

San Juan County Charter Review Commission Findings

September 20, 2021

Charter Review Commission (CRC) findings are derived from research by CRC members, presentations by former and present elected officials, comments received from the public, and the experience and input of CRC members. Each of the findings listed below identifies a problem with the existing Charter and states the CRC's solution to those problems. Divided votes indicate that some CRC members' interpretations and conclusions differed from those of the majority; however, the majority supported the finding.

All evidence supporting the following findings, including documents and oral and written comments by elected and appointed officials, as well as members of the public, was presented and discussed at regular open public meetings of the CRC. Oral and written presentations made the CRC are referenced in CRC minutes, which are available at www.sanjuanco.com on the Charter Review Commission page.

Finding 1. Ranked Choice Voting

As one of the three Home Rule Charter counties in Washington State that holds nonpartisan elections, San Juan County (SJC) has a unique opportunity to include ranked choice voting (RCV) in its Charter. RCV is a method of voting which gives voters the option to vote for several candidates in the same race, ranking them in order of preference. Thus, RCV ensures that the winner has the broadest possible support.

Under RCV, votes are counted in rounds. If one candidate gets more than half the votes, they win. However, if no candidate gets more than half of the first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. If a voter's favorite candidate was eliminated, their vote counts for their next choice. These rounds repeat until a candidate wins more than half of the votes. RCV is also known as instant runoff voting.

In top two elections, it is possible for a candidate to advance to the general election without broad support among the public. This can happen when candidates with similar views and platforms "split the vote." RCV significantly reduces the effect of vote splitting by allowing voters to rank backup choices if their preferred candidate does not win. With RCV, similar candidates can run for the same position without hampering each other's chances and winning candidates are likely to have broad voter support.

The CRC proposes the amendment for the 2022 ballot to stipulate that RCV will be implemented in SJC as soon as the Washington State Legislature passes it at the state level. Adding RCV to the SJC Charter in 2022 sends a message to the State Legislature that the majority of SJC voters want to implement this method of voting. CRC research on RCV resulted in the following findings:

- RCV gives voters more choice and more power in the political system while saving time and money.

- RCV allows voters to rank backup choices and avoid “throwing away their vote” on a candidate who either drops out of the race or is not one of the top finishers.
- RCV reduces the likelihood of a “spoiler” candidate altering the results of an election because voters who cast a vote for that candidate can rank backup choices that will reveal which candidate is preferred by the most voters.
- RCV makes it far less likely that low voter turnout in a primary election will eliminate a candidate who might otherwise win in a high voter turnout general election.
- RCV would likely encourage more residents to run for office in the county because:
 - RCV reduces vote splitting, allowing similar candidates to run without harming each other’s chances. This also means political parties are far less likely to serve as “gatekeepers” by discouraging first-time candidates from running for fear that they will split the vote with the party's frontrunner.
 - For jurisdictions that use RCV to combine the primary and the general into a single election, as SJC proposes to do, the costs of campaigning are significantly reduced, because candidates only have to run once, not twice. Lowering the cost of campaigning opens the door to more first-time candidates.
 - Research has consistently demonstrated that RCV campaigns tend to be less negative (a finding reported by both voters and candidates). The more issues-focused climate of RCV campaigns is partly responsible for encouraging more candidates to run, particularly women and people of color.
- Candidates are motivated to run positive, issue-focused campaigns and to reach out to all voters because even if a candidate is not a voter’s *first* choice, they hope to stay in the running as their *second* or *third* choice candidate. For this reason, candidates are less likely to engage in negative campaigning against other candidates.
- In states and municipalities where RCV has been used over the last decade, RCV saves a significant amount of money. For example, RCV can be used in a single election without the need for a nominating primary. RCV saves public funds by combining the primary and general elections.
- RCV has become a more widely accepted method of voting, educational materials are more widely available, and RCV voting systems have become easier and more cost-effective to put in place.
- RCV has been enacted in over 50 jurisdictions across the United States, including San Francisco (CA), Minneapolis (MN), Santa Fe (NM), Cambridge (MA), New York (NY), over 20 cities in the state of Utah, and the states of Alaska and Maine. A full list of jurisdictions in the U.S. using RCV is available at: https://www.fairvote.org/where_is_ranked_choice_voting_used

In summary, RCV would have a positive impact on both the process and outcome of elections in San Juan County by enhancing the democratic process at minimal cost, encouraging more candidates to run for office while conducting more positive issue-oriented campaigns.

The Local Options Bill, SHB 1156, has been introduced for the 2021-22 state legislative session in Washington State. It gives localities the option to adopt ranked choice voting.