

Ranked Choice Voting and Civility: New Evidence from American Cities

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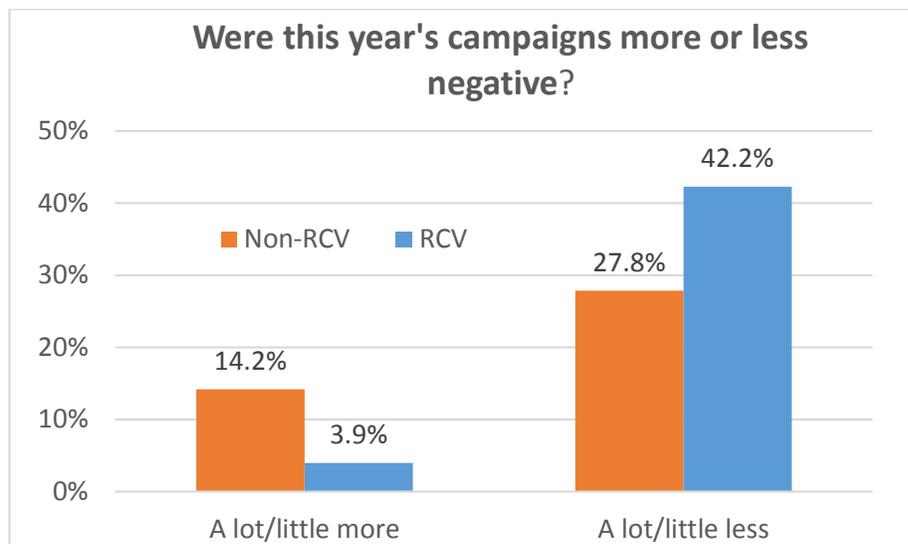
April 2014

By Andrew Douglas

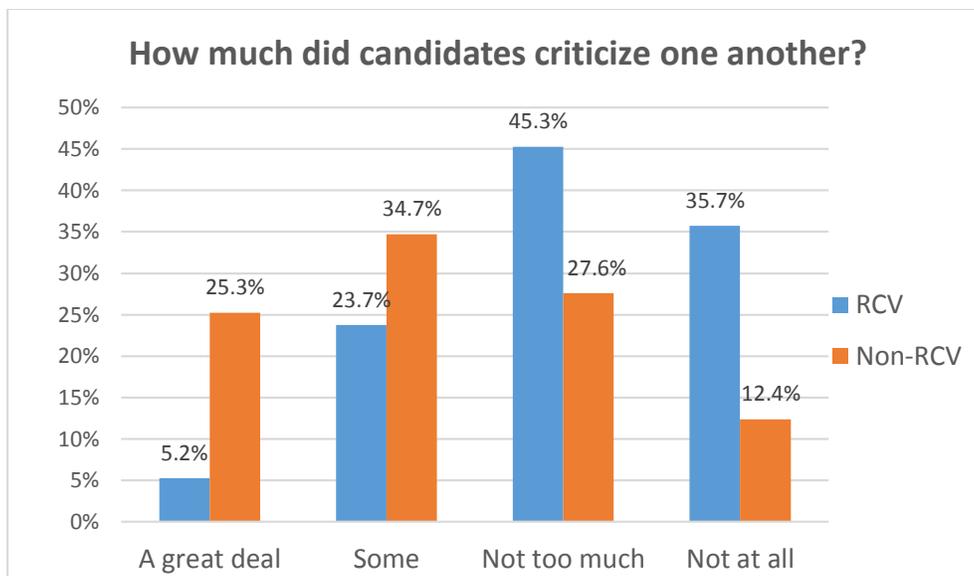
Ranked choice voting (RCV) has been associated with a range of civic benefits, but in the context of the polarized politics of the United States its potential to promote civil and inclusive campaigns is especially promising. As the use of ranked choice voting has increased in the U.S. – including adoptions in Minnesota’s Twin Cities and the Bay Area in California – there is now more data available to test this idea in American elections. Highlights from two recent studies suggest that RCV has been embraced by voters and candidates alike, who see RCV as a means of reducing divisive politics and fostering more positive, inclusive, and informative campaigns.

The charts in this analysis are based largely on data from a random sample survey of 2,400 likely voters, conducted after the November 2013 elections by the Eagleton Poll at Rutgers University in collaboration with Professor Caroline Tolbert (University of Iowa) and Todd Donovan (Western Washington University). Half of the respondents were from one of three cities holding elections with RCV: Minneapolis (MN), where RCV was used for mayor and 21 other offices; St. Paul (MN), where RCV was used for mayor and a city council race; and Cambridge (MA), where the multi-seat form of RCV was used to elect the city council and school committee. The other half of respondents were from one of seven non-RCV control cities with similar demographics, including Seattle (WA), Tulsa (OK) and Boston (MA). Larger cities had proportionally larger shares of respondents. In addition, data is presented from a survey by Tolbert and Donovan of more than 200 candidates from cities holding RCV elections in 2011 to 2013 and from control cities. While wider adoption of RCV in the United States would allow for more robust conclusions about its effects, these initial results are encouraging.

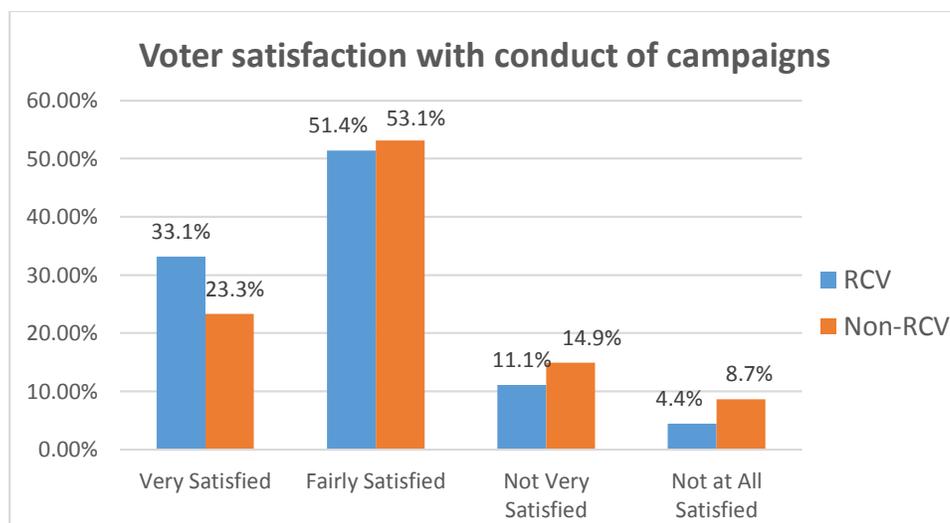
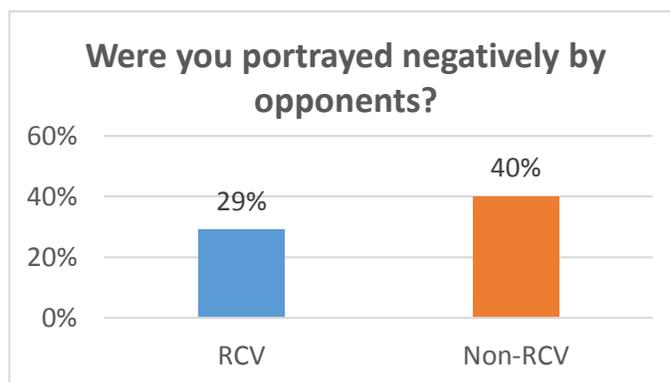
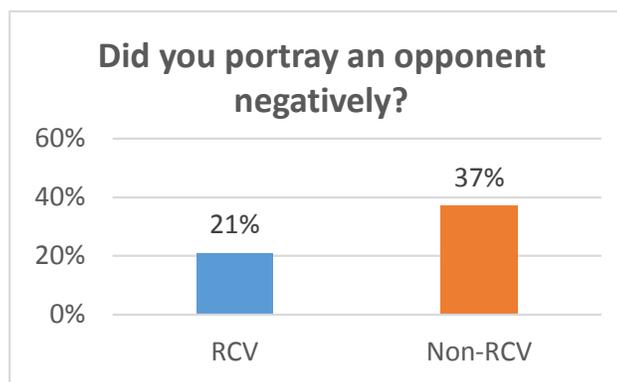
Impact on campaign tone: When asked if this year’s campaigns were more or less negative than other recent political contests, voters in ranked choice voting cities were significantly more likely to report that the 2013 election was less negative, and significantly less likely to report that the campaigns were more negative.



Similarly, voters from RCV cities were significantly less likely to report that candidates criticized one another “a great deal” than were voters from non-RCV cities (5.3% to 25.3%). Meanwhile, as the chart below illustrates, they were nearly three times as likely to say that candidates had not criticized one another at all (35.7% to 12.4%).

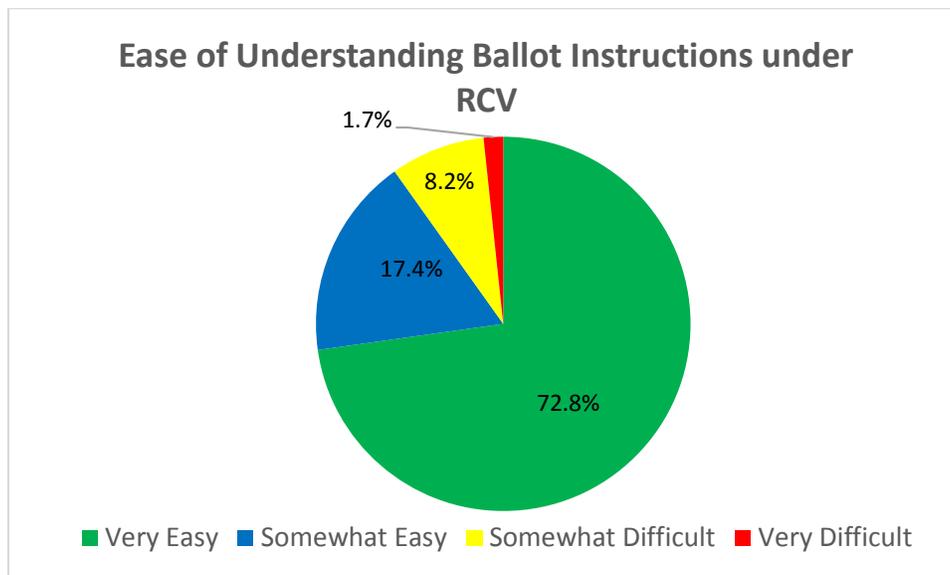


Evidence from the Donovan-Tolbert candidate survey found similar opinions about the effects of ranked choice voting from those on the other side of the electoral process. Candidates who participated in RCV elections were significantly less likely to claim that they had been portrayed or described negatively by their opponents, or to admit that they had portrayed an opponent negatively.

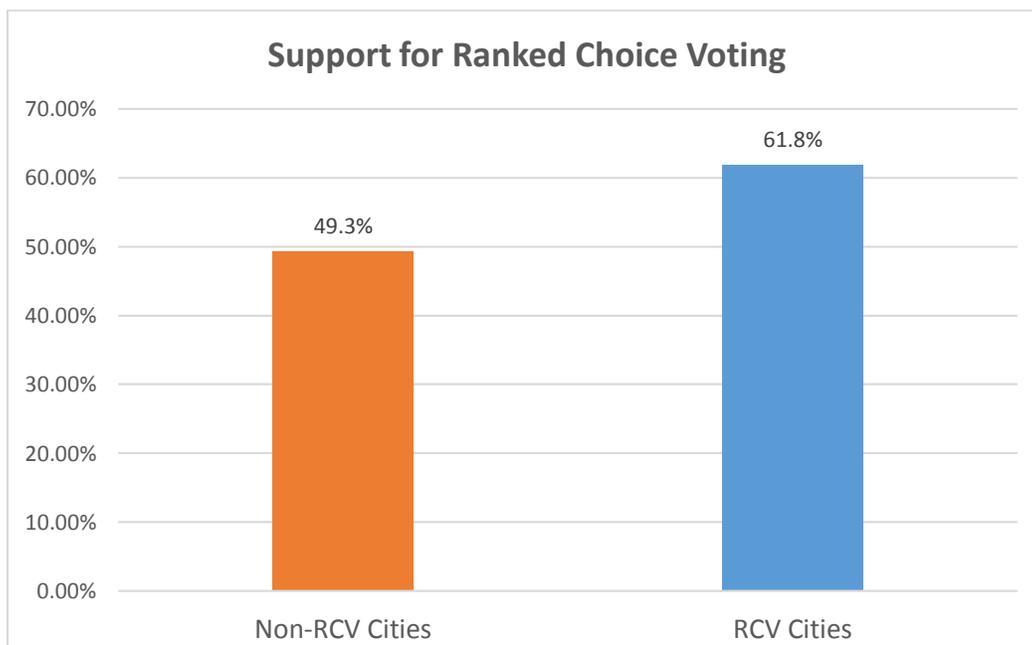


Voter satisfaction: The reduction in negative campaigning likely contributed to the greater overall satisfaction of voters with the conduct of campaigns in cities with ranked choice voting. Such voters were significantly more likely to report that they were “very satisfied,” and nearly half as likely to describe themselves as “not at all satisfied.”

Ease of voting with RCV: The survey of voters also found that the vast majority of those who have voted in a ranked choice voting election adapted to the new ballot with ease. Over 90% of those surveyed reported that understanding the instructions on their RCV ballot was either somewhat or very easy.



Support for RCV: Support for ranked choice voting is strong in the three RCV cities surveyed. Given the clear improvements to the tenor of campaigns seen in cities with RCV, the ease with which voters have adapted to using it, and the system’s ability to avoid problems with traditional plurality voting elections (the spoiler effect) and runoff elections (costs and turnout), it is no surprise that support for RCV is strong among those who have experienced it.



Over 60% of respondents in RCV cities supported the system, while nearly half of respondents elsewhere did so. While these results are indicative of a strong base of support for ranked choice voting across most cities that were surveyed, it also suggests that first-hand experience with RCV sustains or improves attitudes toward the system.

Caroline Tolbert is a professor of political science at the University of Iowa, where she focuses on voting, elections, public opinion, and representation. She is the co-author of eight books and nearly 50 articles in academic journals. Her work has been funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, Smith Richardson Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), Partnership for a Connected Illinois, One Community (Cleveland), and the National Science Foundation (NSF). She is the author of the forthcoming paper *Experiments in Election Reform: Voter Perceptions of Campaigns under Ranked Choice Voting vs. Plurality Voting*, which analyzes data from the survey of voters presented here.

“There appears to be a systematic relationship between availability of RCV elections and perceptions of relatively more positive electoral campaigns.” - Dr. Caroline Tolbert

Todd Donovan is a professor of political science at Western Washington University, where he studies the relationship between representation and electoral systems, public opinions, political behavior, direct democracy, and American state politics. He is the author of 10 books on elections and campaigns, and over 50 peer reviewed journal articles. He is the author of the forthcoming paper *Candidate Perceptions of Campaigns under Preferential and Plurality Voting*, which analyzes the above-referenced survey of candidates in plurality and ranked choice voting elections, finding that candidates in RCV systems were more likely to praise and less likely to criticize their opponents, and that they were less likely to report that discourse during the campaign took a negative tone.

*“RCV candidates were more likely than plurality candidates to report that rivals were praising each other... more likely to say that their contests were less negative than other elections... and less likely to report that their campaign or their opponent’s campaign was negative.”
- Dr. Todd Donovan*

Our thanks to the Democracy Fund for supporting this project.