One Defective Ballot in Minneapolis' 2009 RCV Election and Other Facts

Authored on March 05, 2013

March 5, 2013 -- Were disappointed that longtime voting reform opponents are misrepresenting election data to assert that RCV disenfranchises communities of color. Sadly, were not surprised: guardians of the status quo have floated this argument before. The problem for them, however, is that the facts simply dont bear it out.

5 Quick Facts:

1. Ranked Choice Voting, in fact, actually increases political participation by historically underrepresented voters by eliminating municipal primaries (or runoffs) that are disproportionately unattended by communities of color. For example, in 2005 (before RCV was enacted), general election turnout was nearly three times greater than primary turnout in Ward 5 -- which is predominately people of color -- compared to two times greater for the city overall. In 2009, thanks to RCV, there was just one higher turnout and more diverse election in November.

2. 95 percent of Minneapolis voters in the 2009 election found RCV to be simple to use; 97 percent of voters of color found using a ranked ballot simple compared to 94 percent of white voters.

3. There was just one (1) single defective ballot found among the nearly 46,000 ballots case in 2009. While there were greater ballot error rates found in certain precincts in Minneapolis in 2009, none of these errors, with the exception of one, were sufficient to disqualify the ballot for any race. Further, according to the City Clerk, the reported errors represent the aggregate and not the true number of errors.

4. Spoiled ballots (i.e., those with errors caught by machines, corrected by the voter and counted) indicate lack of voter familiarity with voting and are more common in low turnout wards. This is true regardless of voting method. In fact, the highest spoiled ballot rates occur in (even-year) partisan primaries, ranging from 13 to 22 percent from 2002 to 2008 in Ward 5, compared to 7 percent in the 2009 RCV election.

5. In San Francisco, where RCV has been used for a decade, 16 of the 18 officeholders elected under RCV are people of color. In 2010, the City of Oakland elected its first female and Asian American to the office of mayor under RCV. No loss by a candidate of color in the 2009 Minneapolis election can be attributed to RCV.

More Detail:

- Claims that communities of color find RCV too confusing arent just insulting; they also dont hold water especially given strong voter education and outreach. A whopping **95 percent of Minneapolis voters in the 2009 election found RCV to be simple as 1-2-3 . . . and St. Paul voters had a similarly easy time with their RCV rollout in 2011.**

- According to a Feb. 25, 2013 memo from the Minneapolis City Clerk, **in 2009, there was just one (1) single defective ballot found among the nearly 46,000 ballots cast in a total of 25 races. When a ballot error was reported, the ballot was normalized and then tabulated.**

- It was anticipated when moving to a new system that there might be a higher-than-average share of voters who mismark their ballots, **which is why error notification is important. This was provided, ensuring that voters who mismarked their ballots had the opportunity to complete another ballot.** The machines couldnt capture all errors that voter may have made, such as repeating or skipping a ranking; these errors were caught during the counting process in a step called

normalization, which we anticipate will be part of the tabulation process again this year. **Despite efforts to misleadingly suggest widespread disenfranchisement, all of these (but one) were corrected and counted, according to the election results for each race, which show zero defective, uncounted ballots.**

- In fact, according to the Minneapolis City Clerk, **The reported errors represent the aggregate and not the true number of errors.** Admittedly, this was an overly conservative way of tracking the number of ballot errors requiring normalization; however, that process was used because the 2009 municipal election was the first use of RCV.

- Spoiled ballots (i.e., those with errors caught by machines, corrected by the voter and counted) indicate lack of voter familiarity with the ballot or the process of voting more generally and are more common in low turnout wards. This is true regardless of voting method. **In fact, the highest spoiled ballot rates occur in (even-year) partisan primaries.**

- While mindful of the need to acknowledge and learn from *any* error FairVote Minnesota continues to aim for 100 percent voter understanding the precincts with higher percentages of errors in the samples highlighted by Mr. Rice were generally low-turnout precincts. **These examples of initially mismarked (again, they were corrected and counted) ballots were the exception, not the norm.**

- **A St. Cloud State University study found that 97 percent of voters of color found using a ranked ballot simple compared to 94 percent of white voters.** Persons of color are more likely to understand how RCV functions better than white voters. Further, the majority of all voters (65 percent) indicated their preference to use RCV again in future municipal elections.

- **RCV benefits communities of color and others who are disproportionately underrepresented in traditional primaries by eliminating this low-turnout step in municipal elections.** Studies show that voters in low-turnout, unrepresentative primary elections which arent needed under RCV are disproportionately older, whiter, and wealthier than voters in November general elections. Precinct data prior to Minneapolis switch to RCV showed that in precincts with a higher proportion of people of color, primary participation rates were very low compared to general election participation rates. In precincts with smaller proportions of people of color, primary participation rates were much higher. **RCV mitigates this inequity by holding one holding in November, when turnout is higher and more diverse.**

  - For example, in 2005 (before RCV was enacted), general election turnout was nearly three times greater than primary turnout (8 percent compared to 21 percent) in Ward 5 -- which is predominately people of color compared to two times greater for the city overall (15 percent to 30 percent). In 2009 under RCV, thanks to RCV, there was just one higher turnout and more diverse election in November.

- **RCV promotes more inclusive campaigning.** *La Prensa* publisher Alberto Monserrate explained in a 2010 editorial that since winning under RCV often requires candidates to earn a share of second-place votes, the system encourages candidates to reach out to communities and voters they might otherwise have written off. According to the aforementioned SCSU study, the majority of candidates who responded to the survey preferred RCV over the traditional system and wanted to use it again in municipal elections.

- **RCV doesnt just increase political participation by historically underrepresented voters; in the long run it also yields more leadership from historically underrepresented communities.** It allows candidates from communities of color to run without fear of being eliminated in low-turnout, unrepresentative primaries, and to compete against each other without fear of vote-splitting and lost representation. In San Francisco, where RCV has been used for a decade, 16 of the 18 officeholders elected under RCV are people of color including nine of 11 members of the Board of Supervisors and all seven citywide officials. As a recent *San Francisco Chronicle* op-ed pointed out,

thats by far the highest percentage of minority officeholders of any large, diverse U.S. city. In 2010, the City of Oakland elected its first female and Asian American to the office of mayor under RCV. **Simply put, RCV fosters outcomes more reflective of the whole electorate.**

- ○ Mr. Rice claims that the number of minority elected officials in Minneapolis has decreased under RCV, pointing in particular to the loss of a candidate of color in the park board race at-large. As noted in the City Clerks letter, election outcomes are the result of several factors, including name recognition, campaign organization, competitiveness of the race, endorsements, etc.. The park board race referenced in Mr. Rices proposal was a highly competitive race for three seats. Two of the top four candidates were people of color. One of these candidates placed second in the initial and final round; the other, whom Mr. Rice references, placed fourth in the initial and final rounds. She simply didnt garner sufficient first, second and third choice votes combined to emerge among the top three finishing candidates.

- ○ Also noted in the City Clerks memo was the ward 4 race, in which an African American candidate received enough support to require a runoff: Under traditional voting methods, it is questionable whether that particular candidate would have ranked so highly. The RCV process allowed him to stay engaged in the race for that particular seat through a first and second round of tallying.

It is important to keep in mind that conclusions cannot be drawn from one election. It will take time to assess RCVs impact on fostering more diverse participation and outcomes in Minneapolis elections.

- While voter education provided by the city of Minneapolis, FairVote Minnesota and other organizations in 2009 was tremendously effective, resulting in extremely high levels of voter understanding and satisfaction, we continue to improve and refine our outreach efforts. **Completely error-free ballots are unlikely (as weve seen in RCV and non-RCV elections alike), but we strive for as few errors as possible. Lessons learned from 2009 will help ensure that special effort is made this year to reach new and infrequent voters and ensure all ballots are completed accurately.**

- Minneapolis is working toward replacing its antiquated machines this year with RCV-compatible machines, which would provide more timely election results than was experienced in 2009**.**

QUOTES:

Ranked Choice Voting yields majority outcomes. It encourages elected officials to represent their constituents in a way thats accountable to that majority. It helps foster compromise and consensus for the greater good while discouraging the kind of rigid, hostile politics we are experiencing today. *Congressman Keith Ellison*

[M]ost voters . . . reported that they understood how RCV functions perfectly well or fairly well and persons of color are more likely to understand how RCV functions better than white voters. *St. Cloud State University study*

Primary turnout is lowest in communities of color, meaning we have very little voice in this weeding process. Our candidates have a hard time getting through in any district that isnt predominantly comprised of people of color. In contrast, we turn out in proportionally higher numbers in general elections. With IRV, our effective participation and, therefore, voting power is greater, expanding opportunities for candidates of color to represent us. - *Former Minneapolis city council member Ralph Remington and former state Sen. Mee Moua, 2008 commentary*

By eliminating low-turnout municipal primaries (just 5 percent in the last St. Paul election), and folding two elections into one high-turnout, more-diverse November election, RCV increases voter participation, producing outcomes that are more meaningful and more representative. Expanding access to political

power and policymaking is how we get new perspectives, fresh ideas and outside-the-box solutions to seemingly intractable problems. *Former state Sen. John Harrington and Hmong American Partnership CEO and President Bao Vang, 2011 op-ed*

[W]e like RCV for another compelling reason: its demonstrated ability to foster more inclusive politics and policymaking. Ranked Choice Voting brings more diversity to government, allowing for a wider range of ideas, worldviews and candidates in political races that currently are dominated by heavily resourced insiders. *2010 La Prensa editorial*

Opening up the political process encourages the greatest and most diverse number of voters making decisions that will affect their lives, schools and neighborhoods. This is exactly what IRV does -- by eliminating underrepresentative primaries and giving voters more choices in a single, decisive November election.   We believe that allowing voters more choices is neither confusing nor intimidating. In fact, we believe just the opposite. More choices encourage participation and involvement, and IRV boosts opportunities for candidates representing communities of color. *State Rep. Carlos Mariani, St. Paul, and Ramsey County Commissioner Toni Carter, St. Paul*

SOURCES:

1. Data from various cities showing ease of understanding RCV: http://fairvotemn.org/node/1541

2. Minneapolis Election Results, 2009: http://www.minneapolismn.gov/elections/results/elections_2009general-results

3. St. Cloud State University study: Prepared for city of Minneapolis, 2009: http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@council/documents/webcontent/convert_282497.pdf

4. 2010 La Prensa editorial: http://fairvotemn.org/node/1856

5. 2008 Ralph Remington/Mee Moua editorial: http://fairvotemn.org/node/997

6. 2011 John Harrington/Bao Vang editorial: http://fairvotemn.org/node/2096

7. Recent SF Chronicle piece by election scholars Richard DeLeon and Ared Lijphart explaining how RCV increases access to politics and policymaking for communities of color: http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/openforum/article/In-defense-of-ranked-choice-voting-4215299.php

8. Memorandum from Minneapolis City Clerk dated Feb. 25, 2013

9. Submitted commentary by Congressman Keith Ellison, September 21, 2012