

Senate Bill 791
Hearing Before the Senate Rules Committee
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Testimony of Dr. Paul Gronke

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At Reed College

My name is Paul Gronke, and I am a professor of political science at Reed College and the director of the Early Voting Information Center, a non-partisan policy research center dedicated to helping state and local elections officials find the best practices, policies, and procedures for their jurisdictions. I received my PhD in political science from the University of Michigan in 1994 and I have spent my whole professional career working on elections.

I speak today in favor of SB 791. I am going to provide evidence from extensive research, conducted in many states and localities, that show that RCV is a well-tested and effective election reform that provides better representation, provides more choices for voters, and minimizes wasted votes.

Ranked Choice voting is particularly effective in non-partisan elections and in primaries, where the “party signal” is not available to help guide voters. This is why I think SB 791 is especially well-designed, because it allows Oregon to test out RCV in exactly the kinds of elections where it provides the most benefits.

America’s traditional reliance on plurality “first past the post” elections sacrifices accurate representation in favor of producing majorities. There are some political science defenders of the American system, but not many. Most in the discipline advocate for some method of voting that would allow better representation of an increasingly multicultural and diverse electorate.

RCV strikes an appropriate balance, in my view, and in the view of many of my colleagues. RCV still produces a “majority winner” but at the same time allows voters to express a preference for more than just a D or an R. And RCV is perfectly compatible with single-member districts that are used throughout our state.

RCV is particularly a superior voting system in primaries and in non-partisan elections. In these elections, when there is often more than 2 candidates, voters are forced to vote strategically and not sincerely.

In presidential primaries especially, there can be large and dynamic candidate pools, and the “winner” in a primary may be far from the candidate preferred by a majority of voters because there are so many “wasted” votes. RCV avoids this problem.

In the March 2020 Washington primary, for example, over 400,000 votes were cast for two candidates – Elizabeth Warren and Michael Bloomberg – who had withdrawn by the day of the

primary. Overall over three million votes – over 7% of all ballots cast – went to candidates who had withdrawn by the time a state held its primary.

I submitted to the committee a short opinion article in which Rob Richie, director of FairVote, and I point out that members of the armed services and citizens living overseas would be especially helped by SB791 because of the long time required to transmit UOCAVA ballots.

Non-partisan elections, don't have a party label on the ballot, and there can be multiple candidates who, even unofficially, stand closer to one or another party. This means that voters have to vote "strategically" and can't choose their most preferred candidate.

And because the May primary is used as a "first round" in many localities, our current system advantages incumbents and reduces competition.

The Oregonian, reported that from 2000- 2016, 93% of Portland City Council races were determined by the May primary.

The 2020 mayoral contest is a great example of the problems with our current system and how RCV can solve them. Mayor Ted Wheeler defeated challenger Sarah Iannarone by 19,378 votes in November.

But there were over 45,000 write in votes in that race, and an analysis of a random sample of ballots by EVIC shows that approximately 60% of those write-ins went to a single candidate, Teresa Raiford.

As a result, we now have an election outcome for the mayor of our largest city and we cannot be sure that the winner was actually the most preferred candidate by a majority of voters. We may never know the answer, but we do know that under SB791, this would never happen again.

The winner of a non-partisan race will be the majority winner, chosen by the voters in a general election, and there can be no question about their legitimacy.

Adopting RCV in primaries and non-partisan elections is a pro-voter, pro-democracy reform to Oregon's election system, and I urge you to support SB791.