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H7704: Ranked Choice Voting Option for Cities and Towns

FairVote has long supported ranked choice voting systems because they provide a stronger voice for the greatest number of voters. We believe that ranked voting methods would have a positive effect on voter participation and have great potential to reduce many of today's electoral problems, including low turnout, negative campaigning, limited voter choice, under-representation of women and communities of color, wasted votes, uncompetitive elections, and "spoiler" problems.

H 7704 would provide the rules and structures for Rhode Island's cities and towns to adopt ranked choice voting. The bill is modeled after legislation from California.

For single-winner elections, like mayor, town manager, or a ward-based city council system, Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) would be implemented. IRV has all of the majoritarian benefits of a multi-election runoff system, with some significant advantages. Compared to the traditional "delayed" runoff, IRV saves taxpayers money, cuts the costs of running campaigns, elects candidates with higher voter turnout and reduces negative campaigning because candidates seek a #2 ranking from their opponents' supporters.

IRV is recommended by Robert's Rules of Order and is used in government elections in the US and around the world. Some examples include the Utah Republican Party, Washington State, where a three-city pilot program was signed into law in 2005, the cities of Burlington (VT), San Francisco (CA) and Cary (NC), many University student governments and Boards of Directors, Australia's parliament, Ireland's president, London's Mayor and the Heisman Trophy winner. States like Louisiana and Arkansas have adopted IRV for military voters to ensure that they have a voice in runoff elections.

For multi-member district or at-large local elections, H 7704 provides a structure for choice voting, a proportional voting system in which voters elect candidates in proportion to their share of the popular vote. A majority of voters will elect a majority of seats, but not all seats. The result is that most voters consistently elect at least one candidate of their choice. Choice voting has been used for city council and school board elections in Cambridge (MA) since 1941 and is used for local school board elections in New York City and for national elections in Ireland and Australia. Choice voting in other cities – like New York in the era of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia – also resulted in fair racial, ethnic and partisan representation.

Both IRV and choice voting are easy for voters, who simply rank their choices in order of preference. To see how IRV and choice voting work, please examine the attached explanations and sample ballots.