

An Assessment of Rank Choice Voting's Debut in Pierce County, WA

A Research Report of The Washington Poll

By: Loren Collingwood¹, Todd Donovan², and Matt Barreto³

June 8, 2009

Introduction

Prototypical elections in the U.S. involve candidates first campaigning in a primary where they compete against partisans of the same political stripe. The winner of each party's primary then face off against one another in a general election. Ranked choice voting (RCV), or instant run-off voting, is a method of voting that essentially incorporates the primary and general elections into one election and on one ballot.⁴ It is designed to provide voters with a broader array of candidates from which to choose without having to risk 'wasting their vote' by not voting for one of the top two candidates. In brief, proponents argue that RCV improves democratic voting processes.⁵

With RCV, voters do not just pick their top choice; instead, they rank their first, second, third, fourth, and so on, choices. As such, RCV is an iterative voting process, with a series of votes. On the first vote, if one candidate obtains a majority (50% + 1) of the vote, they win. But, if no candidate receives a majority on the first vote, the candidate with the fewest first-choice votes is eliminated from the election. The eliminated candidate's votes are then allocated to each voter's second choice candidate. This process continues until one candidate has a majority of votes.ⁱ The process is designed to operate as a primary and general election all in one. In a traditional primary, voters who voted for the losing candidates that did not advance to the runoff or general, must decide which of the two finalists they will vote for, or perhaps to not vote in the runoff. In RCV, the voter is allowed to vote in the primary and runoff/general during the same election.

Few jurisdictions in the U.S. employ RCV, although there has been a recent increase in the number of geographic entities using this method, including the city of San Francisco and Burlington, Vermont. In 2006, voters in Pierce County, Washington, approved a Charter Amendment to use RCV in upcoming elections. RCV in Pierce County debuted in 2008 for County-level elections only. This report analyzes the results from the seven RCV election contests in the November, 2008 general election. These include the County Executive contest, the County Assessor-Treasurer contest, County Sheriff, and the County Council District seats (2, 3, 4, and 6).

¹ University of Washington, Department of Political Science

² Western Washington University, Department of Political Science

³ University of Washington, Department of Political Science

⁴ Ranked Choice Voting – Also referred to as RCV in this report.

⁵ A January, 2005, report by FairVote, estimates that the city of San Francisco saved approximately \$1.2 million by not having to administer run-off elections.

The Primary and General in One Election

As mentioned, one tenet of RCV, in theory, is to limit the number of elections required to fill seats for public office. In doing so, RCV can be thought of as a primary, general, and even run-off election wrapped into one.

One criticism of RCV is that it allocates votes differently from traditional primary and general election contests. That is, RCV may be seen by some observers as problematic because there is no guarantee that the candidate with the most votes in the first round of counting will obtain the most votes in the final round of balloting. One way to assess if this is something unique to RCV is to examine several (recent) examples of outcomes in traditional elections. As we illustrate below, the candidates who receive the most votes in a primary contest do not always win the general election.

Looking at the most recent Washington State legislative results, while most of the candidates who gained the most votes in the top two primary went on to win the general, several examples contravene this general rule. Indeed, of the 26 Senate elections, the candidate that received a majority of the votes in the primary received the most votes in the general 22 times. Two candidates—Randi Becker (LD-2) and Kevin Ranker (LD-40)—however, were able to make considerable progress between the two elections to muster a victory. The numbers from these contests are displayed in table 1. Finally, two candidates, Margarita Prentice (LD-11) and Dan Swecker (LD-20), received a plurality of the primary vote share and a majority in the general.

Table 1. Primary and General voting patterns for 2008 State Senate elections.

2008 State Senate Legislative Primary and General Results (Races where primary winner did not win general)						
District	Candidate	Party	Primary Vote	Primary Vote Share	General Vote	General Vote Share
LD-2 – Senate	Marilyn Rasmussen	Democrat	14,675	50.44	30,206	48.37
LD-2 – Senate	Randi Becker	Republican	10,921	37.54	32,244	51.63
LD-40 – Senate	Kevin Ranker	Democrat	10,310	28.28	38,200	58.56
LD-40 – Senate	Steve Van Luven	Republican	13,787	37.82	27,028	41.44

Results are similar for candidates seeking office in 2008 for state representative position one and position two, respectively, and are presented in table 2. Of the 49 races for position one, 40 candidates won a majority of the vote in both elections, five won a plurality in the primary followed by a victory in the general, and four candidates came second in the top two primary but won in the general. For representative position two, 45 candidates won a majority of the vote in both contests, 2 won a plurality

in the primary followed by victory in the general, and two finished second in the primary but won the general. The results of the candidates who did *not* place first in the primary, but *did* place first in the general are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Primary and General voting patterns for 2008 legislative district elections.

2008 State Representative Legislative Primary and General Results (Races where primary winner did not win general)						
District	Candidate	Party	Primary Vote	Pri. Vote Share	General Vote	Gen. Vote Share
LD-6 -- State Rep 1	Kevin Parker Don A.	Republican	11,248	29.80	37,050	52.85
LD-6 -- State Rep 1	Barlow	Democrat	17,208	45.58	33,050	47.15
LD-8 -- State Rep 1	Brad Klippert	Republican	6,272	19.00	31,266	52.51
LD-8 -- State Rep 1	Carol L. Moser	Democrat	12,603	38.18	28,278	47.49
LD-14 -- State Rep 1	Norm Johnson	Republican	5,618	22.06	23,790	53.24
LD-14 -- State Rep 1	Vickie Ybarra	Democrat	7,642	30.01	20,895	46.76
LD-47 -- State Rep 1	Geoff Simpson	Democrat	8,999	39.52	27,439	52.62
LD-47 -- State Rep 1	Mark Hargrove	Republican	10,666	46.84	24,707	47.38
LD-6 -- State Rep 2	John F. Driscoll	Democrat	17,902	48.10	35,107	50.05
LD-6 -- State Rep 2	John E. Ahern	Republican	19,315	51.90	35,033	49.95
LD-44 -- State Rep 2	Mike Hope	Republican	15,101	49.33	34,437	50.09
LD-44 -- State Rep 2	Liz Loomis	Democrat	15,512	50.67	34,319	49.91

In summary, one criticism leveled against RCV—that candidates who do not obtain the most votes in the initial iteration of voting can go on to win the election outright—is also a function of traditional primary and general election dynamics. Although the trend above suggests that candidates who win primaries also tend to win the general, there are regular instances when this does not happen. In short, it is not a unique feature of RCV to have a candidate win office after trailing in the initial vote count.

Another critique is that a third place candidate can win under RCV; but this is certainly an anomaly and did not happen in any of the Pierce County contests. While this cannot happen in the current top-two primary electoral design, it was possible under the blanket primary once employed in Washington State.

Thus, many electoral dynamics characterized by traditional voting systems are mirrored in RCV. After any primary the top two finalists must then go after the votes of the losing candidate either through endorsements or outreach to those voters. The finalists know that winning the primary does not ensure their victory in the general and that voters who preferred one of the losing candidates still has a vote in the general and a chance to influence the election. This reflects a very similar process that likely occurs under RCV.

Ranked Choice Voting Results

The 2008 general election marked the first time Ranked Choice Voting occurred in Washington State. RCV occurred for seven races in Pierce County: Executive, Assessor / Treasurer, Sheriff, and Council Members 2, 3, 4, and 6. However, just Executive, Assessor, and Council position 2 involved more than one round of voting. Results for these contests are presented below.⁶

The County Executive race—the most high profile of the three—involved three rounds of voting. Working forwards, Shawn Bunney, endorsed by Republicans, captured a plurality of the vote (35 percent) in round 1. Pat McCarthy, a Democrat, came second with 26.5 percent of the vote, followed by Democrat Calvin Goings (23 percent), and Mike Lonergan (15 percent). Lonergan sought a Republican endorsement, but fell short at the GOP convention, and campaigned as an independent.⁷ Because no candidate received a majority of the votes, Lonergan (last place) was eliminated and his supporters' second preference votes were then transferred to the remaining candidates.. These votes were distributed fairly equitably and similar in proportion to the initial vote. That is, McCarthy garnered 29 percent of Lonergan's vote, Goings 18.5 percent, and Bunney 30 percent. The remainder of Lonergan's vote was exhausted, as 10,746 of his voters opted to not rank a second choice candidate.

These reallocated figures, however, still did not produce a majority for any candidate. The final round of voting eliminated Goings, whose supporters' votes were then distributed to the remaining candidates. Goings supporters split heavily toward the other Democrat, McCarthy, by a ratio of about 3:1, with 19,562 votes exhausted. This gave McCarthy the final majority at 50.75 percent to 49.25 percent.

⁶ See appendix for tables of Sheriff, and Council positions 3, 4, and 6.

⁷ The Pierce County Official Local Voter's Pamphlet officially lists Mike Lonergan as a member of the Executive Excellence Party.

Table 3. County Executive had three rounds of voting, with Bunney winning the first two rounds, but McCarthy gaining the most votes in the final round.

County Executive Election 2008								
Candidate	Round 1			Round 2			Round 3	
	Votes	Percent	Transfer	Votes	Percent	Transfer	Votes	Percent
Mike Lonergan	45,330	15.15	-45,330	0	0.00	0	0	0.00
Pat McCarthy	79,235	26.49	12,973	92,208	31.98	44,138	136,346	50.75
Calvin Goings	69,052	23.08	8,375	77,427	26.85	-77,427	0	0.00
Shawn Bunney	105,057	35.12	13,633	118,690	41.17	13,602	132,292	49.25
Write-In	458	0.15	-458	0	0.00	0	0	0.00
Exhausted by								
Over votes	532		61	593		125	718	
Under Votes	13,107		0	13,107		0	13,107	
Exhausted ballots	0		10,746	10,746		19,562	30,308	
Continuing Ballots	299,132	100.00		288,325	100.00		268,638	100.00
TOTAL	312,771		0	312,771		0	312,771	

This contest was a tightly fought competitive election. The fact that Bunney was ahead initially but failed to capitalize in the final round of voting speaks to the competitiveness of the race, not the iniquities of RCV as an electoral system, per se. Indeed, very competitive legislative races analyzed earlier in this process showed candidates winning in the “initial” round but then losing in the “final” round. Moreover, the logical transfer of votes (i.e., Goings votes shifting primarily to McCarthy) are dynamics we would expect to see from a losing primary candidate who then encourages their supporters to vote for the member of their party who goes on to compete in the general. As such, this contest mirrors election dynamics seen in traditional primary then general elections.

County Assessor / Treasurer

The County Assessor race involved six candidates, and required four rounds of counting.⁸ The initial count gave Dale Washam (independent), a plurality of the vote at 25 percent. Three candidates trailed closely; Terry Lee, a Republican (19.1%) Jan Shabro, a Republican, 19.1%, and Barbara Gelman, an endorsed Democrat, with 19.0%. Beverly Davidson, a second endorsed Democrat, was in 5th place with 10.4%. Under a top-two primary, both Democrats and Shabro would have been eliminated prior to the general election.

In the first round, Tuma and Davidson (D) were eliminated due to relatively low vote totals. Gelman (D) received a plurality of second preferences from supporters of these candidates, with the rest distributed fairly evenly across the remaining candidates. As no one had a majority after this count, Shabro (R) (the

⁸ According to the Pierce County Official Local Voters’ Pamphlet, this was a non-partisan race.

lowest ranked candidate remaining), was then eliminated. A plurality of Shabro's supporters' second preferences (13,640) went to Gelman (D), with 11,686 going Lee (R) and 10,492 to Washam. After these two rounds of transfers, Washam remained in the lead with 36.4%, with Gelman (D) at 32.5 and Lee (R) at 31%. This meant Lee was eliminated. In Round 4, Lee's supporters' second preferences then split slightly toward Gelman, but not enough to overtake the lead that Washam had since the first count. In sum, this contest involved four tight rounds of voting, where Washam began with a lead of 6% that narrowed but held resulting in a final victory of 51.93.

Table 4. County Assessor race is close throughout, as the vote is disparate.

County Assessor / Treasurer Election 2008						
Candidate	Round 1			Round 2		
	Votes	Percent	Transfer	Votes	Percent	Transfer
Dale Washam	65,676	25.02	6,322	71,998	28.94	10,492
Terry Lee	50,278	19.16	8,245	58,523	23.52	11,686
Jan Shabro	50,023	19.06	8,224	58,247	23.41	-58,247
Bernardo Tuma	18,205	6.94	-18,205	0	0.00	0
Barbara Gelman	49,874	19.00	10,133	60,007	24.12	13,640
Beverly Davidson	27,340	10.42	-27,340	0	0.00	0
Write-In	1,051	0.40	-1,051	0	0.00	0
Exhausted by Over						
Votes	363		71	434		73
Under Votes	49,961		0	49,961		0
Exhausted Ballots	0		13,601	13,601		22,356
Continuing Ballots	262,447	100.00		248,775	100.00	
TOTAL	312,771		0	312,771		0

	Round 3			Round 4	
	Votes	Percent	Transfer	Votes	Percent
Dale Washam	82,490	36.44	15,876	98,366	51.93
Terry Lee	70,209	31.02	-70,209	0	0.00
Jan Shabro	0	0.00	0	0	0.00
Bernardo Tuma	0	0.00	0	0	0.00
Barbara Gelman	73,647	32.54	17,420	91,067	48.07
Beverly Davidson	0	0.00	0	0	0.00
Write-In	0	0.00	0	0	0.00
Exhausted by Over					
Votes	507		93	600	
Under Votes	49,961		0	49,961	
Exhausted Ballots	35,957		36,820	72,777	
Continuing Ballots	226,346	100.00		189,433	100.00
TOTAL	312,771		0	312,771	

County Council Position Two

The only Council position to move beyond one round was seat 2. Joyce McDonald, a Republican state legislator, nearly obtained a majority in the first round of balloting at 49.92 percent of the vote. Carolyn Merrival, who campaigned as a Democrat, finished third and was eliminated. Her vote transferred to Al Rose, another Democrat, at a high rate; nevertheless McDonald was able to reach a majority at 55.26 percent.

Table 5. County Council position 2 was not close in the first round, but drew closer in the second round.

County Council Position 2 Election 2008					
	Round 1			Round 2	
	Votes	Percent	Transfer	Votes	Percent
Al Rose (D)	12,317	30.79	4,747	17,064	44.74
Carolyn Merrival (D)	7,651	19.13	-7,651	0	0.00
Joyce McDonald (R)	19,967	49.92	1,111	21,078	55.26
Write-In	65	0.16	-65	0	0.00
Exhausted by Over					
Votes	31		2	33	
Under Votes	3,630		0	3,630	
Exhausted Ballots	0		1,856	1,856	
Continuing Ballots	40,000	100.00		38,142	100.00
TOTAL	43,661	0		43,661	

Under-voting and Over-voting

Another criticism leveled against RCV is the relative complexity it poses for voter decision making. In the case of candidate elections, voters in RCV systems must rank candidates for the various offices on the ballot, whereas voters in traditional voting systems typically just pick one candidate.⁹ This relative complexity suggests that RCV is a more cognitively challenging task, which may result in higher rates of voter abstention. Adding to this, because of its first time status, the voter learning for this election may be considerably high, which may also cause some voters to abstain. Students and practitioners of voting call abstention under-voting; according to the Pierce County Auditor’s website, “an under vote is when a voter chooses not to vote on a specific race or issue.”

Two issues of under voting emerged in the RCV contests in Pierce County. The first issue—that turnout was generally higher for non-RCV contests—came about likely for two reasons. First, absentee voters, who comprised 84% of all voters, received two ballots in the mail—one for traditional contests, the other for RCV contests. About 20,000 voters did not return their RCV ballots but returned their traditional ballots. In other words, turnout was lower for the RCV contests.¹⁰ While turnout is generally

⁹ In Pierce County, voters rank up to three candidates.

¹⁰ As acknowledged, under-voting tends to increase with down-ballot races, so we would expect to see fewer votes for County Executive than, say, for governor. But, for a variety of reasons, we should not necessarily expect to see

lower for down-ballot races, the fact that RCV was on a separate ballot and was an alien form of voting for many voters may have resulted in higher rates of under-voting witnessed in typical traditional contests.

Table 6. Fewer people cast ballots in RCV contests than in traditional voting.

RCV and Traditional Ballots Cast		
	Raw Numbers	Percent
Registered Voters	411,103	
Poll Ballots Cast	52,134	12.68
Absentee Ballots Cast	281,690	68.52
Total Traditional Ballots Cast	333,824	81.20
RCV Ballots Cast	312,771	76.08
Total Ballots – RCV Ballots	21,053	6.31

The second under-voting issue is that among those RCV ballots returned, as with any election, some voters did not vote in a particular race, or, unique to RCV, cast the allotted number of ranked votes. For instance, if a voter did not vote at all in a specific contest, that is an under-vote. But if a voter casts a vote on the first ballot but abstains from rounds two and three that is considered an exhausted vote, not an under-vote. In the 2008 County Executive race, for example, 13,107 voters were classified as under-voters because they abstained from this contest yet still turned in their ballots.¹¹ In terms of exhausted votes, 10,746 voters cast but one vote, and 19,562 cast just two votes for a total exhaustion of 30,308 votes.

Over-voting, on the other hand, occurs “when a voter votes for two candidates in a race or connects the arrow for both “yes” and “no” on an issue.”¹² In the RCV context, a ballot is considered an over-vote if at any time during the balloting contest the ballot cannot be advanced because more than one candidate is selected in one rank.¹³ Table 7 reports under-votes and over-votes by round for the three races that required more than one round, as well as the four one round RCV contest.

lower turnout for County Executive than say, State Auditor or State Treasurer. This is because County Executive may be a more high profile race for many voters. Nevertheless, total votes cast for State Auditor (excluding under and over voting) was 308,800. The same calculation for County Executive puts total votes cast at 299,132, about 9,000 votes lower.

¹¹ Presumably because they voted in other RCV contests.

¹² <http://www.co.pierce.wa.us/pc/abtus/ourorg/aud/elections/RCV/ranked/rcvresults.htm>

¹³ Ibid.

Table 7. Under and Over Vote by RCV Electoral Contest

Under and Over Voting in RCV Contests					
County Executive					
	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Total	
Over Votes	532	61	125	718	
Under Votes	13,107	13,107	13,107	13,107	
Total Vote	312,771				
County Assessor / Treasurer					
	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Total
Over Votes	363	71	73	93	600
Under Votes	49,961	49,961	49,961	49,961	49,961
County Council – District 2					
	2008			2004	
	Round 1	Round 2	Total	Total	
Over Votes	31	2	33	3	
Under Votes	3,630	3,630	3,630	12,429	
Total Vote	43,661			44,875	
County Council – District 3					
	2008			2004	
	Round 1	Total		Total	
Over Votes	23	23		7	
Under Votes	2,987	2,987		4,182	
Total Vote	52,310			49,461	
County Council – District 4					
	2008			2004	
	Round 1	Total		Total	
Over Votes	8	8		1	
Under Votes	5,177	5,177		12,204	
Total Vote	41,267			43,408	
County Council – District 6					
	2008			2004	
	Round 1	Total		Total	
Over Votes	8	8		8	
Under Votes	2,435	2,435		3,322	
Total Vote	33,045			34,087	

Further analysis suggests that, while the general under vote of 21,053 was an undesirable element of the RCV voting process, among the ballots that were returned under-voting does not appear to be outstanding relative to the under-vote levels in previous (non-RCV) elections. Moreover, while the

amount of over voting does increase in the 2008 RCV election compared to the 2004 general, both contests contain an over-vote of very few voters. A simple comparison across similar-type elections sheds light on these under-vote and over-vote issues. We focus here expressly on comparing the 2008 election to the 2004 election.

County Executive

The 2008 County Executive race reported a combined over-vote and under-vote of 718 and 13,107 votes, respectively. To more fully gauge the impact of under-voting, it is necessary to add in the 21,053 voters who cast a normal ballot but not a RCV ballot. This brings the total under-vote to 34,160, or 10.4 percent of the total ballots cast. The 2004 Executive contest reported lower under vote—28,718—but there was also lower turnout. Thus, the under-vote was about the same (9.06 percent) as the 2008 contest. Finally, the over-vote was minute in 2004; just 48 voters over-voted. The evidence suggests, then, that for the County Executive race, there was an increase in over-voting but not especially for under-voting.

Table 8. Under-vote and over-vote in the 2004 and 2008 County Executive elections.

<i>County Executive Comparison (2004 and 2008)</i>				
	2004 Votes	2004 Percent	2008 Votes	2008 Percent
Over Vote	48	.02	718	.22
Under Vote	28,718	9.06	34,160	10.39
Total Ballots Cast ¹⁴	317,002		333,824	

County Assessor / Treasurer

To gauge whether there was an abnormal amount of under-voting in the County Assessor race, a comparison to the 2004 race is drawn. This comparison reveals that under-voting was much higher in the 2008 County Assessor race than in the 2004 Assessor contest. In the 2004 election, under-voting accounted for about 10 percent of the total ballots cast; but in the 2008 race, under-voting doubled to 21 percent of the total ballots cast.

Table 9. Under-vote and over-vote in the 2004 and 2008 County Assessor contests.

<i>County Executive Comparison (2004 and 2008)</i>				
	2004 Votes	2004 Percent	2008 Votes	2008 Percent
Over Vote	35	.01	600	.18
Under Vote	32,025	10.1	71,014	21.27
Total Ballots Cast	317,002		333,824	

¹⁴ Includes total ballots cast for the normal voting procedure for 2008.

County Sheriff

The County Sheriff race was decided on the first ballot, as Paul Pastor received 72 percent of the vote among ballots cast for the RCV contests. The scenario of RCV and non-partisan office combine to create a fairly high under-vote of 70,547 (21 percent of the total vote). The over-voting is still low at just 101 (.03 percent). Unfortunately for this analysis, there was no Sheriff contest in 2004 or 2000; thus it is hard to know whether this under-vote is uniquely high. But, given that the percent under-vote is very similar to the under-voting in the Assessor race, it may be that circa 20 percent is an expected value for down ballot countywide contests.

County Council

RCV contests also included the County Council races 2, 3, 4, and 6. Seat 2 is the only race to invoke the RCV algorithm, whereas the other three races were decided on the first ballot. To examine under and over-voting, a comparison is first drawn between Council Seat 2 and under and over-voting for the other Council Seat contests. Second, all four races are compared to the results from the 2004 elections.

The mean under-vote for the County Council races (2, 3, 4, and 6) is 8.5 percent. County Council 2 matches this almost exactly, at 8.3 percent. Again, RCV reports higher over-voting than standard voting procedures. The mean over vote across the four contests is 17.5 raw votes, whereas the over vote in County Council race 2 is 33. Nevertheless, this is a fraction of the total votes cast, making it essentially negligible to the final outcome.

The under-vote comparison to the 2004 contests is not so straightforward. This is a result of the 21,000 RCV abstentions. Since the general under-vote data is aggregate, it is not possible to disentangle these figures and apply the RCV abstentions to the appropriate County Council races. Further, in 2004, Council Seats 2 and 4 were essentially one candidate contests; thus under-voting should be disproportionately higher in these races. A true comparison, then, is examining seats 3 and 6 across elections.

If we make some assumptions about how these 21,000 general under-votes might be distributed, we can develop an imperfect comparison to the 2004 election. Pierce County contains seven Council seats. The under-vote reported from the Pierce County website, as well as a weighted tally of the under-vote (assignment of the 21,000 votes) is presented in table 5. These results suggest that under-voting was higher in the 2008 election, versus 2004 for seats 3 and 6 (where competitive contests existed).

Table 10. Under vote for County Council seats, 2004 and 2008.

County Council Under-Vote 2008 and 2004 (percent)			
Council Seat	2004	2008	2008 Weighted ¹⁵
2	27.70	8.4	14.47
3	8.46	5.7	11.93
4	28.11	12.6	18.32
6	9.75	7.4	13.20

Logical Pattern in Transfer of Vote

An important factor in evaluating the accuracy of RCV—and by extension its effectiveness—is to determine whether the transfer of votes from one round of voting to the next occurs logically. For instance, if two Democratic and two Republican candidates are on the ballot, it is reasonable to assume that the bulk of a Democratic candidate’s votes will go to the other Democrat should the former fail to advance into the later rounds of the voting process. And likewise with the Republican candidates.

To the extent possible, we measure the transfer of the vote in the 2008 RCV contests. The Executive contest pitted two Democrats, Pat McCarthy and Calvin Goings, against Republican Shawn Bunney. Independent Mike Lonergan was also a contestant. As table 11 demonstrates, Lonergan received the fewest votes in round 1, and therefore was eliminated. His 45,330 votes were distributed fairly evenly among the three candidates. As an independent candidate, this was a logical displacement. After round 2, Goings, the Democrat was eliminated and his votes went disproportionately to the remaining Democratic candidate McCarthy (44,138 to McCarthy, and 13,602 to Bunney). These results suggest that the pattern of vote transfer was logical indeed.

¹⁵ The weighted figure proportionally assigns the 21,053 votes to the appropriate district. The math is straightforward:

1. Normal Ballots Cast (333,824) – RCV Ballots Cast (317,002) / Number of County Council seats (7) = 3,007.6.
2. Number of districts in play (4) * 3,007.6 = 12,030.29
3. This figure is then assigned proportionately to each district based on the normal turnout for that district. For instance, seat 6 had a relatively low turnout compared to seat 3, thus, its allocation of the overall 20,000 over votes is of a lower proportion.

Table 11. County Executive logical transfer of votes.

County Executive Election 2008								
Candidates	Round 1			Round 2			Round 3	
	Votes	Percent	Transfer	Votes	Percent	Transfer	Votes	Percent
Mike Lonergan (O)	45,330	15.15	-45,330	0	0.00	0	0	0.00
Pat McCarthy (D)	79,235	26.49	12,973	92,208	31.98	44,138	136,346	50.75
Calvin Goings (D)	69,052	23.08	8,375	77,427	26.85	-77,427	0	0.00
Shawn Bunney (R)	105,057	35.12	13,633	118,690	41.17	13,602	132,292	49.25
Write-In	458	0.15	-458	0	0.00	0	0	0.00
Exhausted Ballots	0		10746	10746		19562	30308	0
TOTAL	312771		0	312771		0	312771	

The County Assessor race was a non-partisan contest, and even though many of the candidates presented themselves in partisan shades, this obfuscation of candidate partisanship is demonstrated in the transfer of votes. This point is highlighted by Shabro’s transference of votes: second preferences (13,640) went to Gelman (D), with 11,686 going Lee (R) and 10,492 to Washam (I). Thus, the transference tends to reflect the non-partisan nature of this contest.

Turning to the County Council position 2 election, two Democrats, Al Rose and Carolyn Merrival, were pitted against Republican Joyce McDonald. As table 12 reveals below, Merrival placed third in round 1. Her vote was reallocated by a margin of 62 percent – 14.5 percent to Rose and McDonald, respectively. Again, this is logical vote transference.

Table 12. County Council position 2 race suggests a logical transference of votes.

County Council Position 2 Election 2008						
	Round 1			Round 2		
	Votes	Percent	Transfer	Votes	Percent	
Al Rose (D)	12,317	30.79	4,747	17,064	44.74	
Carolyn Merrival (D)	7,651	19.13	-7,651	0	0.00	
Joyce McDonald (R)	19,967	49.92	1,111	21,078	55.26	
Write-In	65	0.16	-65	0	0.00	
Exhausted Ballots	0		1,856	1,856		
TOTAL	43,661		0	43,661		

In short, what these two partisan contests suggest is that, juxtaposed to standard American election campaigns where often 80-90 percent of partisan voters vote for candidates of the same political stripe, RCV contests may produce a less polarized politics. Here, while voters who cast their first vote for a

Democrat tend to also cast their second vote for a Democrat, a sizeable minority cast their second ballot for a Republican.

Campaign Finance

Proponents of RCV claim that, because of the more democratic process of voting for multiple candidates, campaigns that spend less have a greater chance to win than they would under traditional voting systems. We test for this possibility by reviewing campaign spending for candidates seeking RCV offices in the 2008 election compared to the same offices in 2004. If more winning campaigns spent relatively less money in the 2008 races than in the 2004 races, this supports the notion that campaign financing may play a diminished role in RCV systems.

Of the six races examined, in the 2004 election, the candidate that spent the most won five times; his frequency dropped to just three in 2008.¹⁶ To be sure, differences across campaign environments—as well as a certain amount of randomness in campaign politics—may explain the discrepancy between 2004 and 2008, nonetheless these figures *do* suggest that campaign financing may be less of a factor in RCV contests than traditional elections.

Conclusion

Given the above findings, a few conclusive comments are necessary. Overall, RCV has similar voting patterns as exhibited in traditional primary-general election contests. That is, RCV does an effective job of simulating both a primary and general in one election. Moreover, in partisan contests, the transference of votes reflects logical partisan patterns, which we would expect in primary to general contests.

Overall, under-voting was greater in the RCV contests than in the traditional ballot contests. Although this may be due to the fact that voters received two different ballots, this trend toward under-voting is worrisome. To be sure, with more voter education, RCV under-voting will likely decrease in future elections. In other words, in the coming elections, as voters become used to ranked choice voting, under-voting is quite likely to match levels reported in traditional elections. Over-voting, on the other hand, is higher in RCV contests, but the overall impact is so slight, it is negligible.

An analysis of the 2004 San Francisco RCV contest revealed that under-voting was generally less in RCV contests within the city than non-RCV contests outside of the city (such as State Assembly races). To be sure, this discrepancy may be due to the possibility that County Supervisor (RCV) elections may be more high profile than State Assembly races, nevertheless the results are promising.

Finally, a trans-year comparison of candidate financing and electoral victory suggests that candidates who spend less money may be more likely to win in RCV elections than in traditional voting systems.

¹⁶ See appendix for campaign financing on individual RCV contests.

Appendix

Campaign Finance and winner by Contest, 2004 and 2008.

County Executive

Table 13. Campaign contributions for each candidate in the 2004 and 2008 elections

County Executive Campaign Financing (2004 and 2008)		
Candidate	Contributions	Winner
2004 Election		
Greg Bakamis	\$4,666.00	
John Ladenburg	\$134,600.19	√
2008 Election		
Shawn Bunney (R)	\$423,256.92	
Calvin Goings (D)	\$308,534.28	
Pat McCarthy (D)	\$116,601.66	√
Mike Lonergan (E)	\$43,735.00	

County Assessor / Treasurer

County Assessor Campaign Financing (2004 and 2008)¹⁷		
Candidate	Contributions	Winner
2004 Election		
Ken Madsen	\$27,751.51	√
Richard Washam	\$1,519.00	
2008 Election		
JANICE SHABRO	\$17,047.85	
BARBARA GELMAN	\$16,220.00	
BEVERLY DAVIDSON	\$9,837.40	
Richard Washam	\$0	√

¹⁷ Contributions and expenditures were not reported for all candidates in this election. Data gathered from <http://www.pdc.wa.gov/>.

County Council Position 2

County Council Seat 2 Campaign Financing (2004 and 2008)		
Candidate	Contributions	Winner
2004 Election		
Calvin Goings	\$50,213.25	√
2008 Election		
Joyce Mcdonald	\$32,444.79	√
Allen Rose	\$30,556.29	
Carolyn Merrival	\$15,059.52	

County Council Position 3

County Council Seat 3 Campaign Financing (2004 and 2008)		
Candidate	Contributions	Winner
2004 Election		
Roger Bush	\$68,887.04	√
Kevin Wimsett	\$62,366.49	
2008 Election		
Bruce Lachney	\$84,861.16	
Roger Bush	\$43,863.37	√

County Council Position 4

County Council Seat 4 Campaign Financing (2004 and 2008)		
Candidate	Contributions	Winner
2004 Election		
Richard Dorsett	\$44,684.65	
Timothy Farrell	\$41,296.00	√
Bill Smitherman	\$32,291.35	
2008 Election		
Timothy Farrell	\$21,705	√
Kenneth Paulson	\$0	

County Council Position 6

Candidate	Contributions	Winner
2004 Election		
Richard Muri	\$18,202.01	√
Donald Green	\$0.00	
2008 Election		
Richard Muri	\$22,564.59	√
Vincent Stewart	\$8,557.27	

References

FairVote – The Cent for Voting and Democracy. 2005. *Evaluation of San Francisco’s first ranked choice election*. [www. FairVote.org](http://www.FairVote.org).

Neely, Francis, Lisel Blash, and Corey Cook. 2005. *An assessment of ranked choice voting in the San Francisco 2004 election*.

Porter, John. Brookings Institution. *Opportunity 08. Empowering moderate voters: implement an instant runoff strategy*.

ⁱ Porter, John. Brookings Institution. *Opportunity 08. Empowering Moderate Voters: Implement and Instant Runoff Strategy*. Accessed 2/12/09.