

Tips for Bay Area Candidates in Ranked Choice Voting Elections

FairVote California (FVCA) provides this campaign strategy guide to help candidates running in ranked choice voting (RCV) elections in the Bay Area cities of Berkeley, Oakland, San Francisco, and San Leandro. This information is based on analyses of RCV and conversations with candidates and campaign consultants in these cities and in other cities with RCV like Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota, Portland in Maine, and Cambridge in Massachusetts.

FVCA is contacting all of the candidate campaigns to provide the following information:

1. Review how ranked choice voting works
2. What it takes to win in RCV elections
3. General candidate advice

Key Features of RCV

- *Ranking candidates* - Voters vote by ranking individual candidates in order of preference: 1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice. (Voters are limited to three rankings in Bay Area cities, but may be allowed more in the future with new voting equipment.) A voter's 2nd choice will count if their 1st choice is eliminated. A voter's 3rd choice will count if their 1st choice and 2nd choice has been eliminated.
- *Value of ranking candidates* - Voters do not have to rank three candidates, but are encouraged to do so unless until they are indifferent about the remaining candidates. Ranking a lower choice candidate never counts against a top choice, but it may help defeat a voter's last choice candidate. In the Bay Area's most contested elections, about three in four voters rank three candidates; nearly nine in ten will rank at least two.
- *One election, not two* - By allowing voters to rank candidates, RCV can combine two rounds of voting into a single "instant runoff" election. Voters only have to make one trip to the polls and candidates can focus on campaigning for one election instead of two. With one general election, voter turnout will be higher, more representative, and diverse.
- *Getting a #1 vote matters most, but so do backup choices* - Earning a voter's #1 ranking is most important, but earning a #2 and #3 ranking can make a difference in the final head-to-head comparison between the strongest candidates. If a candidate has too few votes to stand a chance, the vote will be used to help that voter's next choice.
- *No "split voting"* - multiple candidates from the same community can run without worry of the "spoiler effect" as long as like-minded voters rank candidates in order of choice.

What it Takes to Win Under RCV

Winning a RCV election outright requires that a candidate receive a majority (at least 50% +1) of valid votes. If no candidate is the first choice of a majority, an “instant” runoff is triggered – instant in that the voters need not return to the polls to determine the winner.

With RCV, every voter gets one vote – and no more. Some have wrongly suggested that RCV gives some voters two votes. But a voter never has their ballot count for more than one candidates at a time. A voter’s ballot will only count for a first choice if that candidate still has a chance to win. Your vote will count for a lower choice if your top-ranked candidates have lost.

In a close RCV contest, then, a candidate needs to do well in first choices and then receive additional votes from being a second or third choice of voters who preferred defeated candidates. We encourage all candidates to reach out to various communities of voters to secure their support as a second or third choice. Evidence suggests that the best way to accomplish that goal is direct interaction -- door-knocking, community meetings and other tactics where voters come to believe you will listen.

As a candidate seeking to win, two important questions to ask yourself are:

- 1) “How can I maximize my first choices?” and,
- 2) “How can I be the second and third choices of people who rank other candidates first?”

Here’s what Minneapolis mayor Betsy Hodges said in a [video interview](#) about her 2013 race, when she earned an upset victory by winning the most first choices against a better-funded opponent and far more second and third support support from backers of defeated candidates:

“It was a much more interesting project to figure out how to make a case for myself, and it was also a really great way to extend the conversation.. ..You know, making the phone calls and saying “Hi, I’m Betsy and here’s why I’m great. I’m not the first person you think is great, well how about second? Can I be your second choice?” Now, asking to be someone’s third choice [pause, crowd laughter]...is exactly like you think it is -- the first five or six times. After that you realize, we’re just having a conversation and this person is still on the line. This person is still on the phone. We are still talking about the future of Minneapolis.”

General Candidate Advice

The candidate with the most first choices usually wins. You need first choices most of all, so don’t just say “Vote for Me (Candidate X).” Instead, clarify that you would most like to be a first choice even as you you still would appreciate their support as as second or third when they decide to back someone else. ”

KEY POINT: With RCV in a single-seat contest, it’s impossible for a candidate to win with just second-choices votes even if every single voter ranks that candidate second.

Use phrasing like “Rank Candidate X #1,” or “Give your 1st Ranking to Candidate X.”

Even if you think you could win by receiving the winning threshold of the first choices, pursue second and third choices by reaching out to supporters of other candidates, just in case.

KEY POINT: “Bullet Voting” Won’t Help You Win, But Suggesting It May Help You Lose

Some candidates mistakenly believe that if their supporters rank a second or third choice, this might somehow dilute the strength of that voter’s first preference or somehow hurt the chances of that favorite candidate getting elected. That dynamic can occur in a traditional at-large election where more than one candidate wins, but it is *not* the case with ranked voting. Under RCV, ranking backup choices can never hurt the chances of a voter’s first choice.

If a voter has ranked you first, that ballot will *only* count as a vote for you and provide no benefit to any other candidate *as long as you’re still in the running*. The backup choices marked on a ballot are only considered if you, as their first-choice candidate, have been eliminated and are not in the runoff count. If you’ve been eliminated, it can’t help or hurt you if your supporters’ ballots indicate backup choices for the RCV count.

If your campaign urges your supporters not to rank alternate choices, you run the risk of discouraging backers of other candidates to not rank you as an backup choice as well.

Some campaigns see strategic value in actively encouraging voters to rank a certain other candidate second – as a way of suggesting that supporters of that candidate might be wise to rank you as their second choice. But even then, it is wise to find connection with backers of all candidates who may be eliminated and have their votes go to a backup choice.

What to Put on Your Campaign Materials

In cities where RCV is used, campaign materials typically ask people for their first-choice ranking. Below is an example with actual ranking spelled out- - something you only should do if you have endorsed other candidates..

Ranked Choice Voting Ballot

MAYOR Rank your first, second and third choice candidates in the columns below. One to be elected.		
1 1st Choice Select one	2 2nd Choice, if any. Must be DIFFERENT from your 1st choice. Select One	3 3rd Choice, if any. Must be DIFFERENT from your 1st and 2nd choices. Select One
<input checked="" type="radio"/> YOUR NAME Party	<input type="radio"/> YOUR NAME Party	<input type="radio"/> YOUR NAME Party
<input type="radio"/> CANDIDATE B Party	<input type="radio"/> CANDIDATE B Party	<input type="radio"/> CANDIDATE B Party
<input type="radio"/> CANDIDATE C Party	<input checked="" type="radio"/> CANDIDATE C	<input type="radio"/> CANDIDATE C Party
<input type="radio"/> CANDIDATE D Party	<input type="radio"/> CANDIDATE D Party	<input checked="" type="radio"/> CANDIDATE D Party

You want people to rank you #1, and if they won't do that, to rank you #2. "Can I count on your #1 vote? If you're committed to another candidate, please consider giving me your #2 ranking."

You may wish to publicly disclose your personal #2 and #3 rankings, or even explicitly ask supporters of those candidates to rank you #2 or #3. Endorsing organizations commonly indicate their #1, #2 and #3 rankings.

When listing endorsements, it is common and fair practice to accurately cite the endorsement ranking.

Sample Campaign Materials

