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**SENATE BILL 6156**

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**State of Washington 68th Legislature 2024 Regular Session**

**By** Senators Nobles, Trudeau, Frame, Kuderer, Nguyen, Pedersen, Saldaña, and Shewmake

AN ACT Relating to increasing representation and voter participation in local elections; amending RCW 29A.60.221, 29A.52.112, 29A.52.220, 29A.24.010, 36.32.040, 36.32.050, 35A.12.040, 28A.343.320, 29A.04.410, 29A.12.080, and 29A.36.121; reenacting and amending RCW 29A.36.170; adding a new section to chapter 29A.52 RCW; adding a new section to chapter 29A.04 RCW; adding a new section to chapter 52.14 RCW; adding a new section to chapter 53.12 RCW; creating new sections; repealing RCW 29A.04.127; and providing an expiration date.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  The legislature finds that jurisdictions throughout the state have been discussing adopting ranked choice voting to elect their officials, with some jurisdictions exploring the concept through resolutions and proposed charter amendments, plaintiffs in Yakima county requesting it as a remedy under the Washington voting rights act in July 2020, and Seattle voters having already chosen it in November 2022. Without legislative guidance, however, local governments and courts considering ranked choice voting must independently develop their own unique methodology to implement it.

The legislature wishes to ensure that state law provides consistent and clear rules governing the use of ranked choice voting in Washington. The legislature therefore intends for this act to provide baseline definitions and legal requirements for ranked choice voting elections throughout the state.

The legislature further intends to create a work group to aid the secretary of state in developing effective rules and implementation materials for local governments that enact ranked choice voting through popular vote, by action of their governing body, or as a remedy under the Washington voting rights act. The work group will also develop high quality voter education standards and support materials to aid in the implementation of ranked choice voting throughout the state.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 29A.52 RCW to read as follows:

(1) Except as provided in subsections (2) and (3) of this section, a county, city, town, school district, fire district, or port district may conduct its elections using ranked choice voting. A county, city, town, school district, fire district, or port district that adopts ranked choice voting may, but need not, use ranked choice voting for all offices in an election.

(2) A city, town, school district, fire district, or port district that has voters in more than one county may conduct an election using ranked choice voting only if:

(a) Another city, town, or district that lies entirely within at least two of the counties in which the city, town, or district has voters uses ranked choice voting; or

(b) A court orders the use of ranked choice voting as provided in this section as a remedy under RCW 29A.92.110.

(3) Ranked choice voting may not be used in an election for an office for which two or fewer candidates are competing.

(4) An election using ranked choice voting must meet the following requirements:

(a) The county auditor shall design the ballot to allow a voter to rank the candidates for a particular office in order of preference, including one write-in candidate;

(b) The county auditor must allow a voter to rank at least five candidates per office. The secretary of state may adopt rules that determine the maximum number of candidates per office that a voter is allowed to rank on a ballot in order to accommodate technical limitations from voting systems and ensure compatibility with all ballot formats;

(c) A voter does not need to rank the maximum number of candidates. The county auditor shall count a ballot regardless of how many candidates the voter has ranked. The county auditor shall not count votes for rankings made by a voter that are greater than the maximum number of rankings allowed for each office;

(d) If a voter skips one or more numbers in ranking candidates, or ranks an invalid write-in candidate, the county auditor shall count any votes after the skipped number for the voter's next-highest ranked candidates as if the voter had not skipped the number;

(e) If a voter provides the same number ranking to more than one candidate, the county auditor may not count that vote ranking for any candidate and may not count a vote for any subsequent number ranking for that office;

(f) The election must be one of two types of ranked choice voting elections. If the election is a single-winner contest, including an election in which multiple positions with the same name, district number, or title are dealt with as separate offices, the winner of each contest must be determined using the instant runoff voting method, as defined in this section and further provided in secretary of state rules. If the election is a multiwinner contest in which the positions are not dealt with as separate offices, including a primary, the winners must be determined using the single transferable vote method, as defined in this section and further provided in secretary of state rules;

(g) If the requisite number of officers have not been elected, or selected to continue to further rounds of vote tabulation, by reason of two or more persons having an equal and highest number of votes for the same office, the official empowered by state law to issue the original certificate of election shall resolve the tie as provided in RCW 29A.60.221.

(5) A county, city, town, or district that conducts a general election for a single-winner contest using ranked choice voting must hold a primary using the single transferable vote method to winnow candidates for the election to a final list of five candidates. A county, city, town, or district that conducts a general election for a multiwinner contest using ranked choice voting may not hold a primary.

(6) A county, city, town, or district that adopts ranked choice voting must implement ranked choice voting within two years following its adoption.

(7) The county auditor whose county encompasses a county, city, town, or district that adopts ranked choice voting is responsible for the implementation of the system. If a city, town, or district has voters in two or more counties, each county auditor in which the city, town, or district has voters is responsible for its implementation.

(8) The secretary of state, before May 1, 2025, and in consultation with the ranked choice voting work group created in section 15 of this act, shall adopt rules to administer this section. The secretary's rules must address, at minimum:

(a) Procedures for administering an election that includes voters in more than one county as provided in subsection (2) of this section; and

(b) Procedures for tabulating votes under the instant runoff voting method and single transferable vote method as provided in subsection (4) of this section.

(9) The secretary of state shall develop educational materials for the public and provide training for county auditors to implement ranked choice voting in accordance with the work group recommendations described in section 15 of this act.

(10) As used in this section:

(a) "Ranked choice voting" means a method of counting votes in which votes are tabulated based on a voter's ranking of candidates in order of preference as provided in this section.

(b) "Instant runoff voting method" means a method of counting votes in which ballots are counted in rounds and the candidate receiving the fewest number of votes is eliminated, continuing until one candidate receives a majority of all votes counted in that round and is declared the winner.

(c) "Single transferable vote method" means a method of counting votes in which:

(i) A winning threshold is calculated based on the number of votes cast and the number of seats to be filled, plus one;

(ii) Ballots are counted in rounds, and at the end of each round any candidate who receives enough votes to pass the winning threshold is declared elected. Any votes received by that candidate in excess of the threshold to win are transferred to other candidates. After all such votes have been transferred so that no candidate has votes exceeding the winning threshold, the candidate with the least number of votes is eliminated, and their votes are transferred to other candidates in the next round; and

(iii) The counting process stops when the number of elected candidates equals the number of seats to be filled, or the number of candidates remaining equals the number of seats not yet filled by an elected candidate.

(11) This section does not apply to any jurisdiction that, on the effective date of this section, uses ranked choice voting for one or more offices.

**Sec.**  RCW 29A.60.221 and 2004 c 271 s 176 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) If the requisite number of any federal, state, county, city, or district offices have not been nominated in a primary by reason of two or more persons having an equal and requisite number of votes for being placed on the general election ballot, the official empowered by state law to certify candidates for the general election ballot shall give notice to the several persons so having the equal and requisite number of votes to attend at the appropriate office at the time designated by that official, who shall then and there proceed publicly to decide by lot which of those persons will be declared nominated and placed on the general election ballot.

(2) If the requisite number of any federal, state, county, city, district, or precinct officers have not been elected by reason of two or more persons having an equal and highest number of votes for one and the same office, the official empowered by state law to issue the original certificate of election shall give notice to the several persons so having the highest and equal number of votes to attend at the appropriate office at the time to be appointed by that official, who shall then and there proceed publicly to decide by lot which of those persons will be declared duly elected, and the official shall make out and deliver to the person thus duly declared elected a certificate of election.

(3) For a tie occurring at any point in the counting process of an election conducted using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act, the official empowered by state law to certify candidates for the general election ballot shall resolve the tie using the lot method described in this section. If the tie occurs before the final round of counting, the tie must be resolved as expeditiously as possible.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 29A.04 RCW to read as follows:

"Primary" or "primary election" means a procedure for winnowing candidates for public office to a final list of two as part of a special or general election, or to a final list of five in a county, city, town, or district election that uses ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act. Each voter has the right to cast a vote for any candidate for each office without any limitation based on party preference or affiliation, of either the voter or the candidate.

**Sec.**  RCW 29A.36.170 and 2013 c 143 s 1 and 2013 c 11 s 45 are each reenacted and amended to read as follows:

For any office for which a primary was held, only the names of the top two candidates will appear on the general election ballot, unless the election will be conducted using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act, in which case only the names of the top five candidates will appear on the general election ballot; the name of the candidate who received the greatest number of votes will appear first and the candidate who received the next greatest number of votes will appear second. No candidate's name may be printed on the subsequent general election ballot unless he or she receives at least one percent of the total votes cast for that office at the preceding primary, if a primary was conducted. On the ballot at the general election for an office for which no primary was held, the names of the candidates shall be listed in the order determined pursuant to RCW 29A.36.131.

**Sec.**  RCW 29A.52.112 and 2014 c 7 s 1 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) A primary is a first stage in the public process by which voters elect candidates to public office.

(2) Whenever candidates for a partisan office are to be elected, the general election must be preceded by a primary conducted under this chapter, unless the general election is a multiwinner contest using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act.

(3) Based upon votes cast at the primary, the top two candidates, or the top five candidates in a primary for a single-winner general election conducted using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act, will be certified as qualified to appear on the general election ballot((~~, unless only one candidate qualifies as provided in RCW 29A.36.170~~)).

((~~(3)~~)) (4) No primary may be held for any single county partisan office to fill an unexpired term if, after the last day allowed for candidates to withdraw((~~,~~)):

(a) Only one candidate has filed for the position; or

(b) In a primary for a single-winner general election conducted using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act, five or fewer candidates have filed for the position.

((~~(4)~~)) (5) For partisan office, if a candidate has expressed a party preference on the declaration of candidacy, then that preference will be shown after the name of the candidate on the primary and general election ballots as set forth in rules of the secretary of state. A candidate may choose to express no party preference. Any party preferences are shown for the information of voters only and may in no way limit the options available to voters.

**Sec.**  RCW 29A.52.220 and 2013 c 195 s 1 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) No primary may be held for any single position in any nonpartisan office if, after the last day allowed for candidates to withdraw, there are no more than two candidates filed for the position, or in a primary for a single-winner general election conducted using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act, there are no more than five candidates filed for the position. The county auditor shall as soon as possible notify all the candidates so affected that the office for which they filed will not appear on the primary ballot.

(2) No primary may be held for an office in a county, city, town, or district that is conducting a multiwinner general election using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act.

(3) No primary may be held for the office of commissioner of a park and recreation district or for the office of cemetery district commissioner.

((~~(3)~~)) (4) Names of candidates for offices that do not appear on the primary ballot shall be printed upon the general election ballot in the manner specified by RCW 29A.36.131.

**Sec.**  RCW 29A.24.010 and 2003 c 111 s 601 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) Not less than thirty days before the first day for filing declarations of candidacy under RCW 29A.24.050 for legislative, judicial, county, city, town, or district office, where more than one position with the same name, district number, or title will be voted upon at the succeeding election, the filing officer shall designate the positions to be filled by number, except as provided in subsection (3) of this section.

(2) The positions so designated shall be dealt with as separate offices for all election purposes. With the exception of the office of justice of the supreme court, the position numbers shall be assigned, whenever possible, to reflect the position numbers that were used to designate the same positions at the last full-term election for those offices.

(3) In an election conducted using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act in which there is more than one position with the same name, district number, or title, the county, city, town, or district shall choose whether the filing officer will designate the positions to be filled by number and deal with positions as separate offices.

**Sec.**  RCW 36.32.040 and 2018 c 113 s 205 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) Except as provided in subsections (2) and (3) of this section, the qualified electors of each county commissioner district, and they only, shall nominate from among their own number, candidates for the office of county commissioner of such commissioner district to be voted for at the following general election. Such candidates shall be nominated in the same manner as candidates for other county and district offices are nominated in all other respects.

(2) Except as provided in subsection (3) of this section, where the commissioners of a county composed entirely of islands with a population of less than thirty-five thousand have chosen to divide the county into unequal-sized commissioner districts pursuant to the exception provided in RCW 36.32.020, the qualified electors of the entire county shall nominate from among their own number who reside within a commissioner district, candidates for the office of county commissioner of such commissioner district to be voted for at the following general election. Such candidates shall be nominated in the same manner as candidates for other county offices are nominated in all other respects.

(3) A county may conduct an election for county commissioners using ranked choice voting as defined in section 2 of this act.

(4) The commissioners of any county may authorize a change to their electoral system pursuant to RCW 29A.92.040.

**Sec.**  RCW 36.32.050 and 2018 c 301 s 7 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) Except as provided otherwise in subsection (2) of this section or this chapter, county commissioners shall be elected by the qualified voters of the county and the person receiving the highest number of votes for the office of commissioner for the district in which he or she resides shall be declared duly elected from that district.

(2) Beginning in 2022, in any noncharter county with a population of four hundred thousand or more, county commissioners must be nominated and elected by the qualified electors of the commissioner district in which he or she resides. The person receiving the highest number of votes at a general election for the office of commissioner for the district in which he or she resides must be declared duly elected from that district.

(3) A county may conduct an election for county commissioners using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act.

(a) A county that deals with commissioner positions as separate offices and adopts ranked choice voting using the instant runoff voting method as provided in section 2 of this act shall hold a primary to winnow the list of candidates in the district to five. If no more than five candidates have filed for a position after the last day allowed for candidates to withdraw, the county may not hold a primary for that position.

(b) A county that chooses not to deal with commissioner positions as separate offices and instead adopts ranked choice voting in a multiwinner contest using the single transferable vote method as provided in section 2 of this act may not hold a primary for those positions.

**Sec.**  RCW 35A.12.040 and 2015 c 53 s 52 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) Officers shall be elected at biennial municipal elections to be conducted as provided in chapter 35A.29 RCW. The mayor and the councilmembers shall be elected for four-year terms of office and until their successors are elected and qualified and assume office in accordance with RCW 29A.60.280. At any first election upon reorganization, councilmembers shall be elected as provided in RCW 35A.02.050. Thereafter the requisite number of councilmembers shall be elected biennially as the terms of their predecessors expire and shall serve for terms of four years. Except as provided in subsection (2) of this section, the positions to be filled on the city council shall be designated by consecutive numbers and shall be dealt with as separate offices for all election purposes. Election to positions on the council shall be by majority vote from the city at large, unless provision is made by charter or ordinance for election by wards. The mayor and councilmembers shall qualify by taking an oath or affirmation of office and as may be provided by law, charter, or ordinance.

(2) If a city or town uses ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act, the city or town shall choose whether the council positions to be filled will be designated by number and dealt with as separate offices.

**Sec.**  RCW 28A.343.320 and 2015 c 53 s 11 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) Candidates for the position of school director shall file their declarations of candidacy as provided in Title 29A RCW.

(2) Except as provided in subsection (3) of this section, the positions of school directors in each district shall be dealt with as separate offices for all election purposes, and where more than one position is to be filled, each candidate shall file for one of the positions so designated: PROVIDED, That in school districts containing director districts, or a combination of director districts and director at large positions, candidates shall file for such director districts or at large positions. Position numbers shall be assigned to correspond to director district numbers to the extent possible.

(3) If the school board uses ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act, the school board shall choose whether to deal with the positions of school directors as separate offices for elections purposes.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 52.14 RCW to read as follows:

A board of fire commissioners may conduct an election for fire commissioner using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 53.12 RCW to read as follows:

A port commission may conduct an election for port commissioner using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  (1) A ranked choice voting work group is created.

(2) The work group shall consist of:

(a) A member from the association of Washington cities, chosen by the association;

(b) A member from the Washington state association of county auditors, chosen by the association; and

(c) A member from an organization with expertise in ranked choice voting. The governor shall solicit applications and choose the organization for the work group. The organization shall choose its member for the work group.

(3) The work group shall advise and aid the secretary of state in drafting rules to implement this act, as provided in section 2 of this act.

(4) The work group shall advise and aid the secretary of state in developing implementation and support materials for local governments that choose to enact ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act. These materials must be informed by known best practices for ranked choice voting, such as best practices for ballot design, voter education, and election results reporting. Examples of support materials that may be developed by the work group include: Sample ballots; formats and timelines for reporting election results; and poll worker trainings. When developing such materials, the work group may consult similar materials developed by other jurisdictions that have previously implemented ranked choice voting.

(5) The work group shall also develop voter education materials for local governments that choose to enact ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act. Examples of support materials that may be developed by the work group include: Voter education materials, such as flyers, brochures, video explainers, and graphics; candidate trainings; media trainings; and poll worker trainings. These materials must be developed by May 1, 2025.

(6) In carrying out its duties under subsection (5) of this section, the work group must consult with and provide meaningful opportunity for input from academics and other scholars of elections, the association of Washington cities, the Washington state association of counties, voting rights and election reform organizations, organizations representing traditionally underrepresented communities in Washington, tribes, and community stakeholders.

(7) The work group must provide a report to the appropriate committees of the legislature by June 1, 2025, detailing its activities and recommendations.

(8) This section expires December 1, 2025.

**Sec.**  RCW 29A.04.410 and 2020 c 337 s 1 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) Every county, city, town, and district, and the state is liable for its proportionate share of the costs when such elections are held in conjunction with other elections held under RCW 29A.04.321 and 29A.04.330, except as provided in subsection (2) of this section.

(2) The costs of implementing a ranked choice voting election, as provided in section 2 of this act, borne by a county must be apportioned under this section to the jurisdiction using ranked choice voting. Implementation costs that must be apportioned under this subsection include the costs associated with:

(a) Obtaining, upgrading, or developing any tabulation system components necessary for ranked choice voting, including hardware and software;

(b) The use or maintenance of any tabulation system components necessary for ranked choice voting; and

(c) Voter education and outreach associated with ranked choice voting.

(3) Whenever any county, city, town, or district, or the state holds any primary or election, general or special, on an isolated date, all costs of such elections must be borne by the county, city, town, or district concerned, or the state as appropriate.

(4) The purpose of this section is to clearly establish that the county is not responsible for any costs involved in the holding of any city, town, district, state, or federal election.

(5) In recovering such election expenses, including a reasonable proration of administrative costs, the county auditor shall certify the cost to the county treasurer with a copy to the clerk or auditor of the city, town, or district concerned, or the secretary of state as appropriate. Upon receipt of such certification relating to a city, town, or district, the county treasurer shall make the transfer from any available and appropriate city, town, or district funds to the county current expense fund or to the county election reserve fund if such a fund is established. Each city, town, or district must be promptly notified by the county treasurer whenever such transfer has been completed. However, in those districts wherein a treasurer, other than the county treasurer, has been appointed such transfer procedure does not apply, but the district shall promptly issue its warrant for payment of election costs. State and federal offices are to be considered one entity for purposes of election cost proration and reimbursement.

**Sec.**  RCW 29A.12.080 and 2013 c 11 s 22 are each amended to read as follows:

No voting system or voting device shall be approved by the secretary of state unless it:

(1) Secures to the voter secrecy in the act of voting;

(2) Permits the voter to vote for any person for any office and upon any measure that he or she has the right to vote for;

(3) Correctly registers all votes cast for any and all persons and for or against any and all measures;

(4) Provides that a vote for more than one candidate cannot be cast by one single operation of the voting device or vote tally system except when voting for president and vice president of the United States or in an election using ranked choice voting; and

(5) ((~~Except for functions or capabilities unique to this state, has~~)) Has been tested and certified by an independent testing authority designated by the United States election assistance commission, except:

(a) For functions or capabilities unique to this state; or

(b) For stand-alone components of voting systems that have been tested by an independent testing authority designated by the United States election assistance commission but that cannot be officially "certified" because the authority can certify only complete voting systems.

**Sec.**  RCW 29A.36.121 and 2013 c 11 s 42 are each amended to read as follows:

(1) The positions or offices on a primary consolidated ballot shall be arranged in substantially the following order: United States senator; United States representative; governor; lieutenant governor; secretary of state; state treasurer; state auditor; attorney general; commissioner of public lands; superintendent of public instruction; insurance commissioner; state senator; state representative; county officers; justices of the supreme court; judges of the court of appeals; judges of the superior court; and judges of the district court. ((~~For~~)) Except as provided in subsection (3) of this section, for all other jurisdictions on the primary ballot, the offices in each jurisdiction shall be grouped together and be in the order of the position numbers assigned to those offices, if any.

(2) The order of the positions or offices on a general election ballot shall be substantially the same as on a primary ballot except that state ballot issues must be placed before all offices. The offices of president and vice president of the United States shall precede all other offices on a presidential election ballot. The positions on a ballot to be assigned to ballot measures regarding local units of government shall be established by the secretary of state by rule.

(3) All offices that are elected using ranked choice voting as provided in section 2 of this act must be grouped together, appearing consecutively and in an order consistent with subsections (1) and (2) of this section. The county auditor may, in the auditor's discretion, place the grouping of offices elected using ranked choice voting at any place on the ballot, except that the grouping of offices may not be placed before any office that is required to come before it under subsections (1) and (2) of this section.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  RCW 29A.04.127 (Primary) and 2005 c 2 s 5 & 2003 c 111 s 122 are each repealed.

**--- END ---**