



Ranked Choice Voting in Practice:

Candidate Civility in Ranked Choice Elections, 2013 & 2014 Survey Brief

In 2013, FairVote received a \$300,000 grant from the Democracy Fund to coordinate a research project on the impact of ranked choice voting on the civility and substance of election campaigns in American cities.

As part of the project, the Eagleton Poll surveyed more than 4,800 likely voters in 21 cities after their local city elections (in November 2013 or November 2014).

In a ranked choice voting (RCV) election, voters rank candidates in order of preference. The tally of RCV votes simulates a series of “instant runoffs.” In each “runoff,” the last-place candidate is defeated and ballots cast for that candidate are added to the tally of the next-ranked candidate on each ballot. The runoffs continue until a winner emerges. This process means that RCV rewards candidates who can win second and third choices from a broad range of voters *in addition to* first choices from a large core of supporters.

In theory, RCV incentivizes campaign civility because, in order to win second and third choice rankings, a candidate needs to appeal to other candidates’ supporters. The increasing use of RCV in the United States, including in four Bay Area cities in California and Minnesota’s Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, enables rigorous testing of the effects of RCV on the civility of election campaigns.

As part of a broader project funded by the Democracy Fund, the Eagleton Poll at Rutgers University has conducted two polls—one in 2013 and another in 2014—that explore the impact of RCV on city elections in the United States. Each poll surveyed a random sample of more than 2,400 likely voters,¹ the great majority of whom had voted in their local election that year. The surveys were conducted in English and Spanish and on cell and landline telephones.

In November 2013, half of respondents surveyed by the Eagleton Poll were in three cities holding RCV elections: 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).

Established in 1971, the Eagleton Poll at Rutgers University is a widely-respected source of rigorous university-based public interest polling. For over 40 years, the Eagleton Poll has conducted the premier statewide poll measuring New Jersey public opinion.

In November 2014, the Eagleton Poll conducted an expanded version of the same survey in 11 Californian cities: the four Bay Area cities that use RCV (Berkeley, Oakland, San Francisco, and San Leandro) and seven control cities. In the 2014 survey, 1,345 respondents were likely voters in one of four cities holding elections with RCV: 685 respondents from Oakland, which used RCV to elect a new mayor and half of its city council and school board; 395 respondents from San Leandro, which used RCV to elect a new mayor and three city councilors in citywide races; 151 respondents from San Francisco, which adopted RCV first in the Bay Area and in 2014 used RCV in one competitive city council election and five less competitive elections in its 11 wards; and 114 respondents from Berkeley, where there were two competitive RCV city

¹ Likely voters are defined as currently registered voters who, when asked, expressed interest in local affairs.

council races among its eight wards. The 2014 survey also included 1,111 likely voters in one of seven control cities in California with demographics and social structures comparable to a surveyed RCV city.²

Building on analysis by Andrew Douglas in his 2013 report and Sarah John in her 2014 report, this research brief summarizes the key trends and findings of the 2013 and 2014 surveys. 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. The data provide evidence of RCV's positive effect on civility, widespread general support for RCV, and voters' ease with voting on a RCV ballot.

Summary of Findings

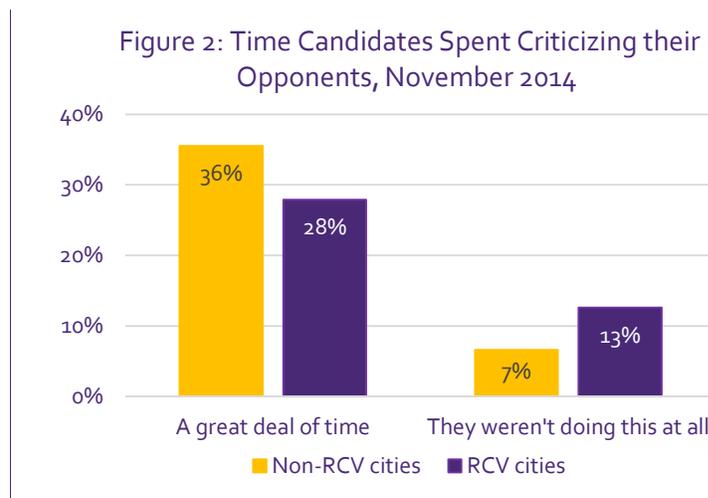
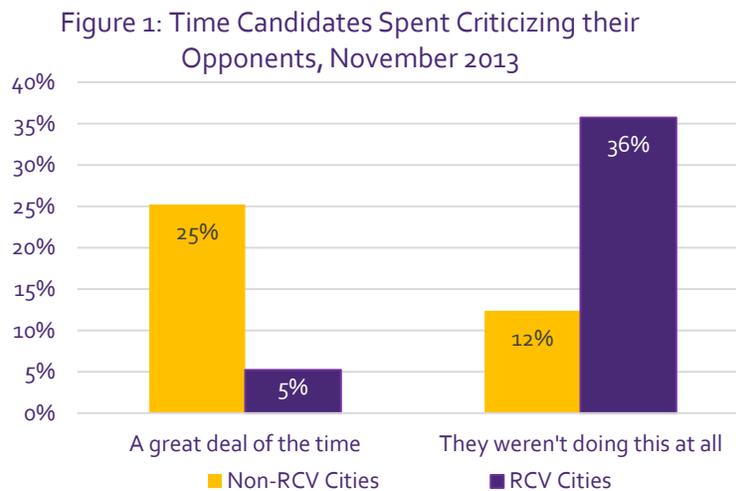
- In both surveys, more respondents in cities using RCV reported **candidates spent little time criticizing opponents** than in cities that did not use RCV. In the 2013 survey, only 5% of respondents thought that candidates criticized each other "a great deal of the time" compared to 25% in non-RCV cities. Similarly, only 28% of RCV-city respondents reported candidates criticized each other "a great deal of the time" in the 2014 California survey, compared to 36% of respondents in non-RCV cities.
- More respondents in cities using RCV reported **less negative campaigns** than in cities that did not use RCV. In the 2013 survey, 42% of respondents in RCV cities found the 2013 campaign to be less negative whereas only 28% of voters in non-RCV cities shared a similar sentiment. In the 2014 survey in California, 18% of RCV-city respondents perceived the 2014 campaign as less negative than recent local campaigns compared to 13% of respondents in non-RCV cities.
- 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. Only 29% of candidates in RCV cities reported being portrayed negatively by opponents, compared to 40% in non-RCV cities.
- In the 2013 survey, an overwhelming majority (90%) of respondents in RCV cities found the RCV ballot **easy to understand**. Similarly, 89% of respondents in RCV cities in California found the RCV ballot **easy to understand**.
- In California, more respondents (49%) in RCV cities reported **understanding RCV extremely or very well** than reported understanding the top-two primary extremely or very well (40%). (The question was not asked in the 2013 survey)
- A majority of all respondents in both surveys believed **RCV should be used in local elections in their city**. Support was greatest in cities already using RCV: in the 2013 survey, 62% of those in RCV cities supported its use in their local elections; in the 2014 survey in California, 57% of respondents in cities using RCV supported its use. In cities that use plurality voting methods, 49% of respondents in the 2013 survey support the introduction of RCV for their local elections and in the 2014 survey in California 54% supported the introduction of RCV into their local city.

² The 2014 control cities, all in California, were Alameda (101 respondents), Anaheim (100), Richmond (349), Stockton (111), San Jose (203), Santa Ana (100) and Santa Clara (147). Each held city elections in Nov. 2014.

Impact on campaign tone

Respondents from RCV cities reported lower levels of criticism among candidates than those in non-RCV cities. In the 2013 survey, 5% of respondents in RCV cities thought candidates criticized each other “a great deal” compared to 25% in non-RCV cities.³ In the 2014 survey in California, 28% in RCV cities responded that candidates criticized one another “a great deal”. By contrast, 36% of respondents from non-RCV cities reported a great deal of criticism between candidates.

The contrast between candidate-on-candidate criticism levels in RCV and non-RCV cities (Figures 1 and 2) is much larger in the 2013 survey than in the 2014 survey in Californian cities. However, Californian likely voters in cities using RCV consistently perceived less candidate-on-candidate criticism than in non-RCV cities.



The proposition that a less negative campaigning style accompanies RCV is bolstered when we consider respondents’ views on whether the recent campaigns were more or less negative than other recent local political contests. When asked if this year’s campaigns (2013) were more or less negative than other recent political contests, 42% of likely voters in the 2013 survey in RVC cities thought local campaigns

³ All percentages reported are percentage of valid responses. Responses of “don’t know” and refusals to answer are excluded from the data.

were *less* negative (Figure 3), compared to the 28% of likely voters in non-RCV cities. Furthermore, just 4% of respondents in RCV cities felt local campaigns were *more* negative than in previous years whereas 14% of non-RCV respondents thought their local campaigns were more negative.

In the 2014 California survey, more respondents in RCV cities reported that the 2014 election was less negative than prior contests (Figure 4). Overall, 18% of respondents in RCV cities, thought that the campaign was less negative than in the recent past. In non-RCV cities, only 13% of respondents believed the 2014 local campaign was *less* negative than recent contests. Similarly, only 17% of respondents in RCV cities believed the 2014 local campaign was *more* negative, compared to 23% in the non-RCV cities.

Figure 3: Negativity of 2013 Campaigns Compared to Previous Local Campaigns, November 2013

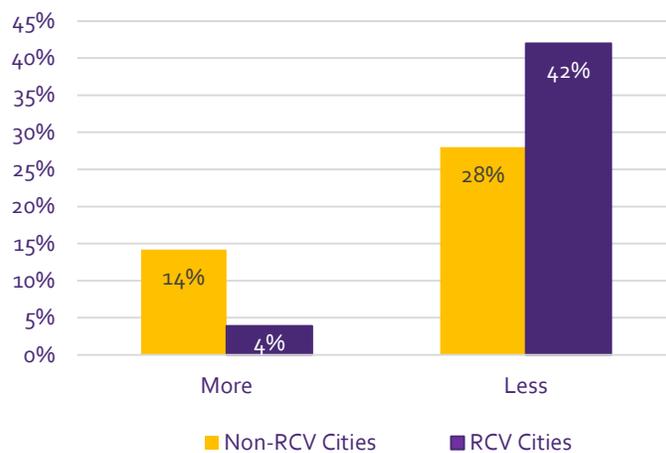
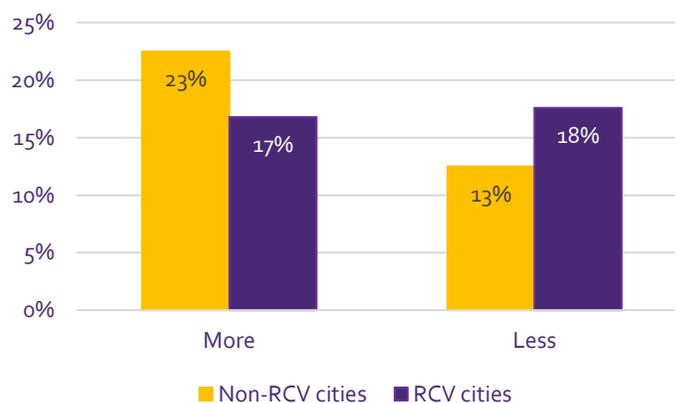


Figure 4: Negativity of 2014 Campaigns Compared to Previous Local Campaigns, November 2014

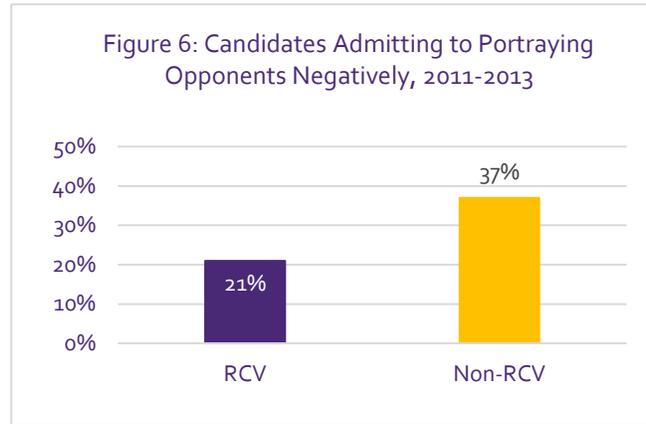
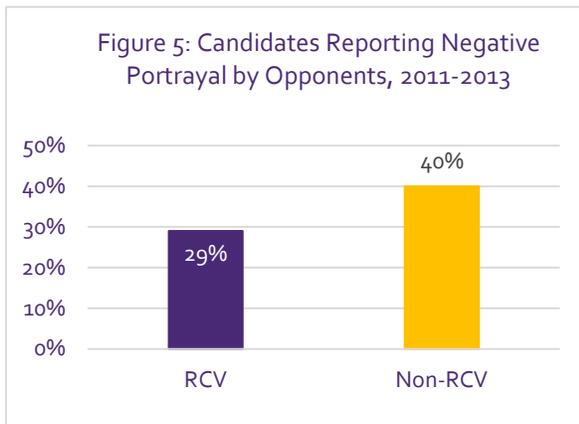


The tendency for likely voters in RCV cities to report less negative campaigning was statistically significant in both the 2013 and 2014 surveys, even though each survey focused on a different set of city elections. In the 2013 survey, respondents in non-RCV cities were more than three-times more likely to report that campaigns in their city elections were more negative than in past contests than were

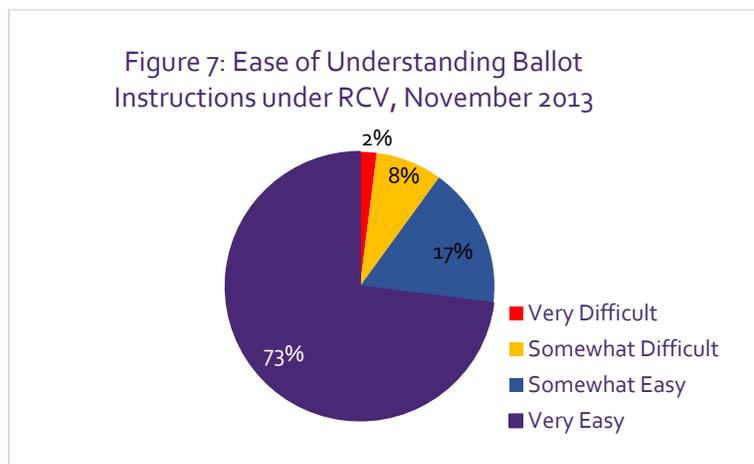
respondents in RCV cities. In 2014, respondents in non-RCV cities were 35% more likely than respondents in RCV cities to report that campaigns in their city elections were more negative than in past contests.

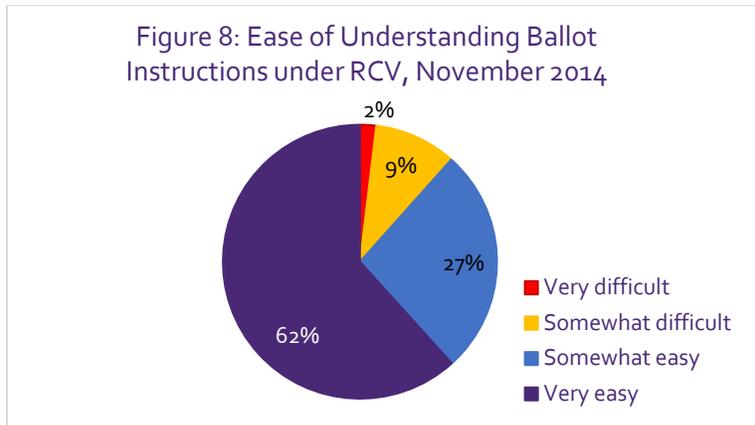
One potential reason for the smaller difference between RCV and non-RCV respondents' perceptions of negativity in the 2014 survey is that RCV is well-established in the Bay Area. San Francisco has used RCV to elect city leaders since 2004, and Berkeley, Oakland and San Leandro previously used RCV in competitive elections in 2010 and 2012. As a result, any reduced negativity caused by the use of RCV would have mostly been perceived in campaigns before the 2014 campaign. By contrast, in 2013, one of the three surveyed RCV cities (Minneapolis), was holding its first serious citywide contest with RCV – a competitive mayoral election – and St. Paul was holding its first citywide election using RCV. The data from the 2014 and 2013 surveys suggests that a consistently less negative campaigning style accompanies RCV.

Evidence from the Donovan-Tolbert candidate survey (Figures 5 and 6) 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.



Ease of voting using RCV

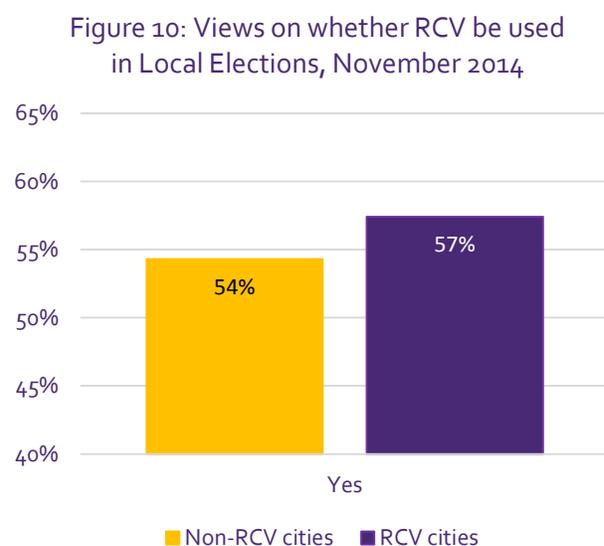
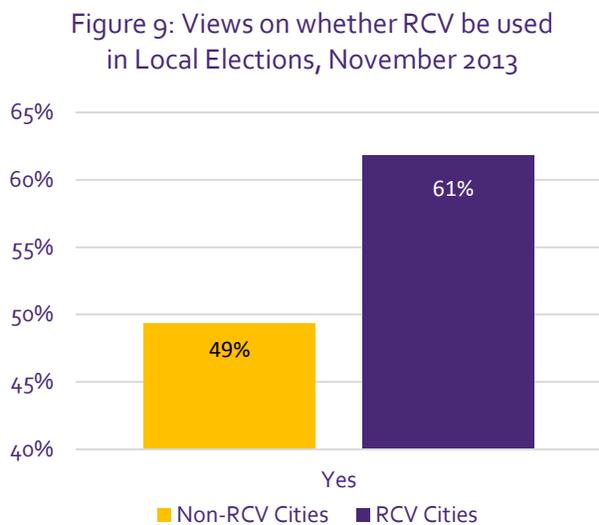




The 2013 and 2014 surveys also found that the vast majority of those who have voted in a RCV election understood the ballot with ease. In both surveys, almost 90% of respondents reported understanding the instructions on their RCV ballot was either somewhat or very easy (Figures 7 and 8).

Support for RCV

A majority of respondents from RCV cities supported the use of RCV in local elections in both surveys, with 62% of RCV respondents supporting the continued use of RCV in the 2013 survey and 57% supporting its use in the 2014 California survey (Figures 9 and 10). Opposition to RCV never topped 48% in any city using RCV. In the 2013 survey, about 49% of respondents from non-RCV cities supported the introduction of RCV to local elections. Interestingly, a majority of those in non-RCV cities in California (54%) supported the introduction of RCV to their local elections. In two non-RCV cities (Santa Ana and Santa Clara) in the 2014 survey, support for RCV was over 60%.⁴ These results indicate a strong base of support for RCV. They also indicate that first-hand experience sustains or improves attitudes toward RCV, even in cities with controversial elections. For example, in Oakland, 60% supported RCV despite a close mayoral election in 2010 that triggered criticism of RCV by backers of one of the losing candidates.



⁴ The question was worded as follows: "Do you think ranked choice voting, where voters can rank candidates in order of preference with their first choice voting most, should be used in local elections in _____"

Conclusion

Both the 2013 and 2014 surveys indicate that voters perceive less criticism between candidates and lower levels of negative campaigning in elections conducted using RCV. Results of the surveys also suggest that most voters easily understand RCV ballot instructions and want RCV to be used in their local elections. Support for ranked choice voting was strong in the three RCV cities surveyed in the 2013 survey and in the four RCV cities in the 2014 California survey.

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.

Information about the Ranked Choice Voting Civility Project

The Eagleton Poll survey data presented here are part of a larger project investigating ranked choice voting in local elections. The project is funded by the Democracy Fund, conducted with Professors Caroline Tolbert, Todd Donovan, Martha Kropf, and David Kimball and assisted by FairVote's staff and its Ranked Choice Voting Academic Advisory Committee.

Professors Tolbert and Donovan are responsible for developing and evaluating the telephone survey. 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. 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.

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