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To Special Committee on Electoral Reform  
From Rob Richie, Executive Director, FairVote (United States)  
Date August 25, 2016  
Re Brief Providing Information and Research on the Use of Ranked Ballots in the United States

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Thank you for the committee holding this important hearing, and for my opportunity to submit this brief describing information and research on the use of ranked ballots in the United States. Throughout this brief, I will use the term most commonly used in the United States for the reform: ranked choice voting, or RCV. RCV refers both to the use of ranked ballots to elect a single winner (the Alternative Vote) and to its use to elect winners in multi-winner constituencies (Single Transferable Vote) After introducing FairVote and our general take on RCV, I will describe significant and instructive new research on how RCV s working in the United States.

### **Background on FairVote**

FairVote – The Center for Voting and Democracy is a U.S. nonpartisan organization founded in 1992, with a history of working with scholars, civic leaders, policymakers, and journalists. FairVote works to improve our democracy through research, advocacy and support of electoral reforms at all levels of government. We have been directly involved in the adoption, implementation and evaluation of ranked choice voting in American cities such as Minneapolis (MN), Oakland (CA), San Francisco (CA) and Portland (ME), along with multi-winner forms of it in Cambridge (MA) and New York City. We are providing research and educational support to reformers in Maine supporting a November 2016 ballot referendum to adopt RCV in most of its major elections, and have been involved in many city ballot measures for both single-winner and multi-winner RCV.

We write to share our research and analysis about ranked choice voting to help you consider what options will work best for Canada. Given the context of the United States, where there are a number of important elections for executive offices and where we have different political traditions, we advocate for ranked choice voting as a single winner reform and believe that research supports it as a significant improvement over both plurality voting elections and runoff elections. We also support the use of multi-winner RCV (STV) in multi-winner constituencies, and advocate for its use in multi-winner districts for the U.S. Congress.

Although we do not make a specific recommendation for what reform Canada should adopt, we do believe lessons from the United States support the use of ranked ballots, either in single-winner or multi-winner constituencies (or a combination of both) as effective for promoting important democratic values.

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## Background on Ranked Choice Voting in the United States

Ranked choice voting is an increasingly popular election reform. Voters in more than a dozen U.S. cities have approved its use by landslide margins in the past decade for local, municipal offices, including Memphis (TN), Minneapolis (MN), St. Paul (MN), Berkeley (CA), Oakland (CA), San Francisco (CA), Portland (ME), Sarasota (FL), Santa Fe (NM), Ferndale (MI), and Takoma Park (MD). Cambridge (MA) has used it in multi-winner elections (STV) to elect their city council since the 1930's.

FairVote supports the use of RCV, because it promotes our core mission of giving more voice to voters. With RCV, voters can vote for the candidate they like the most without worrying about electing the candidate they like the least. It also helps ensure that voters will have more meaningful choices, because under RCV, candidates cannot act as “spoilers” and so are not shamed for participating.

When used to elect one candidate, RCV helps to promote the principle of majority rule. Voters rank candidates in order of choice (1, 2, 3). Every ballot counts as one vote for its highest ranked candidate. If a candidate receives a majority in first-choices, they win just like in other elections. If not, then the last-place candidate is eliminated, and voters who ranked that candidate first have their vote added to the totals of their next choice. That repeats until the top two candidates are left, and the one with more votes wins.

When used in multi-winner constituencies, RCV helps to promote the principle of proportional representation. The count works like a single-winner election, except that the threshold is less than a majority. For example, in a three-winner riding, any candidate winning more than 25% of first-choices will be elected. If they receive more than 25% of the votes, the quantity of extra votes they received will count for their voters' next-choices, ensuring that a majority of votes will always be able to elect a majority of the seats. The threshold changes based on the number of seats to be elected. It is always the smallest number of votes that mathematically guarantees victory: 25% if three will be elected, 20% for four, 16.7% for five, and so on.

FairVote has proposed reforming the U.S. House of Representatives through a model bill we call the “[Fair Representation Act](#),” which combines multi-winner and single-winner RCV. States with large populations would elect Members in multi-winner districts, states with medium populations would elect up to five Members statewide, and states with very small populations would elect only one Member. This is a model that we believe can be effective in creating a more representative national legislature than one elected by first past the post.

We do not introduce this to say that Canada should adopt this particular model. We have not done sufficient research into the Canadian context specifically to make any claim as to what system is best for Canada. However, these findings suggest that the use of ranked ballots provide clear benefits, and should be considered as a potential part of whatever reform Canada ultimately adopts.

## Research

The following is an index of research on the use of ranked ballots in the United States with a short description of its key findings. We encourage you to go to the source material for more detail.

Taken together, this research suggests that ranked ballots, whether used in single-winner or multi-winner constituencies, helps promote inclusive and civil campaigning, and that voters of all demographics use the ranked ballot effectively. When used in multi-winner constituencies, it also promotes fair representation and good governance based on a variety of metrics.

### ***Campaign Civility under Preferential and Plurality Voting***

Todd Donovan (Western Washington University), Caroline Tolbert (University of Iowa), and Kellen Gracey (University of Iowa)

Available at <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0261379416000299>

In November 2013, 2,400 likely voters were surveyed in 10 cities. Three cities had just held local elections using RCV (Minneapolis and St. Paul (MN) and Cambridge (MA)), and seven control cities had used plurality voting in their November elections. The surveys show that likely voters in cities that used RCV were more satisfied with the conduct of local campaigns than people in similar cities with plurality (first-past-the-post) elections and more likely to have some in-person contact with candidates for office. People in cities with RCV were also less likely to view campaigns as negative, and less likely to respond that candidates were frequently criticizing each other. The results are consistent across a series of robustness checks.

### ***Voter Participation and Voter Error with Ranked Choice Voting in the United States***

David C. Kimball (University of Missouri-St. Louis) and Joseph Anthony

Summary available at <https://fairvote.app.box.com/v/kimball-anthony-turnout>

This study examines the degree to which voters turn out to vote and properly cast their votes, comparing ranked choice voting to plurality voting in the United States. It compares demographically similar cities with RCV and plurality voting. It finds that RCV helps increase voter participation in decisive elections when reducing the substantial drop in voter participation that commonly occurs between primary and general elections and between first round and runoff elections, but otherwise does not appear to have a strong positive or negative impact on voter turnout and ballot completion. In a case study of Minneapolis, it finds similar levels of socioeconomic and racial disparities in voter participation in plurality as in RCV elections. They also found no increase in total residual voters (meaning total ballots where voters skipped voting in the election or invalidated their ballot in that election) compared to non-RCV elections which is a particular significant finding in California city elections with RCV because they are held at the same time as non-RCV race like president or governor that appear first on the ballot and are the bigger drivers of participation. Kimball and Anthony have updated their research for

presentation at the September 2016 American Political Science Association conference and are preparing to submit their work for publication in the fall.

***Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Candidate Civility in Ranked Choice Elections, 2013 & 2014 Survey Brief***

Haley Smith, Sarah John, and Andrew Douglas

Available at <https://fairvote.app.box.com/v/APSA-Civility-Brief-2015>

The Eagleton Poll at Rutgers University conducted two polls—one in 2013 and another in 2014—that explore the impact of RCV on city elections in the United States. In both surveys, more respondents in cities using RCV reported candidates spent less time criticizing opponents than in cities that did not use RCV. More respondents in cities using RCV reported less negative campaigns than in cities that did not use RCV. In the 2013 survey, 90% of respondents in RCV cities found the RCV ballot easy to understand; 89% of respondents in RCV cities in California found the RCV ballot easy to understand. A majority of all respondents in both surveys believed RCV should be used in local elections in their city. Support was greatest in cities already using RCV.

***Voter Understanding and Use of Ranked Choice Voting***

Sarah John

Available at <https://fairvote.app.box.com/v/RCVunderstandingmemo>

This memo focuses on voter experience with RCV in U.S. cities, based on analysis of RCV ballots after they were cast and public opinion surveys. It summarizes research suggesting that voters under RCV at levels comparable other systems (like the “Top Two” primary used in California and Washington) and that they readily use the option to rank candidates for local offices. It provides detailed information on overvote and undervote rates in RCV elections. Notably, more than 99% of voters in Bay Area elections cast an RCV ballot that counts and more than eight in ten rank more than one candidate in competitive multi-candidate mayoral elections.

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

Representation2020

Available at <https://fairvote.app.box.com/v/RCV-Representation-BayArea>

This study examines the effect of ranked choice voting on women and people of color running for elected office in the California Bay Area. San Francisco began using RCV in 2004 for their city elections, followed by Oakland, Berkeley, and San Leandro in 2010. Women and people of color hold more than 80% of these cities’ 52 offices that have been elected by RCV. The findings of the study reveal that RCV increases descriptive representation for women, people of color, and women of color. Some reasons for RCV’s positive effects can be related to how often it replaces low, unrepresentative turnout elections and that it allows for multiple candidates

appealing to the same community to run without splitting the vote. The unambiguously positive impact of RCV on descriptive representation encourages further study.

***Escaping the Thicket: The Ranked Choice Voting Solution to America's Districting Crisis***

Andrew Spencer, Christopher Hughes, and Rob Richie

Available at <https://fairvote.app.box.com/v/EscapingtheThicket>

In this law review article, FairVote staff makes the case for the use of multi-winner districts with ranked choice voting (STV) for U.S. congressional elections. It reviews the history of plurality voting in U.S. congressional elections, and how this emphasis on single-winner elections intersects with the Voting Rights Act, which makes vote dilution of racial and ethnic minority populations illegal. In some cases brought under the Voting Rights Act, jurisdictions have adopted semi-proportional voting methods rather than the use of single-winner districts. The article reviews what makes those voting methods most effective, and concludes that they would have their most potent application in congressional elections. It lays out a proposal for multi-winner districts with ranked choice voting for congressional elections and describes its likely impact.

***Structural Electoral Reform: Impact, Methods, and Opportunities***

FairVote

Available at <http://www.fairvote.org/comparative-structural-reform>

This 2015 report presents an extensive assessment of the potential impact of 37 structural reforms to election laws and legislative structures in collaboration with fourteen prominent political scientists. The participating scholars were asked to assess each reform's impact on 16 different criteria fitting within four topline categories: legislative functionality, electoral accountability, voter engagement, and openness of process. In the scholars' assessment, the three structural reforms that would have the greatest positive impact on U.S. democracy are two forms of STV (ranked choice voting in five-winner districts, and ranked choice voting in three-winner districts) and Districts Plus (a form of mixed-member proportional representation). Single winner forms of RCV were also judged to have a positive impact compared to many of the other reforms that were analyzed. The report also includes background information on each reform with links to a large number of scholarly resources.

***Monopoly Politics***

FairVote

Available at [http://www.fairvote.org/monopoly\\_politics](http://www.fairvote.org/monopoly_politics)

FairVote's biennial report, Monopoly Politics, presents in-depth analysis of U.S. congressional elections, with factsheets for each state and detailed analyses on a range of topics. It uses a partisanship metric to project election results in "safe" districts, with greater than 99% accuracy despite not making use of any polling data or spending data or anything else other than prior election results. In November 2014, more than two years before the 2016 elections, we

projected winners in nearly six out of seven House races to take place two years later using a methodology that was wrong in only one out of more than 700 races going into the 2012 and 2014 elections.

The report also makes the case that the exclusive use of single-winner districts causes the overwhelming majority of congressional elections to lack meaningful competition; distorts partisan outcomes such that a clear majority can vote for one of the two major parties and the other win a solid majority of seats; and polarizes politics as representatives lack any accountability to those outside their party base. As an alternative, the report includes sample STV plans for every state with at least three seats, using districts that are never larger than five seats. Projections of outcomes in these districts suggest that not a single multi-winner district would have representatives from only one major party, and the current partisan skew in House elections would be nearly entirely removed.