Impact of Ranked Choice Voting on Representation
How Ranked Choice Voting Affects Women and People of Color Candidates in California

In 2016, FairVote’s research team, led by Dr. Sarah John, examined the effect of ranked choice voting (RCV) on women and people of color running for elected office in the California Bay Area. A comparison of the four cities that use RCV (San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, and San Leandro) to seven control cities reveals an increase in representation for women, people of color, and women of color in cities that use ranked choice voting. While the initial report was published in August of 2016, we have updated this summary to include all RCV elections through November 2016.

San Francisco began using RCV in 2004, followed by Oakland, Berkeley, and San Leandro in 2010. Fifty-three (53) offices are elected by ranked choice voting in the Bay Area. Women and people of color hold 47 of these seats (89%), a sharp rise from pre-RCV elections. Since RCV implementation, women and people of color have won 81% of all elections, compared to 67% in the same amount of races pre-RCV.

Ranked choice voting’s positive effects are likely related to how often it replaces low, unrepresentative, primary or runoff elections and that it allows for multiple candidates to run without splitting the vote.

Key Findings

• **More people of color in elected office, especially women of color.** Since the introduction of RCV, women of color have won 23% of all contests, up from 14% pre-RCV. People of color have won 62% of all contests. People of color now hold 13 of the 18 seats in San Francisco elected by RCV.

• **Comparative increase in the proportion of women in elected office.** The introduction of ranked choice voting in California led to an increase in the proportion of women (and especially women of color) winning local political office. Cities that implemented RCV have seen a small increase in the proportion of women since implementation, while cities that do not have RCV have seen a decrease over this period. Women won 9 of 11 open seats in the 2014 elections across all 4 cities, and 2 out of 3 open seats in San Francisco in 2016. In Oakland, women now hold 13/18 seats elected by ranked choice voting.

• **Increase in the percentage of candidates of color and female candidates of color.** RCV led to an increase in the percent of city council candidates who are people of color and women of color.

These findings are robust and statistically significant. FairVote’s study controls for the impact of socio-economic factors (like educational attainment and the racial composition of the city), political factors (like partisanship and voter turnout), as well as electoral factors (incumbency, the use of term limits, and public financing).

© Copyright September 2017. We encourage readers of this report to use and share its contents, but ask that they cite this report as their source.
This study does not identify the mechanism by which RCV increases descriptive representation, yet the unambiguously positive impact of RCV on descriptive representation encourages further study. RCV might be fairer for women, people of color, and women of color because RCV:

- replaces low turnout, unrepresentative elections (e.g. primaries or runoff elections) with more representative, high turnout November elections;
- discourages divisive and negative campaigning;
- avoids the spoiler effect, allowing for multiple candidates appealing to similar voters to run without splitting the vote.

Our study shows that ranked choice voting increases the likelihood that a woman will win local elective office. Additionally, RCV increases the proportion of female candidates of color running and winning local elective office. In cities that implemented RCV, 32% of female candidates of color went on to win their races after RCV was implemented, compared to 25% pre-RCV. In comparison, female candidates of color won in decreasing percentages over the same time period in Bay Area cities that did not implement RCV. In city council races, RCV was associated with an increase in the proportion of candidates who were people of color and women of color.

Female candidates of color do not have to fear playing the role of the spoiler to other candidates from their community or candidates with a similar ideology. The importance of second (and third) choices — along with a sizeable core of first choice support — means that candidates who can build broad coalitions of support have better chances of winning with RCV than under single-winner plurality or majority runoff systems. Female candidates of color tend to build broad coalitions of supporters.

*In each of the RCV cities, pre-RCV election data was collected for as many cycles as the city has had RCV elections. We include data beginning in 1995 for non-RCV cities, with the “post” era beginning in 2010. The data represent 249 non-RCV elections and 270 RCV elections. These figures represent updated versions of Figures 9 & 7 in the full report and include data through 2016.

Download the full report at representation2020.com.

Contributors: Dr. Sarah John, Haley Smith, Elizabeth Zack, Cynthia Terrell, Michelle Whittaker, Jennifer Poe, Rob Richie, and Madeline Brown.

The Impact of Ranked Choice Voting on Representation is an initial report on findings from a study of the effects of RCV on the candidacy and election of women, people of color and women of color in California Bay Area city elections.