

ADDENDUM: SOME CITIES THAT HAVE USED RCV/IRV ELECTIONS

[Takoma Park MD, Marilyn Abbott, Board of Elections; Cary NC, Gary Sims, Wake County BOE Director; Telluride CO, Amy Levek, former Mayor and member of the Telluride Town Council; Berkeley CA, Mark Numaninville, City Clerk; St. Paul MN, Nancy Homans, office of the Mayor; and San Leandro, California, Tamika Greenwood, City Clerk]

The following are opinions and observations of these local officials, reported by the LWVO committee member who interviewed them. Opinions expressed are those of the local official, not the interviewer. RCV/IRV = ranked-choice voting / instant run-off voting are synonymous.

Takoma Park Maryland uses Instant Runoff Voting for City Council elections. It was instituted several years ago by a coalition of citizens, with the goal of assuring that persons elected would have a majority vote. It also provided potential cost saving by avoiding the necessity of runoff elections. The respondent reported that she felt voters understood IRV elections and that Takoma Park had provided a lot of educational materials to help them understand the process. She also noted, however, that wards with lower socio-economic voters tended not to make second or third choices compared to wards with more affluent voters. (Ed Note: That could result in a larger number of exhausted ballots.)

Cary, North Carolina was part of a pilot study when the North Carolina legislature passed enabling legislation in 2007 to pilot a ranked voting system to replace traditional primaries. The local BOE provided an extensive education campaign to help voters understand the new system and to make voters aware that the new system saved the cost of primaries. The trial affected only Cary and not the entire Wake County. The vote went well, and everyone thought it was fair. But the post-election process was cumbersome and many voters failed to vote for their second and third choices, with some voters voting 1 for all three candidates for election. The legislature then rescinded the enabling legislation. There did not appear to be any significant difference in voter turnout for the Ranked Voting ballot. The BOE said a larger city or more candidates would make the voter count very time consuming and likely eat the cost savings from eliminating the primary. With numerous issues the ballot would also be very long. Also there was fear that the added choices would deter voters from down ballot issues such as bond issues. Wake County returned to semi-open primaries where Independents must declare a party to receive a ballot or receive an issues only ballot, but if they insist they want to change their party affiliation at the polls their ballot will be provisional. The pilot Ranked Voting experiment was also done in Chapel Hill and one other city. It was confusing to all and many ballots were discarded because they were marked incorrectly. The legislature subsequently abandoned the effort.

Telluride, Colorado has primary elections that are nonpartisan and held in odd number of years. On the ballot will be Mayor, Town Council, local yes/no issues and races and issues of San Miguel County, where Telluride is located. Participation in primaries is about 50%. Instant Runoff Voting was initiated by a citizen petition to be used in Mayoral balloting. It was

approved in time to be used in the 2011 election. Each voter is asked to rank the candidates for mayor on the ballot. A candidate who obtains a majority of the first place rankings is declared the winner. If no candidate gets a majority, then the candidate with the fewest votes is removed from consideration. Each of the ballots is tabulated again by ignoring the removed candidate and improving by one position the rank of every remaining candidate who was ranked below the removed candidate. One candidate got a majority in 2011, so the IRV provisions were not needed then. But in the 2015 election none of the three candidates obtained a majority and the IRV re-tabulation was successfully used. But there appeared to be quite a bit of voter confusion about IRV and there was a delay in announcing election results due to the extra care that was needed to make sure that the manual IRV tabulations were accurate. The respondent wondered if IRV will survive in Telluride, citing the experience of Aspen, Colorado, which adopted IRV before Telluride but has already discarded it. The story of Telluride and Aspen teaches us that voting procedures must be understandable and thought fair by the voters.

Berkeley, California approved a measure to use Ranked Choice voting in 2003, but the lack of a vote counting software did not allow it to be implemented until 2010. RCV is now used in races for Mayor, Council seats and Auditor. None of the city and county office races is partisan, but state and federal races are partisan. The ranked choice method allows the voter to rank candidates in order of preference, and eliminates the need for run-off elections that used to be required if no candidate met a certain threshold. RCV replaced the previous system so that the city wouldn't have to have runoff elections, which were costly and which extended the campaign period. There have not been any significant problems thus far, but almost all of the winners in Berkeley for mayor and council since 2010, except for one, got at least 51% of the vote. Voters also seem to understand the system. But there have been issues in neighboring communities. In Oakland, a major mayoral election had a candidate who would have won under the old system, but under Ranked Choice Voting, he ended up losing. Since adopting ranked choice voting, Berkeley has not seen any significant change in turnout, but there have been more nontraditional candidates and less negative campaigning, since candidates are trying to get people's second or third choice votes.

St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota have opted for ranked choice voting for local elections in the general election (with no primary). The respondent stated, "While there are theoretical strengths of such a mechanism, I don't know that the electorate is as happy with the process as they thought they would be." The respondent also noted that there is some difficulty when the ballots are constructed differently for off-year, local elections and the traditional elections. Also they count their ballots by hand in the local elections. Party campaigns have also figured out that they should encourage their voters to rank only one choice, which may defeat some of the nobler purposes for ranked choice voting such as reducing negative campaigning and encouraging consensus candidates. Additionally, the system works so that people voting for "fringe" candidates end up having more votes than those supporting mainstream candidates. Minnesota has both party caucuses and a primary for county and statewide offices. The Legislature is considering a primary-only process because the caucus system is cumbersome, difficult to

navigate and hasn't resulted in an endorsed candidate winning the primary for a number of cycles. There are no current proposals to make any additional changes to the local election system, but the outcomes have not been dramatically different from what the previous system yielded (non-partisan primary with the top two vote-getters going to the general election).

San Leandro, California adopted Rank Choice Voting in order to reduce election costs and increase voter participation. To date, there has been a majority vote winner in all ranked choice elections. The respondent felt that this system has lessened political polarization and felt that ranked choice voting has worked well. She also reported that there are some critics due to the potential error rate in calculating results and voter confusion with the system.

San Francisco, California did not personally respond to our interviewer, after repeated efforts. However, an article assessing the ranked-choice voting in the first election with this new system in the 2004 election, stated that those with less prior knowledge of RCV tended to be the least educated voters, those whose first language was other than Chinese or English and those whose race or ethnicity was something other than Asian or White. The frequency of ranking three candidates was also lowest among African Americans, Latinos, voters with less education and those whose first language was not English. A majority (61%) of polling place voters preferred the RCV system and this was even higher (77%) for absentee voters. Those with no clear prior opinions, 52% preferred to the previous system: nonpartisan election with runoff.

[Ed. note: See Study Guide for definition. How RCV/IRV works -- Ballots are counted once. If no candidate gets a majority of first choices, the candidate with the LEAST first choices is eliminated from contention and the ballots are counted again. For those ballots favoring the eliminated candidate, their second choices move up to first. The process is repeated until a candidate receives a majority of first choices from the ballots still in the mix. A ballot is said to be "exhausted" when all candidates ranked by that specific voter have been eliminated. This happens most frequently when a ballot indicates only one choice -- perhaps that voter liked only one candidate in the field, or perhaps he/she did not do the research necessary to learn about all the others running for the same office. It is possible for the ultimate winner, therefore, to receive less than 50% of the total ballots cast. The technology for counting ballots in this way was at first not available, but in very recent years it has become available. Our Ohio study was completed before information about the 2016 Maine RCV ballot initiative was available. LWV Maine actually initiated that referendum. We recommend that local Leagues seek out the Maine results after the November 8 election, although the new statewide system, if adopted, will not yet be observable in action.]