



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

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Testimony from:

Robert Melvin, Senior Manager, State Government Affairs for the Northeast Region, R Street Institute

In SUPPORT of VT SB 32, “An act relating to ranked-choice voting for presidential primary elections.”

February 7, 2023

Vermont Senate Committee on Government Operations

Chairwoman Hardy and members of the committee,

My name is Robert Melvin, and I am the senior manager of state government affairs for the Northeast region for the R Street Institute. The R Street Institute is 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 in many areas, including election and voting reform. This is the reason our organization has a significant interest in SB 32.

The R Street Institute is an enthusiastic champion of measures that improve the experience of eligible voters while maintaining trust in our electoral processes. Such an enhancement for Vermont’s elections can be found in Senate Bill 32, a proposal that would provide parties with the option to use ranked-choice voting (RCV) for presidential primary elections.

RCV allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference, thereby providing voters with a stronger voice in selecting their elected officials. Voters can leverage RCV to show support for more than one candidate with the confidence that even if their preferred candidate loses the race, they still helped determine the eventual victor.¹

Senate Bill 32 would also incentivize campaigns and candidates for office to engage with a greater number of voters in the hopes of being selected as opposed to plurality elections. Plurality elections have the tendency to foster negative campaign strategies that focus more on appealing to a deeply partisan base, whereas RCV discourages the mudslinging we associate with political campaigns.² RCV pushes candidates to appeal to a wider range of voters.

The legislation’s focus on using RCV in presidential primary elections is particularly desirable.³ When it comes to the normal progression of presidential primaries, candidates who have dropped out of the race will still appear on the succeeding primary ballots in other states. For example, during the 2020 presidential primaries, more than 2 million eligible voters cast a vote for a candidate who had already



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dropped out of the primary race.⁴ RCV could help alleviate the issue of wasted votes through an instant-runoff process, and a greater understanding of voters' perceptions of candidates.

RCV confers benefits to both campaigns and voters, and instant-runoff voting provides far greater insights for candidates than plurality voting.⁵ The ranking of candidates conveys more data related to messaging, and policies that voters desire to see from candidates. Candidates can use the information gathered from this feedback to improve their campaigns and public policy priorities as lawmakers gain a greater comprehension of their constituent's views.

There is a misguided perception by some individuals who worry that a new voting system could inject confusion into the process for voters. The R Street Institute has conducted significant research on RCV and found that, ultimately, there is not bewilderment among voters. Instead, our researchers have discovered that there is a propensity for voters to take advantage of the power to rank candidates, specifically in the context of partisan primaries.⁶ Of note, voters who do not wish to rank candidates also retain the ability to simply select only one contender.

While there may be a misplaced view that RCV is overly complex, the research points to the contrary. Moreover, voters overwhelmingly support the use of this system.⁷ RCV will improve the opportunity for voters to engage in a meaningful manner in the election process, provide greater insight to the public policy preferences of the electorate for lawmakers, and push candidates to appeal to a larger assortment of citizens. For these reasons, I strongly urge your support of SB 32.

Thank you,

Robert Melvin
Senior Manager, Government Affairs for the Northeast Region
R Street Institute
rmelvin@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>.



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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 Johnson and Germer. <https://www.rstreet.org/2022/12/07/ranking-presidents-how-ranked-choice-voting-can-improve-presidential-primaries>.

⁴ “Ranked Choice Voting: The Solution to the Presidential Primary Predicament,” Unite America Institute, June 2020. <https://www.uniteamericainstitute.org/research/ranked-choice-voting>.

⁵ Diane Francis, “The only poll that matters is the one on U.S. Election Day – all other polls are concoctions,” *Financial Post*, Sept. 23, 2016. <https://financialpost.com/diane-francis/diane-francis-the-only-poll-that-matters-is-the-one-on-u-s-election-day-all-other-polls-are-concoctions>.

⁶ 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>.

⁷ School of Public Policy, “Six-in-Ten Favor Ranked Choice Voting in Federal Elections,” University of Maryland, April 20, 2022. <https://publicconsultation.org/united-states/six-in-ten-favor-ranked-choice-voting-in-federal-elections>.