



OREGON STATE SENATE

January 14, 2020

Chair Golden
Senate Campaign Finance Committee

Oregon is full of options. It has hiking, kayaking, craft breweries, or a day at the beach. And Oregonians are good at choosing their priorities. Maybe our first choice is to go to the beach, but then it starts to rain. We can throw on our boots and jump in puddles in the mountains. But when it comes to choosing political candidates, we get our first choice, or we get nothing – no matter how much we like other candidates on the same ballot.

Ranked-choice voting is the solution to that dilemma and provides a host of side benefits as well, including more positive election campaigns.

With ranked-choice voting, voters rank candidates in order of preference on their ballots. If one candidate gets a majority of first-choice votes, that candidate wins the election. However, if no candidate secures a majority of first-choice votes, the last-place candidate is eliminated, and the second-choice votes of voters who preferred the eliminated candidate are allocated to those who remain in the race. This process continues until one candidate has majority support.

An exciting aspect of ranked-choice voting is that it reduces the incentives for negative campaigning. In traditional elections, candidates benefit from “mud-slinging” by attacking an opponent’s character instead of sharing their positive vision. With ranked-choice voting, candidates do best when they engage with as many voters as possible, including those supporting their opponents. Where cities use ranked-choice voting, negative advertising has all but disappeared.

In February 2019, a Portland City Club research report recommended ranked-choice voting as preferable to the current system. “Portland should adopt some alternative voting system such as ranked-choice, preferential, or cumulative voting to better achieve equity goals,” the report stated.

Ranked-choice voting is not a new, untested idea. It was invented around 1870 and has since been adopted by democracies across the world. Australia has used ranked-choice voting in its national elections since 1919. Ranked-choice voting is now in use or approved in 21 cities in the U.S., including San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Cambridge. Voters in New York City recently approved ranked-choice voting, the largest U.S. city to do so. The state of Maine also uses it for federal elections. And in Oregon, voters in Benton County approved a ranked-choice ballot measure in 2016. It will begin using the system in its elections this year.

Oregon was a pioneer with Vote by Mail, a convenient, common-sense method of voting that has become wildly popular among Oregonians. Ranked-choice voting could be an election reform with the same magnitude and influence as Vote by Mail.

Ranked-choice voting has many benefits, including:

- Avoiding costly, low turn-out runoff elections
- Eliminating the spoiler effect of third parties
- Promoting more diverse viewpoints, and
- Encouraging more positive campaigns

As a first step, Oregon should take this idea out for a test drive, similar to its “experiment” Vote by Mail, which was used in various local elections beginning in the 1980s. It did not become a permanent fixture for all Oregon elections until 2000. More local governments should start using ranked-choice voting in their elections.

No new legislation is required for Oregon counties to adopt ranked-choice voting in their local elections if they choose. The more counties that decide to implement ranked-choice voting, the better Oregonians can monitor and evaluate the counties’ experience with the ranked-choice system. Ultimately, I would like to see the legislature to refer to voters a proposal to adopt a statewide system.

This is not a partisan idea. I think we can all get behind an elections system that promotes positive, inclusive and fair elections. Ranked-choice voting empowers voters to make thoughtful decisions that fully reflect their interests and priorities.

The more we can empower voters, the stronger we can make our democracy.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Hass". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mark" being more prominent than the last name "Hass".

Senator Mark Hass