

TO: Laura Newman, City Administrator

FROM: Max Weiss, Management Analyst

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RE: Methods of Ranked Choice Voting for City Council Vacancies

Summary:

Should the City of Batavia decide to adopt Ranked Choice Voting for the purposes of appointing members to a vacancy, it is recommended that the City Council use an Instant Runoff Voting style of ballot tabulation. This method adheres to best practices in election tabulation and is legally allowed in Illinois for elections. A number of other methods have significant drawbacks that lead to candidate selection at odds with the true beliefs of those selecting them.

What is Ranked Choice Voting?

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) is an election method whereby voters rank all candidates by preference, rather than only selecting one candidate. RCV allows voters to align their votes with their true candidate preferences and voters are not stuck having to choose the “lesser of two evils.” An example ballot is below:

	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
Crystal Du Bois (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Edna Mode (Registered Democrat)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dirk Pratt (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Elena Rivera (Registered AK Indep)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Write-in:	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

As you can see, each candidate is listed, and voters are asked to select a ranking for each candidate.

The process of collecting the votes across RCV methods remains remarkably similar, however there are numerous different methods for tabulating said votes. Advocates and researchers consider a number of criteria in explaining the pros and cons of each tabulation method.

Criteria to Consider

The following criteria address fundamental questions of how citizens want democracy to work, and how those values translate into the election, or in this case, selection process.

Resistance to Spoilers

Spoilers are defined as “a minor candidate with little chance of winning, that by being in the race, results in a candidate that the majority of voters oppose being elected over a candidate that a majority of

voters would prefer.¹ An example is how minor political parties in a traditional two-party race may affect who is elected. In some circumstances, spoilers can lead to a majority of people being opposed to the winner.

Later-no-harm criterion

The Later-no-harm criterion seeks to address concerns that ranking a candidate lower would have an impact on later rounds.

Resistance to strategic voting

Voting should generally reflect the true will of the people and not be a strategic guessing game. Strategic voting is when voters can use the methods to hurt another candidate's candidacy, rather than supporting those who they support.

Majority-favor criterion

This criterion states that "if a majority of voters (50+1) prefer candidate A to all other candidates, then A should win."² For example, if a candidate receives a majority of the votes in the first round of Chicago's Mayoral Election, there is not a runoff.

Mutual-majority criterion

This addresses situations whereby a first-place candidate may have everyone else strictly opposed to them. It states that "if there is a single group of more than half the voters who rank every candidate in a set over every candidate outside that set, then the winner should always be a member of the smallest such set.

An example is a group of five friends selecting which type of ice cream to buy. Three people want chocolate, and two want vanilla. However, each of the three who wants chocolate wants a different brand. Under some methods, despite three wanting chocolate and two wanting vanilla, vanilla ice cream would be selected.

Condorcet-loser criterion

This states that "if a candidate would lose in a one-on-one matchup against each of the other candidates in a race, then this candidate should lose."³

Condorcet-winner criterion

This states that "if a particular candidate would win in a one-on-one match up against each of the other candidates in a race, even if nobody considered that candidate to be the best choice then this candidate should win."⁴

¹ FairVote: The Center for Voting and Democracy. (2009, April). Single-winner Voting Method Comparison Chart. Fair Vote.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

Independence of clones criterion

This criterion seeks to address when there are multiple members of the same group (i.e., party) on the ballot. It works by ensuring that if one of the candidates from that group is removed during the process, it does not impact the ability of the other member of the group to be elected.

Monotonicity Criterion

This criterion is a very rare scenario whereby a candidate who would otherwise receive the majority of votes was eliminated too early due to the sequencing of the ratings from other voters.

Current Method: The Borda Count Method

This method of RCV “is intended to elect broadly acceptable candidates, rather than those preferred by a majority.”⁵ Votes are tabulated by assigning a point value to each first-place vote, second place vote, and so on. The points are counted, and the highest scorer is named the winner. There is no transferring of votes and there is only one round of tabulations.

The Borda Count Method has a significant drawback: the selected candidate may not reflect the “will of the people” but instead may be a candidate nobody has strong feelings for or against. This is generally at odds with how most people tend to choose and vote for candidates, especially in competitive elections.

The Borda Count Method also fails to meet several of the above criteria, including:

- Resistance to spoilers
- Later-no-harm
- Resistance to strategic voting
- Majority favorite criterion
- Mutual majority criterion
- Condorcet winner criterion
- Independence of clones criterion

The practical impact of the current system is that the candidate selected is unlikely to be the selection of a majority of voters and that small groups of voters can strategically vote to harm the otherwise favored candidate.

Due to the way Borda Counts are tabulated, this method is the most subject to interference from strategic voting. An example is how MVP voting in Baseball works.

Each team’s two main beat reporters are given 10 votes to rank their top 10 for MVP across the league. A player getting a first-place vote receives 14 points, 2nd gets 9 points, etc.

A borda count selection, like MVP, is subject to strategic voting, which happened during the 2022 NL MVP Race. St. Louis Cardinals first baseman Paul Goldschmidt was widely viewed as the favorite for the award, with San Diego Padres third baseman Manny Machado as the main rival. During voting, one reporter from St. Louis ranked Machado 5th (the lowest of any voter) and instead ranked New York Mets first baseman Pete Alonso 2nd (the highest of any voter by three slots). This strategic vote

⁵ Ranked Choice Voting - Scoring Methods. (n.d.). ezVote Online Voting. <https://www.ezvoteonline.com/M/Ranked-Choice-Voting/>

disproportionately harmed Machado's candidacy. Although there is a generally objective winner for MVP, it nonetheless shows the capacity of individuals to strategically vote.

Additionally, Borda Counts are not a constitutionally approved method for general or primary elections due to not meeting the "one person one vote" requirement.

Methods Used by Nearby Cities

The city codes of Geneva, St. Charles, Aurora, North Aurora, and West Chicago were reviewed to determine their legal method of appointing a candidate to vacant city council seat. Many are mum on what process they officially use and only North Aurora has an ordinance for their appointments.

Geneva

The process of appointment for city council is not specified and there is no language in the code or prior applications that indicates they use RCV to fill vacancies.

St. Charles

St. Charles does not specify the method of appointment in its city code. There is no language in the code or prior applications that indicates they use RCV to fill vacancies.

Aurora

Aurora does not specify the method of appointment in the city code. There is no language in the code or prior applications that indicates they use RCV to fill vacancies.

North Aurora

North Aurora uses a unique, special election method to fill vacancies in city council. As far as I am aware, this is seldom used and is a relic from the 1930s. The ordinance (196), however, has not been repealed and remains in effect. It states:

Sec. 1: Whenever a vacancy shall occur or exist in any elective Village office, a special election for the purpose of filling such vacancy may be called by the Village Board of Trustees. The procedure as to the giving of notice, filing of petitions, and conduct of such elections shall be the same as prevails at a general election for Village officials.

Sec. 2: The provisions of this Ordinance shall not apply to any vacancy in the Office of Village President where the vacancy is less than one year.

West Chicago

West Chicago does not specify the method of appointment in the city code. There is no language in the code or prior applications that indicates they use RCV to fill vacancies.

At this time, no municipality in Illinois uses RCV for their elections and research did not indicate any use this method formally for appointments. Voters in Evanston, with 82 percent approval, made their city the first in Illinois to adopt a RCV method for their municipal elections starting in 2025⁶.

⁶ Agnew, D., & Agnew, D. (2022). Evanston endorses ranked choice voting in a landslide. Evanston RoundTable. <https://evanstonroundtable.com/2022/11/08/evanston-endorses-ranked-choice-voting-in-a-landslide/>

State law ([65 ILCS 5/3.1-10-50](#)) also prescribes the overall rules municipalities must follow for appointing officials to fill a vacancy; however, the law is silent on the tabulation methods a municipal body may use. Illinois Attorney General Opinion 05-007 allows for home rule municipalities to use ranked choice voting for elections so long as it is approved via a referendum. There appears to be no restrictions on using RCV for appointments.

Recommended Method: Instant Runoff Voting (IRV)

When voters hear the phrase ranked choice voting as a potential voting method, this often is what they refer to.

In practice, this works by calculating whether a candidate received a majority of votes on the first ballot. If that happens, that person is declared the winner and the election is over. However, if no candidate receives a majority, the lowest scoring candidate is dropped, and the votes assigned to the dropped candidate go to whoever the voter selected as their second choice. This continues for as many rounds as it takes for a candidate to receive a majority. This dropping and re-assigning is referred to as a single transferable vote, and it's the core of what makes this method legal.

The benefits of this method include:

- The candidate selected is the selection of a majority of voters, and if a majority approves on the first ballot, the election is over.
- The election is immune to the spoiler effect.
- Ranking a candidate lower or higher doesn't impact future rounds due to the transferability of the vote.
- Multiple members of the same group do not impact the ability of that group to win an election due to transferrable votes.

This method also produces and encourages greater representation for marginalized communities. While there is not extensive research on IRV as an appointment tool, research shows municipalities using IRV for elections have more equitable representation.

When used in New York City for the first time, IRV produced the most diverse city council in their history. Research also shows that representation of women is greatly aided by IRV and RCV in general. In 2020, "half of all mayors and nearly half of all city council members elected in cities with ranked-choice voting are women. Additionally, at least seven cities with ranked choice voting for their city council elections have reached gender parity or surpassed it."⁷ IRV also tends to increase participation and lead to more civility and positivity in campaigns⁸.

Not Recommended Alternative Methods

For several reasons, it is not recommended that the board adopt any of the following methods due to their described flaws.

⁷ Rodriguez, B., & Rodriguez, B. (2021). How ranked-choice voting elevates women and people of color seeking office. The 19th. <https://19thnews.org/2021/06/how-ranked-choice-voting-elevates-women-and-people-of-color-seeking-office/>

⁸ McGinn, E. (2020). Rating Rankings: Effect of Instant Run-off Voting on participation and civility.

First Past the Post

First past the post style (FPTP) selection says the candidate with the most votes wins and voters may only choose one candidate for each office. This method is currently used for nearly all conventional elections. The main drawback with this method is that strategic voting is an issue with multiple candidates, especially when multiple candidates are from the same group.

FPTP also fails the majority favor criterion. In a three-candidate election, candidate A may receive 44 percent, B 42 percent, and C 14 percent. Under FPTP, A wins because they received the most votes. However, voters of candidate C may more closely align with B, and thus the candidate with a majority in support is candidate B. In this case, C serves as a spoiler. Under IRV, a voter could rank candidates C, B, A to reflect their true beliefs.

Two-Round Runoff

This method lacks protections to ensure that the candidate who a majority would approve of is able to be selected. For example, take candidates W, X, Y, and Z. W received 49 percent of the first-place votes, X received 22 percent, Y received 20 percent and Z received 9 percent. Under two-round runoff, W and X move on. However, there is a chance Y is the one favored by the majority, but one would never know.

Approval Voting

This method asks voters to select all candidates they approve of. The one with the most votes wins. This again is subject to strategic voting and there are questions whether this could be used for an actual election. Additionally, the candidate selected is unlikely to be the one approved by the majority.

Range Voting

This method is similar to how judges grade a gymnastics competition or other sporting event. Voters are asked to assign a number from a range to each candidate and the one with the highest score wins. This is again subject to strategic voting and is best reserved for situations where there are impartial judges selecting.

Condorcet Methods

These methods pair all candidates against all other candidates in head-to-head tests to see which candidate beats all other candidates. However, there are times where there is no winner, or when there's a circular winner (i.e., A beats C, C beats B, B beats A). This method is rather complicated and the methods for determining a winner in unique situations are extremely mathematical.