

Open letter to the community: Ranked Choice Voting gives communities of color more opportunities

Written by

Monday, 12 August 2013 14:40

Nationwide, democracy is in trouble.

It's threatened from many different directions – by political polarization, by cynicism and apathy, by big money and special interests, by calculated attempts to suppress the vote. The recent Supreme Court decision striking at the heart of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 is the latest blow – a distressing reminder that when it comes to safeguarding and expanding that fundamental American right, we've got lots of work to do.

But we believe Minnesotans are up to the task.

Last year, a broad coalition of democracy defenders united to defeat a restrictive voter ID referendum that would have disenfranchised many eligible voters. And this year, our two biggest cities – Minneapolis and St. Paul – continue to blaze a path for electoral reform as they prepare to use Ranked Choice Voting for critical, competitive local elections. With a hotly contested open mayoral race in Minneapolis and an open council seat in St. Paul's ethnically diverse first ward the whole country will be watching, and we think voters of all political stripes will like what they see.

By eliminating the need for poorly attended, unrepresentative municipal primaries, Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) increases political participation and gives equal voice to historically underrepresented voters.

And though we support different mayoral candidates, we're united in the belief that RCV also promotes campaigning that's more respectful, issue-based, and inclusive. In a system where candidates must be mindful of second-choice votes to win, would-be officeholders tend to focus on their own strengths, accomplishments and ideas instead of tearing down their opponents. They have a compelling incentive to step outside their traditional base and talk to voters they might have ignored under the old plurality system. RCV fosters bridge-building and a more substantive political conversation.

And in the long run, it yields leadership that's much more reflective of the *whole* electorate. This fall marks just the second time that Minneapolis and our sister city, St. Paul, will use RCV – and while we're certain it's going to have a major impact on competitive, multi-candidate mayoral and city council races, there's evidence to suggest some of its biggest benefits are still a few years away.

In San Francisco, where RCV has been used the longest, it's led to leadership that's truly reflective of a diverse city. Under this system, candidates from communities of color can run for office without worrying about being eliminated in low-turnout primaries attended by an unrepresentative sliver of the electorate.

As Richard DeLeon and Arend Lijphart wrote in a San Francisco Chronicle op-ed earlier this year, "studies show that electorates in low-turnout primary elections held in June or September are typically older, whiter and wealthier than those voting in November ... In the November 2012 supervisorial elections, 73 percent of registered voters participated, including many low-income people of color inspired to vote by the presidential election. In the five board races, all winners

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were people of color."

The op-ed continued, "In contrast, voter turnout in the June primary was only 31 percent. Perhaps the smaller and more demographically privileged June electorate would have chosen the same winners elected in November under ranked choice voting - but we doubt it."

Under RCV, candidates can compete against each other without the specter of community "vote-splitting." In the decade that San Francisco has used RCV, 16 of 18 officeholders elected in San Francisco are people of color (include nine of 11 Board of Supervisors members, and all seven citywide officials).

That's why we're puzzled by claims that ranking candidates on a ballot – first choice, second choice, third choice – is somehow too "complicated" or "confusing" for voters of color. The data tell another story.

A St. Cloud State University study conducted during that Minneapolis rollout of RCV reported that 97 percent of voters of color found using a ranked ballot simple – compared to (a still-impressive) 94 percent of white voters.

"Persons of color are more likely to understand how RCV functions better than white voters," said the study.

In a time when so many forces seemed determined to restrict participatory democracy, Ranked Choice Voting offers a simple, sensible and *proven* way to expand it. We're proud to stand on the front lines of voting reform in Minnesota, and we're excited to show the rest of the country, this coming November, the way to a healthier and ultimately more inclusive politics.

Co-signers of the letter:



Sen. Patricia Torres Ray, Senate District 63

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Rep. Susan Allen, House District 62B



Rep. Ellison, director, Minneapolis Public Schools Board of Education



Rep. Vega, president, Hmong American Partnership; FairVote MN board member



Terra Cole, executive director, Heritage Park

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Henry Jimenez, youth advocate and organizer, One Minneapolis



Gerald Anzures, CEO, Pro Health Care, Inc. and Language Banc, Inc.; FairVote MN board



Ilhan Omar, chairwoman, New Americans PAC