

# The Adoption of Ranked Choice Voting Raised Turnout 10 Points



An expansive new study by University of Missouri-St. Louis Professor, David Kimball, and Ph.D. candidate, Joseph Anthony, examines the impact of ranked choice voting (RCV) on voter turnout in 26 American cities across 79 elections.

Kimball and Anthony's study, which will soon be submitted for publication, shows that the adoption of RCV:

- is associated with a 10 point increase in voter turnout compared to primary and runoff elections
- is not associated with any change in turnout in the General Election
- is not associated with any change in the number of residual votes
- did not exacerbate inequities in voter turnout and residual votes in Minneapolis, Minnesota

*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, Professor David Kimball has researched the impact of ranked choice voting on voter turnout. Professor Kimball has participated as an expert in several court cases on election administration, voting rights, and redistricting. He is the co-author of three books: *Helping America Vote*, *Lobbying and Policy Change*, and *Why Americans Split Their Tickets*. He is co-editor of *Controversies in Voting Behavior*.*

Kimball and Anthony find that, compared to the primary and runoff elections that RCV eliminated, **the adoption of RCV in a November election was associated with a 10 point increase in voter turnout**, even when controlling for other factors that boost turnout like competitive mayoral elections and even-year elections. Considering only turnout in November general elections, there was no statistically significant decline associated with the introduction of ranked choice voting. Electoral competition and the timing of the election (odd or even years) have a more significant impact on turnout in general elections than RCV.

Kimball and Anthony provide a much fuller picture of RCV and voter turnout in the United States than previous studies. Their work includes seven cities that use RCV, including Minneapolis, St. Paul and San Francisco, as well as numerous other cities in the West, Midwest and Northeast. Kimball and Anthony compare changes in turnout in cities that adopted RCV against those cities that did not—both before and after adoption—which means we can be confident that the observed increase in voter turnout was systematically associated with RCV and not the vagaries of any one (or two) contests.

Kimball and Anthony also assessed rates of residual votes (these include overvotes—when a voter selects too many candidates—and undervotes—when a voter makes no selection for an office). Kimball and Anthony show that, in the 26 cities studied, **the adoption of RCV was not associated with any change in the number of residual votes**.

In assessing the turnout of different demographic groups, Kimball and Anthony turned to the experience of Minneapolis, Minnesota for a more fine-grained analysis. It is true that voter turnout in 2013, the second election in which Minneapolis used RCV, was higher in wards with high proportions of white and high-income people than in those with high concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities and low-income people. However, this is a trend all across the United States and, if RCV is to be blamed for turnout disparities, we must ask whether the disparities were worse in 2013 than before the introduction of RCV. In fact, the observed turnout disparities between high- and low-income wards were just as prevalent in 2005 (the last local election before RCV) as they were in 2013. **While RCV did not ameliorate demographic inequities in turnout, it did not exacerbate them in Minneapolis.**

When we take a more expansive, representative look at RCV across the United States we see that RCV increases overall turnout when compared to primary and runoff elections. Other than that, RCV has little impact on electoral participation and the inequalities that too often accompany it. RCV does, however, give voters more choice, solves the problem of vote splitting and improves the tone of candidate campaigns.

For more on ranked choice voting visit [www.fairvote.org](http://www.fairvote.org) or call (301) 270-4616.

