



1212 New York Ave. NW
Suite 900
Washington, D.C. 20005
202-525-5717

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Testimony from:
Matthew Germer, Elections Fellow, R Street Institute

In SUPPORT of SB 1380, “A BILL ... relating to elections; presidential primaries; ranked-choice voting.”

January 24, 2023

Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections

Chair Spruill and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for considering my testimony. My name is Matthew Germer, and I conduct research on election reform for the R Street Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy research organization. Our mission is to engage in policy research and outreach to promote free markets and limited, effective government across a variety of policy areas, including election reform. This is why Senate Bill 1380 is important to us.

When it comes to election reform, state legislatures should be focused on improving the voting experience for all eligible voters while ensuring trustworthy elections. House Bill 1482 represents such an improvement by providing parties the option to use ranked-choice voting (RCV) for presidential primary elections.

In an RCV election, voters express their preferences by rank-ordering the candidates. Voters answer more than just “who is your favorite candidate?” Rather, they answer “how do you feel about each candidate relative to the others?” The difference between these questions may seem subtle, but the result is substantially more voice for the voter. If voters are comfortable with more than one candidate, they can say so. If they prefer a lesser-known candidate, they can show support without worrying about the spoiler effect. And because the RCV vote-tallying system will continue until one candidate reaches majority support, voters have more opportunities to contribute to that victory.¹ In short, RCV empowers voters.

Senate Bill 1380 provides particular value by allowing parties to use RCV in the context of presidential primary elections.² Due to the sequential structure of presidential primaries, when candidates drop out of the race, they still appear on subsequent primary ballots across the country. In 2020, for example, more than 2 million Americans cast a vote for a presidential primary candidate who had already dropped out of the race.³ RCV may help reduce wasted votes on these candidates through an instant-runoff and may thus provide a better sense of how voters feel about the viable candidates in the race.



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Although RCV brings many benefits, some may worry that a new voting system will be confusing for voters. Fortunately, RCV is becoming more common across the country, including in Virginia with its use at the 2021 Republican primary convention, which has given researchers like me the chance to explore if, and where, there is confusion.⁴ Ultimately, our research shows that voters are not confused by RCV ballots, and, instead, they are highly likely to take advantage of the rank-ordering features of RCV, particularly in the context of a partisan primary election where voters are more likely to support multiple candidates.⁵

RCV provides citizens a more effective way to communicate through voting and nudges our democracy in a healthier direction. As a result, we urge the committee to support Senate Bill 1380.

Thank you for your time,

Matthew Germer
Elections Fellow
R Street Institute
(714) 609-6288
mgermer@rstreet.org

¹ Matthew Germer, "Restoring Losers' Consent: A Necessary Step to Stabilizing Our Democracy," *R Street Policy Study* No. 240, September 2021. <https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Final-No.-240.pdf>.

² Drew Johnson and Matthew Germer, "Ranking Presidents: How Ranked-Choice Voting Can Improve Presidential Primaries," *R Street Policy Study* No. 271, Dec. 7, 2022. <https://www.rstreet.org/2022/12/07/ranking-presidents-how-ranked-choice-voting-can-improve-presidential-primaries>.

³ "Ranked Choice Voting: The Solution to the Presidential Primary Predicament," United America Institute, June 2020. <https://www.uniteamericainstitute.org/research/ranked-choice-voting>.

⁴ Curt Bramble and Colin Larsen, "Virginia Race Shows that Election Reforms Work," RealClearPolicy, Nov. 2, 2021. https://www.realclearpolicy.com/articles/2021/11/02/virginia_race_shows_that_election_reforms_work_801543.html.

⁵ Matthew Germer, "An Analysis of Ranked Choice Voting in Maine," *R Street Shorts* No. 106, September 2021. <https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Final-Short-106.pdf>.