further research relating to campaign finance and campaign practices:

As noted previously, we believe more research is needed in the area of campaign finance under RCV to better understand how and how much money is raised and spent, and the impact of PACs in influencing the outcome of elections.

- While candidates were effective overall in differentiating themselves without resorting to negative tactics, we are still hearing from candidates and campaign staff that it is challenging and not always clear how to most effectively differentiate without alienating voters. More study would be helpful to identify successful campaign messaging under RCV; in particular, how candidates can effectively differentiate themselves from other candidates without engaging in negative tactics that can be harmful to their campaigns.
- We will continue to conduct exit polls for each election to compare voter experience with RCV over time.

2017 Rank Your Vote Education Campaign | What We Did

In 2017, we embarked on an ambitious education campaign to ensure all voters were prepared to rank their ballots on Election Day, November 7, and that all campaigns were prepared to run effective coalition-building campaigns. We know that the more voters hear about RCV, the more they understand and like it, and the more they rank their ballots. Our message to voters was simple: The more you rank, the more powerful your ballot becomes. That message resonated with voters and on Election Day, 87 percent of Minneapolis Voters and 86 percent of St. Paul voters ranked their ballots. Moreover, 92 percent of Minneapolis voters and 83 percent of St. Paul voters found RCV easy to use. This is compelling proof that our comprehensive voter education efforts worked.

For candidates, our training focused on how to build a large core base of supporters, and then ask for second and third choice support. Again, the success of this training was seen on Election Day. Nearly all candidates had strategies that included reaching voters for second and third choice support and the high percentage of voters ranking reflected their strong efforts.

Our website

The RankYourVote.org website was the go-to site for information about the 2017 Ranked Choice Voting elections, candidates running for office, and tips and tools for voters, candidates, the media and the general public.

Our team

The success of our education efforts was made possible by our #RankYourVote staff team and hundreds of volunteers.



- Heather Klindworth, Director of Campaigns
- Karl Landskroener, Field Director
- Nate Fowler, Events Manager
- Jeanne Massey, Executive Director
- Fahmo Ahmed, Lead Organizer in the Somali community
- Demaris Montoya, Lead Organizer in the Latino community
- GauNou Vang, Lead Organizer in the Hmong community
- Christine Lee, Communications Consultant
- Cindy Bielke, Communications Consultant
- Amara Samuels, Lead Intern
- Aidan Zielski, Lead Intern
- United Strategies, Strategy and Events Consultant
- Andrew Beeman, Field Coordinator

- About Amara, Outreach Consultant
- Anika Robbins, Outreach Consultant
- New Publica, Outreach Consultant
- Kim Ellison, Lead Volunteer
- [FairVote Minnesota Board](#)
- 210 volunteers who contributed a combined 1361 hours!