

Bulletin Articles Related to LWVDC Study on Alternative Voting

November 2020

"LWVDC Study on Ranked Choice Voting"

December 2020

"Ranked Choice Voting on the Ballot"

"What Laws Govern WI Voting Systems"

"How Would RCV Have Affected the August 2020 Primaries?"

February 2021

"How to Evaluate a Voting System"

March 2021

"Mock Election Results - RCV"

"What is Proportional Representation"

LWVDC Study on Ranked Choice Voting

Matt Szczepankiewicz, rcvstudy@lwvdanecounty.org

Ranked-choice voting (RCV) is a voting method used in various elections across 26 different states. This method requires the winner of an election to be supported by more than 50% of voters (a majority) rather than only getting more votes than any other candidate (a plurality). In plurality voting – the system currently used in all elections in Dane County – candidates can fail to achieve the support of the majority of voters. Consider a hypothetical race between three candidates: Vicky Violet, Lucas Lavender, and Gale Goldenrod. Violet and Lavender have similar platforms, while Goldenrod's platform is in opposition. Most Violet voters would support Lavender if given a second choice; likewise, most Lavender voters would support Violet as their second choice. The election results come in as follows:

Violet: 25%
Lavender: 35%
Goldenrod: 40%

Goldenrod is declared the winner, with more votes than either of the other two candidates. Yet Goldenrod's platform is unpopular with a majority of voters, 60% of whom voted for Violet or Lavender! This is the so-called spoiler effect: any plurality election with more than two candidates runs the risk of splitting the vote and handing the election to a candidate lacking majority support. In a plurality vote, a voter's second or third choices aren't collected.

For RCV, in addition to indicating their first choice, just like in a plurality election, voters may also choose to indicate their second or third choices (or more, depending on the number of candidates). RCV uses that information to create outcomes that better reflect all voters' full preferences. Here's how:

- 1) If a candidate has more than 50% of the votes, they win! In the example above, Goldenrod leads with 40% of the votes, but no candidate has a majority.
- 2) If no candidate has a majority, then the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. In this example, Violet has the fewest votes with only 25%, so Violet is eliminated.
- 3) Next, the eliminated candidate's votes go to each voter's next choice of all the candidates still in the race. For instance, suppose:

- 20% of voters supported Violet with Lavender as their second choice
- 5% of voters supported Violet with Goldenrod as their second choice

The results would then look like this:

Lavender: 55%
Goldenrod: 45%

- 4) Finally, repeat steps 1-3 until a winner emerges. In this case, since Lavender now has 55% of the vote (a majority), Lavender wins.

RCV can be thought of as a way to hold a runoff election instantly (such as a head-to-head between Lavender and Goldenrod); for this reason, it's also known as instant runoff voting. **LWVDC is preparing to study this topic and engage members in order to determine whether to adopt a position on RCV.**

Ranked-Choice Voting on the Ballot

RCV Study Committee, rcvstudy@lwvdanecounty.org

Many voters across the country were asked to weigh in on voting systems this November. There were two statewide ballot measures, in Alaska and Massachusetts, and many more local ballot measures. The questions posed to voters ranged from implementing ranked-choice voting or approval voting to changing primary systems and rules.

Massachusetts had an initiative on their ballot to enact ranked-choice voting for all elections in Massachusetts. **The initiative in Massachusetts failed with only 45% of voters voting in favor of it.**

Alaska's initiative asked voters if they should replace their current system of partisan primaries and plurality voting with an open primary system that allows the top-four winners to advance to the general election which then uses ranked-choice voting. This proposed system should sound familiar to anyone currently reading *The Politics Industry* by Katherine Gehl and Michael Porter. **The initiative in Alaska passed in a close election with 50.6% of voters voting in favor of it.**

States aren't the only ones proposing updates to their voting systems. In St. Louis, Missouri, citizens voted on Proposition D. This initiative proposed the use of approval voting for primaries. In approval voting, voters vote for every candidate of which they approve. This means a voter can vote for as many candidates for a given office as they like. **Proposition D, which passed with 68% of voters voting yes, enacts an open non-partisan primary with approval voting.** The top two winners then move on to the general election which maintains a plurality voting system. Their new approval voting system will apply to the offices of Mayor, Comptroller, President of the Board of Aldermen, and Alderman.

Two municipalities in Minnesota voted yes to enact ranked-choice voting. **Both Bloomington, MN and Minnetonka, MN voted to use ranked-choice for electing Mayor and City Council while eliminating the primary for these offices.** Bloomington's ballot measure passed with 51% voting yes. Minnetonka's passed with 55% voting yes.

In addition to those that made it to the ballot, both North Dakota and Arkansas had nearly successful attempts to get statewide initiatives on their ballots this year for open primaries with ranked-choice voting. Despite obtaining the required number of signatures, in both cases the state supreme court struck down the ballot measure due to technical issues. In North Dakota, the ballot measure was not allowed because "[sponsors of the measure failed to provide a full text of the initiative while they were gathering signatures.](#)" In Arkansas, the "[Arkansas Supreme Court ruled that \[sponsors\] had failed to properly follow the law requiring them to certify that all their paid canvassers passed the necessary background checks.](#)" That same requirement disqualified two other ballot measures. [The law creating that requirement was later struck down as unconstitutional](#), but it was too late to revive the ballot measures. We will likely see new ballot measures in North Dakota and Arkansas soon.

Despite the increasing frequency of such ballot measures around the country, we won't be seeing similar ballot measures in Wisconsin anytime soon. Wisconsin does not have statewide citizen initiatives or what is commonly referred to as 'direct democracy.' The only path to changing voting systems in Wisconsin is through the state legislature.

What Laws Govern WI Voting Systems?

RCV Study Committee, rcvstudy@lwvदानecounty.org

When thinking about the laws affecting our elections, we often focus on hot topics such as voter ID laws or redistricting. We don't often think about the more basic laws that define which voting systems are in use, because they so rarely change. These laws, however, govern the very nature of our elections. They determine how a person wins an election, which and how many candidates may run, who can vote in which races, and in what way a voter can voice their support for a candidate. The way our elections work today may seem like the only logical option because it is all we've ever known, but these were in fact deliberate choices made by people and codified in law. Below are a few excerpts from the WI State Statutes that affect our elections.

Plurality Shall Elect

Wisconsin Statutes Chapter 5 instructs that elections shall use a plurality voting method. This statute applies to all elections, including congressional, statewide, county, municipal, and school boards.

Chapter 5
ELECTIONS — GENERAL PROVISIONS; BALLOTS AND VOTING SYSTEMS.
SUBCHAPTER I
GENERAL PROVISIONS

5.01 Scope. (1) CONSTRUCTION OF CHS. 5 TO 12. Except as otherwise provided, chs. 5 to 12 shall be construed to give effect to the will of the electors, if that can be ascertained from the proceedings, notwithstanding informality or failure to fully comply with some of their provisions.

(2) GENERAL PROVISIONS OF ELECTION LAWS APPLY. **The general provisions of chs. 5 to 12 apply to all elections.**

(3) PLURALITY SHALL ELECT. (a) Except as provided in par. (b), in every election to choose any officer, each elector has one vote for each office unless clearly indicated otherwise. The person receiving the greatest number of legal votes for the office shall be declared elected, and the canvassers shall so determine and certify.

(b) In an election to fill a nonpartisan state office, if no names are certified to appear on the ballot, no person may be declared elected.

Excerpt from WI State Statutes Chapter 5. Highlighting added.

Open Partisan Primaries

WI State Statutes instruct that Wisconsin use what is referred to as an 'Open Primary' for partisan offices. Each party has its own ballot. A voter is given all party ballots regardless of political affiliation. A voter may vote in any party's ballot without requiring party registration but must only vote in one party's primary.

Chapter 5
ELECTIONS — GENERAL PROVISIONS; BALLOTS AND
VOTING SYSTEMS.
SUBCHAPTER II
BALLOT FORM

5.60 Spring election ballots.

(8) BALLOTS FOR PRESIDENTIAL VOTE. (am) Except as authorized in s. 5.655, there shall be a **separate ballot for each recognized political party** filing a certification under s. 8.12 (1), listing the names of all potential candidates of that party determined under s. 8.12 and affording, in addition, an opportunity to the voter to nominate another potential candidate by write-in vote or to vote for an uninstructed delegation to the party convention. The order of presidential candidates on the ballot shall be determined by lot by or under the supervision of the commission. **Each voter shall be given the ballots of all the parties participating in the presidential preference vote, but may vote on one ballot only.**

Excerpt from WI State Statutes Chapter 5. Highlighting added.

No Sore Losers

Often referred to as a 'sore loser' law, Wisconsin State Statutes prohibit a candidate who ran and lost in a party primary from running as an independent candidate in the same race. Sore loser laws are common, existing in some form in 47 states.

| |
|--|
| CHAPTER 8 |
| NOMINATIONS, PRIMARIES, ELECTIONS |
| <p>8.15 Nominations for partisan primary. (7)A candidate may not run in more than one party primary at the same time. No filing official may accept nomination papers for the same person in the same election for more than one party. A person who files nomination papers as the candidate of a recognized political party may not file nomination papers as an independent candidate for the same office at the same election.</p> |

Excerpt from WI State Statutes Chapter 8. Highlighting added.

Questions one might ask when reviewing these laws:

What other options were discussed while this statute was being written?

What effects does this statute have on the outcome of our elections?

What other events were happening in the country or state when this statute was written?

Who might have opposed this statute?

Only Two Candidates

WI State Statutes define the number of candidates allowed on election ballots for many races. In the example below, most of these nonpartisan offices on the spring election ballot are limited to two candidates. This limit dictates how many candidates can win in the spring primary and be presented as options to voters in the following spring election.

| |
|--|
| <p>Chapter 5 ELECTIONS — GENERAL PROVISIONS; BALLOTS AND VOTING SYSTEMS. SUBCHAPTER II BALLOT FORM</p> |
| <p>5.58 Spring primary ballots.</p> <p>(3) NAMES ON SPRING BALLOT. Only 2 candidates for state superintendent, for any judicial office, for any elected seat on a metropolitan sewerage commission or town sanitary district commission, in counties having a population of 750,000 or more, only 2 candidates for the office of comptroller and only 2 candidates for member of the board of supervisors within each district, in counties having a population of less than 750,000 only 2 candidates for each member of the county board of supervisors from each district or numbered seat or only 4 candidates for each 2 members of the county board of supervisors from each district whenever 2 supervisors are elected to unnumbered seats from the same district, in 1st class cities only 2 candidates for any at-large seat and only 2 candidates from any election district to be elected to the board of school directors, in school districts electing school board members to numbered seats, or pursuant to an apportionment plan or district representation plan, only 2 school board candidates for each numbered seat or within each district, and twice as many candidates as are to be elected members of other school boards or other elective officers receiving the highest number of votes at the primary shall be nominees for the office at the spring election.</p> |

Excerpt from WI State Statutes Chapter 5. Highlighting added.

These statutes affect elections at every level in our state. Do you have thoughts or comments about how these laws affect our elections? The study committee would love to hear from you. Email us at rcvstudy@lwvdanecounty.org.

How Would RCV Have Affected the August 2020 Primaries?

RCV Study Committee, rcvstudy@lwvदानecounty.org

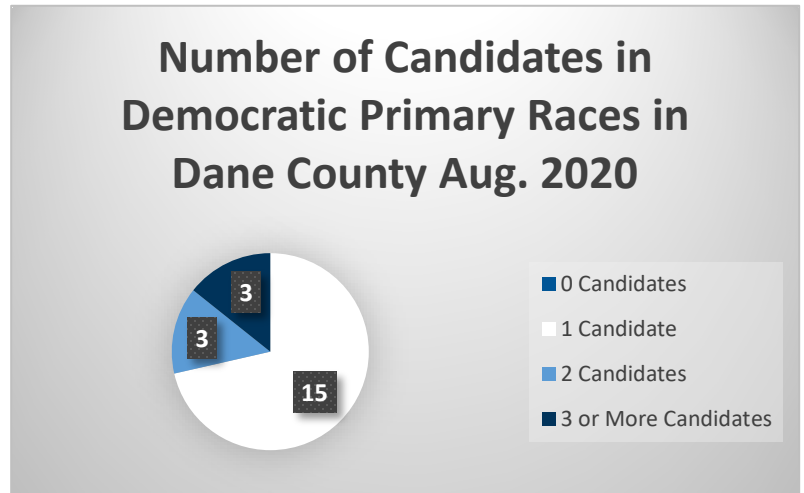
As you know, LWVDC is conducting a study on ranked-choice voting (RCV) and other alternative voting systems. As part of this research, we are looking at recent local election results to determine what effects RCV may have had.

At the time of this analysis, November election results were not yet available, so we focused on the local races in August 2020. This was a partisan primary election. There was a Republican ballot and a Democratic ballot. There was also a Constitution Party ballot that offered no candidates but allowed for write-ins.

Of the twenty-one Democratic primary races in Dane County, only six were competitive. The other fifteen races had only one candidate. Since this was a primary election, some of those fifteen races went on to be competitive in the general election. Of the competitive races, the only races where a majority vote was achieved were those with only two candidates. Three out of twenty-one races, or 14%, were won without a majority vote.

Another way to look at this data is that three out of six (or 50%) of the competitive races in the Democratic primary were determined without securing a majority of the vote. **Winning without a majority of votes is a weakness in our current election system which relies on plurality voting.**

One of these local Dane County races, Assembly District 76, was won by Francesca Hong with only 28.1% of the vote.



Only six races in the Democratic primary had more than 1 candidate. Data from <https://elections.countyofdane.com/Election-Result/122>.

DEM Representative to the Assembly District 76 - Official Canvass

| Candidate | Vote Percentage | Number of Votes |
|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Heather Driscoll (DEM) | 16.3% | 2,780 |
| Dewey Bredeson (DEM) | 0.8% | 143 |
| Tyrone Cratic Williams (DEM) | 22.4% | 3,810 |
| Francesca Hong (DEM) | 28.1% | 4,793 |
| Nicki Vander Meulen (DEM) | 9.3% | 1,586 |
| Marsha A. Rummel (DEM) | 16.5% | 2,803 |
| Ali Maresh (DEM) | 6.5% | 1,099 |
| write-in: (DEM) | 0.1% | 15 |



100% of Precincts Reporting (26 of 26)

The Democratic primary race for district 76 had 7 candidates and was won with only 28.1% of the vote. Data and chart from <https://elections.countyofdane.com/Election-Result/122>.

But this was *only a primary*, you might say. That's true. Often, winning a primary without a majority vote doesn't seem like a significant issue, because the winning candidate will get a majority vote in the general election. However, due to geographically polarized politics, this specific primary essentially determines the general election winner. The Democratic candidate is nearly guaranteed a win in the general election for this seat, and the Republican Party often does not have a candidate at all.

Assembly District 76 does have a Republican candidate this election cycle, but only 304 people cast a vote in the Republican primary for this race, while thousands cast votes in the Democratic primary for the same seat. Given that disparity, this was unlikely to be a competitive race in the general election.

REP Representative to the Assembly District 76 - Official Canvass

| Candidate | Vote Percentage | Number of Votes |
|--------------------|--|-----------------|
| Patrick Hull (REP) |  99.3% | 302 |
| write-in: (REP) |  0.7% | 2 |

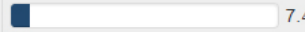




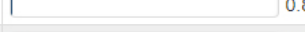
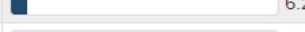

100% of Precincts Reporting (26 of 26)

The Republican primary race for district 76 had only one candidate and 304 total votes. Data and chart from <https://elections.countyofdane.com/Election-Result/122>.

The result is that the representative for Assembly District 76 was determined by 28.1% of primary voters. Keep in mind that turnout tends to be significantly lower for primary elections than general elections. Independent voters are even less likely to participate in partisan primaries. Voters that do vote in partisan primaries can only participate in one party's primary, so the total number of people that vote in each primary race is less than the total turnout for the primary election. This exposes another weakness in our current system: **low-turnout partisan primaries are determining the de-facto winners of the general election in highly polarized, uncompetitive districts.**

In another example, State Senate District 26, the Republican Party had no candidate running, and there were no independent or third-party candidates. The Democratic primary winner in this race, Kelda Helen Roys, who won the primary without a majority of the votes, ran uncontested on the general election ballot.

DEM State Senator District 26 - Official Canvass

| Candidate | Vote Percentage | Number of Votes |
|-------------------------------|--|-----------------|
| Aisha Moe (DEM) |  7.4% | 3,632 |
| Nada Elmikashfi (DEM) |  26.8% | 13,220 |
| Amani Latimer Burris (DEM) |  8.9% | 4,370 |
| Brian Benford (DEM) |  9.5% | 4,699 |
| Kelda Helen Roys (DEM) |  40.2% | 19,801 |
| William Henry Davis III (DEM) |  0.8% | 408 |
| John Imes (DEM) |  6.2% | 3,074 |
| write-in: (DEM) |  0.1% | 44 |

100% of Precincts Reporting (82 of 82)

The Democratic primary race for senate district 26 had 7 candidates. The winner had 40.2% of the vote and faces no contender in the general election. Data and chart from <https://elections.countyofdane.com/Election-Result/122>.

Speaking of uncontested races, of the twenty-one Republican primary races in Dane County in August 2020, seven had no candidate at all, and thirteen had only one candidate. There was only one competitive race on the Republican primary ballot.

Because the Republican primary had seven races with zero candidates, the winner of the Democratic primary would be uncontested in the general election unless an independent or third-party candidate files. These races are additional examples of low-turnout partisan primaries determining election winners.

Examining the results of the August 2020 partisan primary has identified multiple examples of two weaknesses in our current election system that affected these specific races. Does ranked-choice voting address these issues?

1. Winners are determined without majority support.

Assembly District 76 was won with only 28.1% of the vote, and Senate District 26 was won with 40.2% of the vote. This is not to assert that Francesca Hong or Kelda Helen Roys are not supported by the majority of voters in their district. The reality is that we have no way of knowing. We don't know if Tyrone Cratic Williams supporters would have supported Francesca Hong over Marsha A. Rummel. We don't know if the voters for Aisha Moe, Amani Latimer Burris, or Brian Benford would have preferred Nada Elmikashfi or Kelda Helen Roys. Our current plurality voting system does not give voters the option to provide that information. Ranked-choice voting would have allowed voters to voice those preferences. Voters could have ranked all the candidates that they supported. The winners may or may not have changed, but a majority win would have been achieved, a near impossibility in a 7-candidate plurality election.

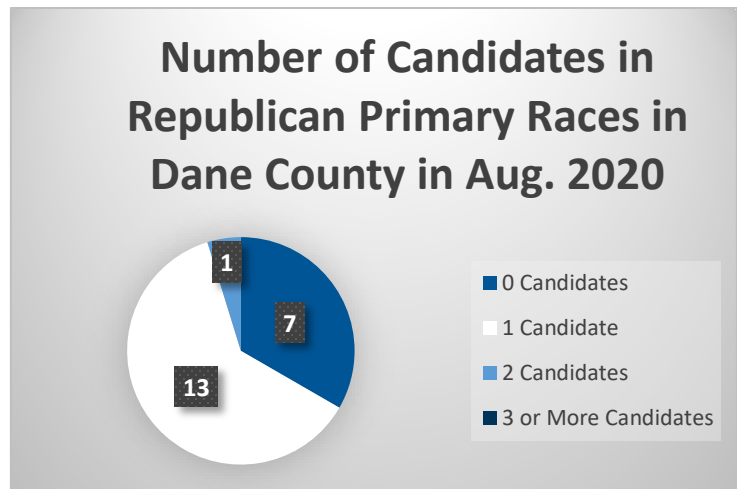
2. Low-turnout partisan primaries are determining general election winners in highly polarized, uncompetitive districts.

We've seen in these districts that by the time the general election rolls around, the winner has already been determined by a small group of voters in a partisan primary. A lot of factors contribute to this outcome, including having only two dominant parties, highly polarized districts, party-specific primary ballots, and lower voter turnout in primary elections. Certain ranked-choice voting implementations can eliminate this weakness.

One implementation is to not have primaries at all. In this case, all the candidates, regardless of party, could be ranked on the general election ballot. This ensures that all voters get a voice, rather than only partisan primary voters who choose to vote on the competitive party's ballot.

Other implementations include top-X primaries, where X is a certain number of candidates that move forward to the general election, often four or five. In this case, the primary is non-partisan and results in X number of candidates moving forward regardless of their party. With more than one candidate moving forward to the general election, the primary is no longer determining the final winner. The general election then employs ranked-choice voting to ensure a majority winner.

By viewing the August 2020 partisan primary through the lens of ranked-choice voting, we see how RCV can mitigate issues that are evident in our own local elections. Of course, RCV does not solve all election issues and we need to further determine if RCV introduces other issues. Do the pros outweigh the cons? To join in on the discussion, contact the study committee at rcvstudy@lwdanecounty.org.



Seven out of 21 races in the Republican primary had more than 0 candidates. Data from <https://elections.countyofdane.com/Election-Result/122>.

How to Evaluate a Voting System

RCV Study Committee, rcvstudy@lcvdanecounty.org

Our democracy relies on fair elections, so the voting system that we use to conduct those elections is of utmost importance. But how do we know if our voting system is best serving our needs? What criteria should be used to evaluate a voting system?

There is a variety of criteria that could be used to evaluate voting systems. Criteria may focus on voter behavior, voter motivation, election administration costs, campaign tactics, whether a system can be weakened by bad faith actors or more. Below is a list of possible criteria that could be used to evaluate a voting system. This list is in alphabetical order so as to not imply any ranking of importance.

Cost and Ease of Election Administration

How easy is it to administer an election for a given voting system? Does the voting system have higher or lower election administration costs compared to other systems?

Easy to Understand Voter Process and Election Outcome

How easy is the voting process and system for voters to understand? Will voters be able to successfully fill out a ballot? Will voters understand and have confidence in the results of the election?

Majority Support for Winners

Does the winner of an election obtain the majority of the votes? Is it possible to win without receiving a majority of the votes?

Minority Representation / Proportional Representation

Does the system allow for representation of minority opinions and underrepresented communities? Does the voting system encourage proportional representation?

Positive/Negative Campaigning

Does the voting system encourage positive campaigning? Does it discourage negative campaigning?

Spoiler Effect

Is the voting system susceptible to the spoiler effect? A spoiler effect refers to cases where an additional candidate pulls support from the most similar candidate, ultimately resulting in the most dissimilar candidate winning the election.

Strategic Nomination Risk

Can bad faith actors alter election results by strategically nominating candidates, with no intention of those candidates winning? The most common examples of strategic nomination involve bad faith actors nominating candidates to take advantage of the spoiler effect. Strategic nomination risk could also be decreased if safeguards and deterrents exist in the overall election system.

Tactical vs Sincere Voting

Does the system encourage voters to vote for the candidate that they sincerely want to win? Or does the system encourage voters to vote tactically to prevent their least-preferred candidate from winning?

Third Party and/or Independent Participation

Does the system increase or decrease the ability for third parties and independent candidates to participate?

Voter Choice and Expression

Is a voter presented with all available options on the ballot? How fully is a voter able to express their preferences?

Voter Participation and Turnout

Does the voting system encourage voter participation and voter engagement? Does the voting system increase or decrease voter confidence that their vote will count? Does the voting system allow lower turnout elections to have disproportionate influence over outcomes?

Wasted Votes

Does the voting system maximize the effective votes? Does it lead to a high number of wasted votes?

While the above criteria identify the general expectations a society may have of its voting system, experts have also defined some mathematically defined criteria for voting systems. These mathematically defined criteria focus solely on how votes lead to election outcomes, and they evaluate whether those outcomes satisfy logical mathematical principals. Below is a selection of some of the more commonly used mathematically defined criteria but note that it is not an exhaustive list.

Majority Criterion

If a candidate receives the majority of the first-rank votes, that candidate should win. It should not be possible for a candidate to receive the majority of first-rank votes and lose. *Note that this is different than the Majority Support for Winners criterion above in that it is concerned only with candidates that do have that the majority of the votes and does not apply to elections where no candidate receives the majority of votes.*

Condorcet Winner

If a candidate would win in a head-to-head competition against every other candidate in the election, then that candidate should win. It should not be possible for a candidate to lose if that candidate would win in a head-to-head competition against all other candidates.

Condorcet Loser

A candidate that loses in a head-to-head competition against every other candidate should lose. It should not be possible for a candidate to win if that candidate loses in a head-to-head competition against all other candidates.

Consistency / Participation

If Candidate A is winning with one set of ballots, adding an additional set of ballots where Candidate A is winning should still result in Candidate A winning. Voting honestly should always be better than not voting at all.

Monotonicity

It should not be possible to harm a candidate by increasing that candidate's rank on your ballot. It should not be possible to help a candidate by decreasing their rank on your ballot.

Later No Harm / Later No Help

The act of adding a lower-ranked preference to a ballot should not harm or help candidates ranked higher on the ballot. In other words, indicating a second choice preference should not prevent your first choice preference from winning.

Independence of Clone Alternatives

Adding a non-winning candidate that is similar to an existing candidate should not change the outcome. A voting system fails this criterion if it is prone to the 'spoiler effect,' where the presence of a similar candidate decreases the chance of one of them winning. A voting system fails this criterion if it is prone to the 'teams effect,' where the presence of similar candidates increases the chance that one of them will win.

Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives

The addition of a non-winning candidate should not affect the result of an election. For example, adding a third candidate to an election should only affect the outcome of the election if that third candidate wins.

There is not a single voting system that meets every one of these criteria. In fact, some of the criterion cannot be 'met' since they are not posing yes/no scenarios. For example, every voting system will have election costs. A voting system does not meet or fail this criterion, but rather lands on a spectrum for comparison against other voting systems. And in some cases, criteria may directly trade-off with one another, causing it to be impossible for a single system to be strong in both.

We should approach evaluating voting systems not in search of a single system that has no flaws, but in search of a system that has the most utility for our democracy at this point in time. One must consider the **relative importance of the criteria**, the **extent and frequency to which a voting system meets or does not meet each criterion**, and the **likelihood that a specific failing could be used strategically to undermine the system**. Have thoughts on these evaluation criteria? Send your ideas and comments to the study committee at rcvstudy@lwvdanecounty.org.

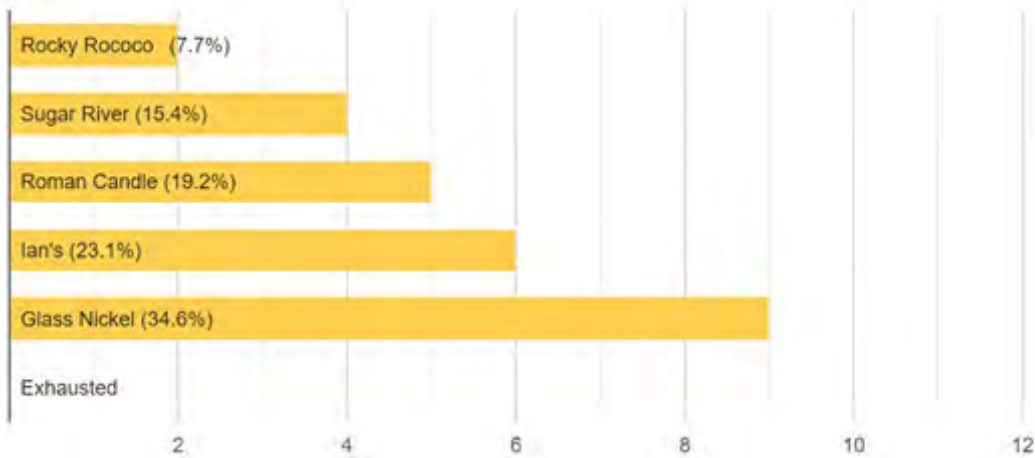
Mock Election Results – RCV

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Thanks to all who participated in this month's online mock election using ranked-choice voting! There were 26 ballots cast. Below are the results. You can also see the results and raw data [here](#).

Round 1

[\(next\)](#)

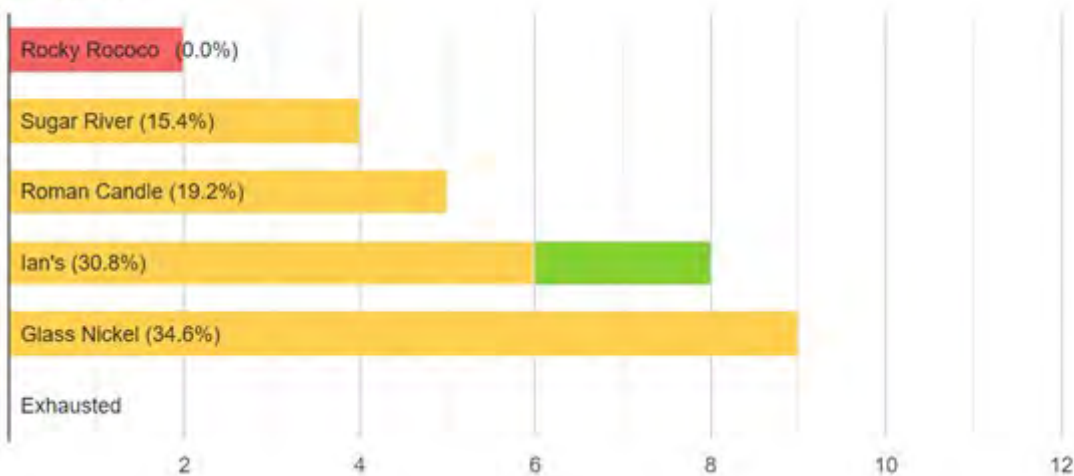


A plurality of voters indicated Glass Nickel as their top choice. However, because no pizzeria passed the 50% threshold for a majority, the pizzeria with the fewest votes (Rocky Rococo) was eliminated. Of the two voters who listed it as their first choice, both listed Ian's as their second choice, and so their votes were transferred to Ian's.

50% threshold, 13 votes

Round 2

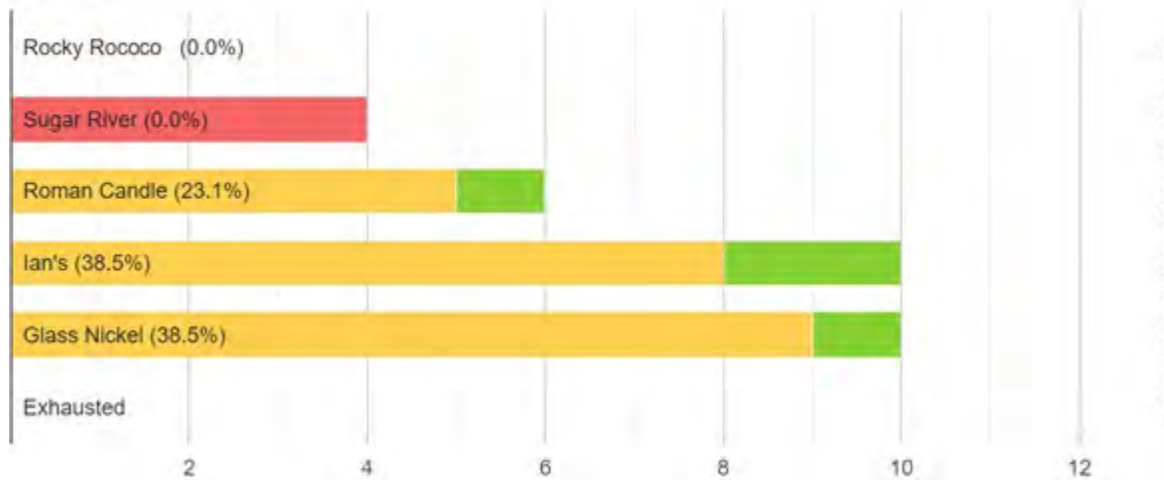
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Next, Sugar River was eliminated, and its four votes were transferred to each voter's next choice.

Round 3

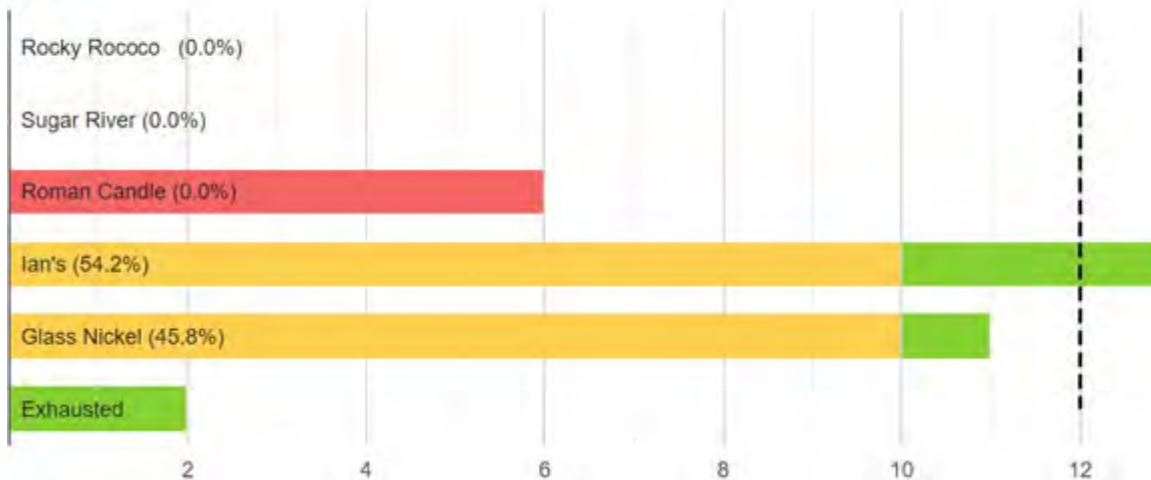
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And finally, Roman Candle was eliminated as it now had the fewest votes. Once it was eliminated, two of the ballots that listed Roman Candle as their top remaining choice were exhausted. These voters didn't express any preference between the remaining two options. That is, they left them blank rather than rank the remaining options. Exhausted ballots can occur in real-life implementations of ranked-choice voting whenever a voter chooses not to fully rank the slate of candidates. Once a ballot is exhausted it no longer affects the outcome of the election.

Round 4

[\(prev\)](#)



However, of the four non-exhausted ballots, one vote was transferred to Glass Nickel and three votes were transferred to Ian's. This put Ian's over the threshold of majority support, making them the winner!

The outcome of this election demonstrates the key difference between ranked-choice and plurality voting: a candidate with a plurality of support in the first round of voting may still lack majority support if voters are split over which of two or more alternatives they prefer. However, when voters are able to express their second (and third, etc.) choices, a different candidate may ultimately prove to have been more popular overall.

To explore ranked-choice voting further, please register for the [info-session on ranked-choice voting](#) on Sunday, March 7 at 4 p.m.

What is Proportional Representation?

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As of the 2020 National Convention, LWVUS has taken a position supporting the use of electoral systems “that elect policy-making bodies—legislatures, councils, commissions, and boards—that proportionally reflect the people they represent.” This is commonly referred to as proportional representation. But how is it achieved? Which electoral systems allow for proportional representation?

Proportional representation allows groups of like-minded voters to have representation on governing bodies even if that group represents a minority of the voters. Single-winner elections elect only one candidate in a winner-take-all style, so proportional representation cannot be achieved in single-winner elections. Multi-winner elections can result in proportional representation, but not all electoral systems allow multi-winner elections to result in proportional representation.

The way seats are defined on policy-making bodies determines whether they use single-winner or multi-winner elections. Wisconsin relies heavily on geographically apportioned seats. Wisconsin’s US Congressional seats, WI State Assembly seats, WI State Senate seats, and WI County board seats are all apportioned into single-member geographic districts. These require single-winner elections, which prevents the possibility of proportional representation on any one of these policy-making bodies, regardless of the electoral system used.

Aside from geographically defined districts, there are two other ways the seats of multi-member governing bodies can be defined: numbered or at-large. The rarest seat definition, numbered seats, is seen locally in MMSD School Board elections. Numbered seats convert each seat to its own single-winner election as candidates are required to declare a specific seat. At-large seats use multi-winner elections in which all candidates run in the same election and the number of winners is determined by the number of open seats.

At-large seats are the only seat definition that allows for multi-winner elections and therefore allows for the possibility of proportional representation. However, not all electoral systems allow for proportional representation even when using at-large seats.

| At-Large Seats | Numbered Seats | Apportioned/Geographic Districts |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Multi-Winner Elections | Single-Winner Elections | Single-Winner Elections |

In plurality voting, multi-winner elections use block voting. Voters vote for the number of candidates that will win. If there are three seats open, then voters select three candidates. Block voting creates another winner-take-all scenario where any size majority (or plurality if there is no majority) can determine 100% of the seats since each voter gets to contribute a whole vote to each of three candidates. Block voting does not result in proportional representation.

Approval voting can be implemented similarly to plurality block voting, preventing proportional representation. In the example of having three open seats, if the top three vote-getters in an approval vote are selected, it still allows for any size majority to win 100% of the seats.

However, Sequential Proportional Approval Voting (SPAV), sometimes called Reweighted Approval Voting (RAV), is an implementation of approval voting that supports proportional representation. In SPAV, each ballot's weight is reduced once that ballot contributes to the win of a candidate. Re-weighting ballots down after they have contributed to a candidate's win limits the maximum voting weight of an individual voter. After re-weighting, the ballot of a voter that did not yet contribute to a winner would be worth more, since they have their full voting weight left to give. Re-weighting can result in minority groups of like-minded voters achieving some representation on policy-making bodies.

Ranked choice voting (RCV) also limits the maximum voting power of each voter, so that each voter contributes a total weight of one vote. As voters' ballots are tallied, if their first-ranked candidate wins, then their vote is counted toward that candidate. If that candidate has more than the necessary number of votes to win, then a fraction of that voters' vote is still available to be contributed to another candidate, but the voter cannot contribute more than one whole vote in total. MPR has published an easy-to-follow 3-minute [video](#) showing how to tally votes in an RCV multi-winner election. Like SPAV, RCV can allow a minority group of like-minded voters to achieve some representation on policy-making bodies.

| | At-Large Seats | Apportioned/ Districts | Numbered Seats |
|------------------|--|--|--|
| Plurality | Block voting does not allow for Proportional Representation. | No Proportional Representation - Single Winner | No Proportional Representation - Single Winner |
| Approval | Allows for proportional representation using Sequential Proportional Approval Voting (SPAV). | No Proportional Representation - Single Winner | No Proportional Representation - Single Winner |
| RCV | Allows for proportional representation. | No Proportional Representation - Single Winner | No Proportional Representation - Single Winner |

The LWVDC study on alternative voting systems will have more detailed examples showing how these different voting systems tally votes in multi-winner elections. To discuss this topic further, please register for the [info-session on proportional representation](#) on Sunday, March 14 at 4 p.m.