



Ranked-Choice Voting Committee Report

Candidate Survey on the Effect of Multi-Winner Ranked-Choice Voting on Portland's 2024 City Council Elections

April 30, 2025

In 2022 Portland, Oregon, voters passed a measure dramatically altering the city's government and electoral system, replacing the five-member at-large City Council elected in a winner-take-all system with a 12-member Council representing four 3-member districts elected via ranked-choice voting. Two years later the first election was held under the new system.

A number of analyses have looked at the voter experience, vote tabulation, and outcome of Portland's historic 2024 City Council election. This project takes a different tack, focusing on the candidates and the lessons they took away from running for office in a multi-member ranked-choice voting system. Our goal was to learn from those on the ground whether or not the new electoral system lived up to its promise of lowering barriers to entry and attracting more diverse candidates, lessening partisan rhetoric and negative campaigning, and favoring collaboration over polarization. It is hoped that this report will assist election officials and potential candidates in future Portland City Council races, as well as those in other communities new to proportional RCV.

Approach

Between mid-January and mid-March 2025, a team of 12 League of Women Voters volunteers, working in pairs, conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with candidates. We interviewed 11 of the 12 elected City Councilors as well as nine candidates who came in between 4th and 7th place, divided across the four districts. (A list of interviewees is at the end of the report.) Eleven of those interviewed were women and six were people of color. Eight had run in previous civic elections, including three elected City Councilors.

The core questions were:

- Did this being a multi-winner ranked-choice election affect:
 - your decision to run?
 - your campaign messaging?
 - how you conducted your campaign?
- If so, in what way?

- How do you believe the way you campaigned influenced your outcome?
- What do you see as the positive or negative effects of multi-winner ranked-choice voting on how candidates interacted with each other?
- How, if at all, do you believe this system voting shaped the outcome of the election?
- What were the biggest challenges you experienced in running under this electoral system?
- [For elected candidates only] Has this election affected your relationships with other elected Councilors or shaped the way you will work together? If so, in what way?

Interviewers were neutral and open-ended in their questioning, leaving any conclusions about the positive or negative effects of the electoral system to the interviewees. Following is an aggregated summary of the results of those interviews.

Did this being a multi-winner ranked choice election affect your decision to run?

- Yes: 15 (9 of 11 elected—81%)
- No: 5 (2 elected; 3 defeated)

By far, the most common reason given by those who said their decision to run had been affected by having multi-member districts and ranked-choice voting was that it raised their confidence that they could get elected. Having three representatives per district “opened a lane” for minority, first-time or non-traditional candidates by taking away the pressure of having to win over the broad electorate, they said. Candidates noted that even districts that leaned one way or another on the political spectrum had sections with a different orientation, so they could focus on their base and values and not try to attract everyone.

A secondary reason, cited by a quarter of those interviewed, was the reputation of ranked-choice voting for favoring a more positive and productive form of campaigning, with fewer personal attacks. As one candidate put it, traditional elections systems promote “tear-down politics,” whereas with ranked-choice voting “you have to establish a positive image and demonstrate how you would work with others if elected.”

Of the five interviewees who said proportional ranked-choice voting was not a consideration in their decision to run, three noted their experience running in previous elections, one said she would have run in any case because the change from a commission to a legislative form of government was an opportunity to chart a new course for Portland, and one ran on impulse without thinking about the new electoral system.

Did this being a multi-winner ranked-choice election affect your campaign messaging?

- Yes: 17 (10 of 11 elected—91%)
- No: 3 (1 elected; 2 defeated)

This question elicited the strongest “yes” response, confirming the prediction made by the proponents of electoral change that multi-winner ranked-choice voting would lessen

polarization and negative campaigning, while increasing collaboration. (The only winning candidate who replied “no” said that he ran positive, issue-driven campaigns in the past and saw this election as no different.)

Interviewees across the board testified to the moderating effect of multi-winner ranked-choice voting. Rather than running to beat others, they focused on getting high-enough rankings to win a seat by focusing on their personal experience, values, vision and promised actions for solving their constituency’s problems. Indeed, in order to appear more collaborative, many spoke positively about other candidates, even endorsing as a second or third ranking those in their district with whom they felt a political kinship. Only a couple of candidates noted any personal attacks, and those were primarily from outside organizations. The overwhelming consensus was that denigrating others would have had negative effects in a proportional ranked-choice voting election where, if you were elected, two of the competing candidates would become your colleagues. In short, “a campaign becomes very different when it’s not a zero-sum game.”

Another defining feature of running in a multi-member district is that the candidates were able to hone their message to particular populations. Whereas, in a single-member plurality system a candidate needs to secure the votes of at least half of the electorate, the winning level in a three-member district is just over 25 percent, opening the door to a wider range of constituencies electing a Councilor of their choice. Therefore, instead of “veering away from the edges” or sticking to “a generic message” in an effort not to alienate the majority—strategies they believed would lead to few top rankings—winning candidates described aiming their message at specific political leanings, language clusters, and issue groups that made up significant minorities of the district. As one elected Councilor summed it up, “Here it was better to be loved by 30 percent of the voters than liked by 60 percent.”

Did this being a multi-winner ranked-choice election affect how you conducted your campaign?

- Yes: 14 (8 of 11 elected—73%)
- No: 6 (3 elected; 3 defeated)

Of the three reasons given for how the new electoral system affected how campaigns were conducted, the most stated was the combination of smaller electoral districts—which increased the capacity for direct voter contact—with very large candidate pools, ranging from 16-30 contenders and a citywide total just shy of 100, that put a significant strain on getting both attention and financing. Therefore, while all traditional campaign marketing methods were used to some extent, the great majority of elected candidates focused their energies on direct voter contact via door-knocking, canvassing, house parties, neighborhood events, and phone banking as the most reliable path to victory. Interviewees variously recounted knocking on 13,000, 15,000 and 16,000 doors, with one reaching 1,000 per weekend. One top vote-getter canvassed in 23 of the district’s 29 neighborhoods, walking a different one each week and holding coffees on the weekend; another reported attending 35 house parties. While seeking endorsements was also emphasized, many felt they ultimately played a less important electoral role than

anticipated. Candidate forums were widely attended at first, but turned out to be so overcrowded with office-seekers that a number of candidates stopped taking part in them.

A significant change from past elections was collaborative campaigning. The only actual slate was in District 3, where Angelita Morillo and Tiffany Koyama-Lane combined forces and won, coming in at second and third place. After assessing from past voting records that the size of the progressive electorate in their district was sufficient to elect two Councilors, Morillo and Koyama-Lane co-campaigned, appearing together at campaign events, sharing mailers, and jointly door-knocking, allowing them to hit twice as many houses. In District 4, winning candidates Olivia Clark and Eric Zimmerman ran independent campaigns, but cross-endorsed the other for secondary rankings, calculating that their district had enough moderate voters to elect two candidates. This particularly benefitted Zimmerman, who came in fourth in first-round votes, but was able to pick up transferred votes from top vote-getter Clark and from other centrist candidates to win a seat. However, cross-endorsing didn't play out in District 1, which has a more diverse and conservative-leaning electorate. Progressive candidates Candace Avalos, Steph Routh and Timur Ender all cross-endorsed and shared campaign literature, but only Avalos won, with Routh coming in 6th and Ender 7th.

In a variation on the cross-endorsement idea, in District 2 Elana Pirtle Guiney created a web of endorsements in which, rather than picking a single second choice, she mentioned various candidates with whom she aligned on different issues. Her message to voters was that City Council would best be served by having an alliance of champions of various concerns.

It should be noted that half of the winning candidates did not take part in cross-endorsing, preferring to run their own race on their own name, without being accountable for the actions or positions of others.

How do you believe the way you campaigned influenced your outcome?

Winning candidates put the highest value on their ability to carve out a niche in order to connect with the 25 percent of the voters they needed to be elected. Some talked about specific work they had done for the local community. Others identified issues that didn't have other champions or focused on personal experience and values that stood out from other candidates. Defeated candidates generally agreed that finding a niche was a key to victory and that their inability to do so, or to communicate that message in "bold enough colors," was a factor in their loss.

To enhance the effectiveness of door-knocking, a half dozen successful campaigns made use of public documents, such as voter surveys from previous elections, to target those they felt would be open to their message. For example, although District 4 as a whole had a history of voting for centrist candidates who took a stronger stance on crime, Mitch Green, a progressive who opposed the hiring of more police, focused his mailers and door-knocking on the sections of the district that shared his political values. That way he maximized his spending while also avoiding going head-to-head with candidates targeting the more pro-police segments of the electorate.

Interviewees generally found considerable benefit in mailers, especially for getting their message to renters who couldn't be reached by door-to-door canvassing. A few credited social media for creating buzz and name recognition, though one said it was not impactful. Other results were decidedly more mixed. Although most candidates sought endorsements—and continue to believe that they are vitally important campaign tools—a significant number said they found the results in this election disappointing, noting that many organizations endorsed so many candidates it had little meaning. (A few predicted that that might change when the number of candidates settles down in future elections.) Media endorsements were a particular sore spot, with candidates new to Portland politics criticizing the mainstream media for ignoring them, regardless of how many donations they had raised.

What do you see as the positive or negative effects of multi-winner ranked-choice voting on how candidates interacted?

The system received strong approval from 17 (85%) of the interviewees, including 10 of 11 elected (91%). Among the terms they used were:

- Friendly, courteous
- Collegial, even across ideological divides
- Less tense
- Clean, no mudslinging
- Good spirit
- Collaborative
- No negative ads
- Created positive relations going forward
- Found areas of agreement; similarities

Some interviewees reported that the more collegial atmosphere of a ranked-choice election made it difficult to distinguish themselves by calling out areas of disagreement with others—though many liked that they could focus on the particular experience and ideas they brought to the table.

How, if at all, do you believe this system of voting shaped the outcome of the election?

Respondents fell into two camps. Those who were elected chiefly vaunted the positive electoral results. “We ended up with 12 people with relevant experience who reflect their districts and are serious in finding outcomes instead of performing for the media.” Those who were defeated focused more on the voter experience of having to deal with an “opaque” election system, which, they argued, led to poor turnout and skewed results. “There’s only so much information voters can take in.”

Nearly all interviewees testified that the election lived up to the promise made by charter reform to create a City Council that was more equitably representative of all Portlanders, more

reflective of the overall population, and less polarized. Ranked-choice voting, they said, allowed Portlanders to “vote their conscience” rather than to settle for who they thought was most likely to win. This was credited with electing a City Council that was historically diverse in race, age, gender, professional background, life experience and political leanings. Replacing an at-large single-winner election system that favored well-funded centrist candidates with one that opened the door to new faces who supported a wider array of voter concerns, “ended both the tyranny of the majority and the minority.”

Several others praised ranked-choice voting for lowering the temperature of the election, enabling the new City Council to start off on a good foot. Predicted one elected Councilor, “We will be trying to make policy, not throw bottles.”

Reviews were less favorable on the voting process, an issue raised by three winning and five defeated candidates. Negative assessments called out the complexity of combining multi-member districts with ranked-choice voting; this, they said, put a daunting burden on busy people, non-native speakers, racial minorities and seniors, who were simultaneously confronted with a transformed legislative system, a new and “over-engineered” voting system, and dozens of candidates of whom they were asked to rank up to six. As evidence, they pointed to cases of voters (especially people of color and low-income residents in District 1) who ranked several candidates as their first choice, because they thought they were casting three votes, or who gave up ranking entirely. In the words of one interviewee, the demand placed on already challenged poor and black voters became “a form of voter suppression.”

What were the biggest challenges you experienced in running under this electoral system?

The greatest challenges raised by all interviewees stemmed from the large number of candidates attracted by the new system and its lower barriers to entry. Both winning and losing candidates called out overcrowded forums, insufficient and unequal media attention and voter exhaustion. The crowded voter forums made it a challenge to stand out, they said. Candidates reported attending forums where there were more candidates than voters or when they were given only a couple of minutes to speak. With as many as 20 people on the stage, said one, “it was very easy to get lost in the background.”

The large number of candidates also led to a funding problem. Nearly all said their campaigns suffered from the changes to the city’s Small Donor Elections program that were made to accommodate the expanded candidate field. These included making it harder to reach the threshold to receive matching funds and lowering the ceiling on the amount of funds available to each candidate. Making up those lost funds with donations was another challenge in a crowded field. Candidates reported having trouble getting major donations and facing donor exhaustion, when searching for smaller contributions.

The third serious challenge, raised by half of the interviewees, was a “lack of voter education” by the city, which they accused of starting too late and failing to reach the most vulnerable populations. They noted that a significant proportion of voters were taken unawares by the changes to the ballots and were confused by the mechanics of ranking candidates in order of

preference; even fewer understood how the votes were counted, leading to a loss of trust in the outcome. Several added that the confusion was worsened by the mainstream media, which focused on negative stories and “acted irresponsibly by harping on how RCV is ‘complicated.’” This concern about the insufficiency of voter education by official channels put the onus on the candidates themselves to educate voters on how to fill out a ballot, spending time and resources they should have been dedicating to their election campaigns.

Has this election affected your relationships with other elected Councilors or shaped the way you will work together?

This question was asked only of elected City Councilors. All but one answered yes, giving credit to both the more collaborative campaign style of ranked-choice voting and the shared responsibility of multi-member districts. Most attested to a camaraderie among Councilors from the same districts, despite different political leanings. Following is a selection of statements from each of the City Councilors.

- *It helped that we didn’t directly campaign against one another.*
- *Although we didn’t agree all the time, the system forced us to work out our issues privately and become collegial.*
- *The election system set the tone for the working relationship.*
- *I see the slate we created for the election remaining long-term.*
- *Because of the lack of negative campaigning, I’ve started out on a good foot with my fellow district councilors.*
- *The general vibe on the Council is good-natured. We’ll figure out ways to collaborate.*
- *We are all very different, but we respect and are open with each other. So maybe a greater sense of collaboration.*
- *All of us in the district are pulling for the same community.*
- *Our district is hiring staff collaboratively.*

It is worth watching to see how long that greater sense of camaraderie will last as City Councilors confront the challenges of approving a budget and enacting legislation that delivers on the various promises they made to their electorates.

Findings

The candidate interviews delivered a strongly positive assessment of multi-winner ranked choice voting overall. In particular, it was credited with fulfilling its promise of attracting more diverse candidates, reducing negative campaigning, giving voice to voters who traditionally had little representation in city government, and generally favoring collaboration over polarization.

However, the interviews also raised concerns that deserve attention. In particular, they point to the need for more robust voter education, particularly tailored to underserved communities

and those with a history of low voter turnout. Importantly, this education effort needs to include training the candidates themselves, as not all of those we interviewed had a correct understanding of how multi-winner ranked-choice voting works. It is also essential for the government, media, funders and endorsers to plan for a larger number of candidates. This is especially a problem when it affects small-donor and other election-financing programs. Addressing these shortcomings in future elections will be essential in delivering the full benefits of multi-winner ranked-choice voting.

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Candidates interviewed

Eli Arnold
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Rex Burkholder
Olivia Clark
Michelle DePass
Jamie Dunphy
Marnie Glickman

Mitch Green
Terrance Hayes
Tiffany Koyama-Lane
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