
State Government & Tribal Relations Committee

HB 1448

Brief Description: Increasing representation and voter participation in local elections.

Sponsors: Representatives Gregerson, Farivar, Parshley, Doglio, Obras, Mena, Fosse, Scott, Salahuddin, Bernbaum, Pollet, Ramel, Nance, Walen, Reeves, Hill, Paul, Berry, Duerr, Fitzgibbon, Callan, Reed, Goodman, Peterson, Ortiz-Self, Macri, Ormsby and Simmons.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Permits the use of ranked choice voting (RCV) in elections for offices in counties, cities, towns, school districts, fire districts, and port districts, and establishes certain requirements for RCV ballot design and vote tabulation.
- Establishes an RCV work group to advise and aid the Secretary of State when developing implementation and support materials for local governments that enact RCV.

Hearing Date: 1/28/25

Staff: Connor Schiff (786-7093).

Background:

Determining Election Winners.

Current Practice in Washington.

Each county in Washington has a canvassing board comprised of the chair of the county legislative body, the county auditor, and the county prosecuting attorney. For each election, the canvassing board is responsible for examining ballots, tabulating votes, and certifying election

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results. In elections for statewide office, United States Congress, and offices in legislative and judicial districts that include parts of more than one county, the Secretary of State (OSOS) then canvasses and certifies the returns.

With one exception, state law does not require any particular method for canvassing boards or the OSOS to determine which candidate should be certified as the winner after a general election.

In current practice, the winners of single-member offices in all Washington jurisdictions are determined using the plurality system in which voters select one candidate and the candidate who receives the most votes is declared the winner. If there is a tie, the winner is chosen by lot. In the 2008 and 2009 elections, Pierce County instead used a method called ranked choice voting (RCV) to determine the winner of its county-level offices. Seattle voters adopted an initiative in 2022 to use RCV in its primary elections beginning in 2027.

Ranked Choice Voting.

Ranked choice voting is a method of voting in which voters may rank multiple candidates in order of preference. For single-winner elections, votes are tabulated using instant runoff voting.

In this method, after voters' first-choice votes are tabulated, the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated, and votes for that candidate are transferred to the next-ranked candidate on those ballots. Votes are retallied, and this process continues until one candidate reaches the threshold necessary to be declared the winner. In elections for multiple-member offices, or in a primary, votes are tabulated using the single transferable vote method. In this method, the winning threshold is calculated based on the number of seats to be filled and the number of votes cast. Ballots are counted in rounds, and votes are transferred to next-ranked candidates from candidates with the fewest votes, who are eliminated, as well as candidates who have already surpassed the threshold to win.

Municipalities in several states, including California, Colorado, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Virginia, Vermont, and New York, have used RCV in municipal elections. Two states, Maine and Alaska, have used RCV in statewide and federal elections.

Primary Elections.

For primary elections, Washington uses a top-two primary system in which all candidates are listed on the same primary ballot and voters may choose any candidate. The name of the candidate who receives the greatest number of votes in the primary appears first on the general election ballot, and the name of the candidate who receives the next greatest number of votes appears second. For offices in which there is more than one position with the same name, district number, or title, the positions are dealt with as separate offices to which candidates are elected in single-winner contests.

Summary of Bill:

Counties, cities, towns, school districts, fire districts, and port districts (eligible jurisdictions) that have voters in only one county may choose to use ranked choice voting (RCV) for their

elections. An eligible jurisdiction that has voters in more than one county may choose to use RCV if another eligible jurisdiction that lies entirely within at least two counties of the original district uses RCV, or if RCV is ordered to remedy a violation of the Washington Voting Rights Act.

Ranked choice voting must be implemented on a date chosen in consultation with the county auditor within two years following the adoption of RCV, unless a court orders a specific date. Jurisdictions that adopt RCV before the effective date of this act are exempt from the specifications in the act.

Certain requirements for RCV ballot design and vote tabulation are established. The Secretary of State (OSOS) is required to adopt rules by May 1, 2026, to specify and implement certain requirements. Eligible jurisdictions that adopt RCV must hold a primary to winnow the list to five candidates. The primary is not conducted using RCV. Eligible jurisdictions that conduct a general election for a multi-winner contest using RCV may not hold a primary. No primary may be held if only one candidate filed for the position.

The costs of implementing RCV that are borne by a county are apportioned to the jurisdiction that is using RCV.

An RCV work group is established, consisting of a member from the Association of Washington Cities, a member of the Washington State Association of County Auditors, and a member from an organization with expertise in RCV. The work group is required to advise and aid the OSOS when developing implementation and support materials for local governments that enact RCV. The work group must also develop voter education materials for such local governments. The work group must consult with and provide meaningful opportunity for input from a number of groups and organizations, as well as community stakeholders. A report to the Legislature is due June 1, 2026.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 21, 2025.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.