NORTHAMPTON MASSACHUSETTS
RANKED CHOICE VOTING COMMITTEE

Meeting Date: August 24, 2021
Meeting Time: 7:00 pm

8/24/2021 - Minutes

1. **MEETING CALLED TO ORDER**
   This meeting was held remotely via zoom.

   At 7:01 Chair Boulrice called the meeting to order.   The committee had a quorum as determined by a roll call; all members were present except Councilor Bill Dwight. Attorney Alan Seewald did not attend the meeting.

At 7:01 pm	Robert Boulrice	John Crowley	Bill Dwight	Catherine Kay	Mark Ventola
Attendance by roll call	Present	Present	Absent	Present	Present

2. **Presentation: Voter Choice Massachusetts**
Comments to the

Northampton Ranked Choice Voting Committee

Greg Dennis and Andy Anderson, Voter Choice Massachusetts gdennis@voterchoicema.org, andy.anderson@voterchoicema.org

Voter Choice Massachusetts has been assisting a number of cities and towns around the state with the implementation of ranked choice voting for their municipal elections. We draw on these experiences to offer the following recommendations on aspects where there may be some questions or choices.

Keep it short and sweet
While the Amherst Ranked Choice Voting committee authored an impressive 53-page report on ranked choice voting, there is no need for the Northampton Committee to delve into anywhere near that level of detail to make a well-considered recommendation. The Amherst report discussed several items that are irrelevant to Northampton, such as which voting machines to purchase (Northampton's machines already support RCV), and it included a discussion of the merits of RCV (pros and cons of RCV are out of scope for the Northampton committee). Moreover, the Amherst report included an extensive, academic discussion of the various methods of surplus transfer in multiseat elections, but the reality is that, as discussed below, only one method is really a reasonable and viable option today. In our view, the Northampton RCV committee meetings and final recommendation can be kept short and sweet.

Multiseat elections should be filled using proportional ranked choice voting
Northampton's current voting method for multiseat elections allows a slim majority of voters to elect 100% of the seats, which may prevent significant minority constituencies from having a voice on the council. The fairest approach to multiseat elections is proportional ranked choice voting, also known as single-transferable vote (STV). For two seats, as for the city council and school committee, it will elect the candidates with more than 1/3 of the vote, and for three seats, as for the trustees of Smith Voc and Forbes Library, the candidates with more than 1/4 of the vote.

Surplus transfer should be WIGM
In a multiseat election, when a candidate receives more than enough votes to be elected, those extra "surplus" votes must be transferred to other candidates so that large constituencies don't waste votes on shoo-in

candidates and thereby lose representation. While there have historically been a handful of different surplus transfer methods in use around the world, only one is used by new RCV implementations in the US today. It has emerged as the standard choice for governmental elections, both because it is extremely fair, and because it can feasibly be hand-counted. It goes by the technical name the "Weighted Inclusive Gregory Method" or WIGM for short. It is the method recommended by the major electoral reform organizations in the world, and importantly, the only method supported by the Dominion Democracy Suite software that works with Northampton's ImageCast Precinct tabulators.

Why did Easthampton exclude multiseat elections?

We understand that the Northampton committee were curious about the decision by Easthampton to not include multiseat elections in their RCV home rule petition. First, Easthampton wanted to start small and faced a bit of a time crunch to get the legislation submitted. Note that at the time Easthampton pursued it, no other city in the state besides Cambridge had RCV and no other municipality had tried the home rule petition route to RCV adoption. They also pursued it prior to the RCV ballot question campaign, when RCV had less name recognition and voter familiarity than it does today. Also, one reason to use RCV is to eliminate the need for preliminary elections, but Easthampton was unusual in that it did not have preliminary elections, even under plurality voting, and so that argument for using

RCV didn't apply. Organizers for RCV in Easthampton are planning to apply RCV to multiseat elections in the near future, and some have expressed a bit of regret for not trying to do so in the first go-round.

Amherst voter intent rules make sense

While voters should be instructed to mark up to one unique candidate per rank, in any election, RCV or otherwise, voters are always free to mark their ballot in any way they choose. For an RCV election, this in turn requires some rules that make a good faith effort to interpret voter intent for three types of marking patterns:

- overvote: when multiple candidates are selected in the same rank
- repeated rank: when a single candidate appears in more than one rank
- skipped rank: when a rank is left blank but a candidate is marked in a later rank

For each of these three marking patterns, one could choose to either:

- truncate: disregard the rank in question and all subsequent ranks
- promote: disregard only the rank in question, elevating the subsequent ranks by one

Amherst chose to truncate the ballot at overvotes and promote subsequent rankings when encountering a repeated or skipped rank, which is a common approach worth considering. Model legislation from the national RCV organization FairVote recommends an alternative to the interpretation of skipped ranks: only promote ranks that follow a single skip but truncate the ballot after multiple successive skips. The thinking is that a voter who, say, marks candidate A as their first choice and candidate B as their last choice would be surprised to have B interpreted as their second choice. A practical downside of this option is that it is not available in the Dominion Democracy Suite software. That said, if you consider the recommended FairVote approach ideal, the legislation could be written to allow either option, so that if some later version of Democracy Suite supports it, the Clerk could administratively adopt it at that time.

Batch elimination and tie-breaking

"Batch elimination" is the simultaneous defeat of multiple candidates in a single round when their votes combined are less than the votes of the next-highest candidate. This is often possible for candidates with very few votes, like write-ins. Should a hand-count ever be necessary, batch elimination helps cut down on the number of rounds needed to count. It also reduces the need to break ties between candidates with the fewest votes, when they can both be eliminated at once. If batch elimination does not apply, we recommend "backwards tie-breaking," as adopted by Amherst and elsewhere. Under this method, a tie is resolved in favor of whichever candidate had more votes in the previous round, and repeating as necessary. If the candidates are tied in all previous rounds (which has never happened in the history of RCV elections in the US), and which candidate is eliminated affects the final result, then the election result would need to be handled as a tied plurality election would be today.

Do not over-legislate

Not every single detail of the election and tabulation process needs to be spelled out in the home rule legislation. Some administrative details, such as the number of ranks available on the ballot or the precision of the arithmetic, can be left to the Clerk's discretion. FairVote recommends adding a section to the legislation that explicitly empowers the Clerk to make small modifications and decisions. Know that if you seek the advice of the

Secretary's office, they are likely to recommend otherwise: to include every minute detail in the legislative text itself, but that is unnecessary and only serves to hamstring the municipality in the future. Easthampton ignored that advice, submitted a relatively brief piece of legislation that was no more detailed than it needed to be, and it was quickly passed by the legislature.

A motion was made and seconded to recognize Kate Kavanagh (Kay, Crowley). The motion passed unanimously.

	Robert Boulrice	John Crowley	Bill Dwight	Catherine Kay	Mark Ventola
Approve Kate Kavanagh to speak to the group	Yes	Second, Yes	Absent	Motion, Yes	Yes

Mr. Anderson gave an example of a multi-seat race with three open positions. Let's say you have 10,000 votes; to determine the threshold of the winner, this number would be divided by 4 {formula is (#of votes) divided by (#of seats +1)}. In the example, more than 2,500 would be required to win one of the seats. If five candidates ran to fill three seats and the 10,000 votes were split as in the Sub Tally column, then candidate 1 would win one seat and the excess votes would be redistributed to the remaining candidates. This process is continued until three winners are declared. The process starts by transferring excess votes before eliminating candidates.

Candidate	Sub Tally	Round 2 Surplus Transfer	The process continues until 3 seats are filled.
1	3,000-2,501=499 excess	Declared Winner-excess votes are distributed below:	
2	2,000	+200=2,200	
3	2,000	+200=2,200	
4	2,000	+99=2,099	
5	1,000	+0=eliminated	

A concern was raised that surplus transfer dilutes the overall margin of win by a first choice candidate. Mr. Anderson stated that the margin of win will still be part of the permanent record; the purpose of the process is to ensure that a majority constituency gets a majority of the seats. The goal of eliminating candidates is to make sure that you have representation of a significant minority interest; the goal of surplus transfer is to ensure that the majority constituency maintains control. To member Kay, this seems rather manipulative; the concept of slates is not something that happens in our city. Member Kay is concerned that the community must trust the result and that the implementation includes that the results can be replicated by a hand count.

To the question about which ballots are selected for surplus transfer, it was explained that a portion of each ballot will be transferred, not an entire vote. All ballots will be subject to a portion of a second choice vote being transferred. Chair Boulrice confirmed that in Cambridge, RCV has been used for many years and that the results have been replicated by a hand count. More examples will be helpful for better understanding of how the process works.

To the question about promoting from lower rank when a higher rank is skipped, Mr Anderson explained that the goal

is to understand voter intent as much as possible. An assumption can be made that a person accidentally skipped a rank if only one rank is skipped. If two or more are skipped this can be perceived as intentional. The safest approach would be to cut off skipped ranks of two or more. Dominion can do this automatically in the software. However, if you don't write the process of truncating skipped votes into the law, Dominion will automatically promote next ranked candidates, even if multiple ranks are skipped. This can be worked around by generating cast vote records; the records would be put into a different secondary software (Universal RCV tabulator), and then the intended method of ranking candidates could be performed. The cast vote record allows people to view the raw data and do their own calculation.

Chair Boulrice asked about topics moving forward. He suggested asking Voter Choice Massachusetts for suggested topics the committee will need to consider. He also suggested inviting people from RCV committees in Amherst & Easthampton. Member Kay agreed that the committee needs to identify items that the committee will need to make decisions about, including should RCV be applied to multi-seat elections; what process should be used for distributing excess votes. She would like to know how the RCV software will interface with our current optical scanner systems. Chair Boulrice believes that RCV will be used for all seats in Northampton, including multi-seat positions and that this has already been decided based upon the recommendation of the Charter Review Committee.

Member Crowley recommended reviewing the topics and deciding which areas need more of the committee's attention.

Chair Boulrice will meet with Voter Choice representatives off-line to review which topics are important and he will bring them back to the committee. He will also share the list with Attorney Seewald to see if there is anything else that needs to be added. This is important because he will ultimately be creating the language to send to the city council and state legislature.

3. **PUBLIC COMMENT**

None

4. **REVIEW AND APPROVE MINUTES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING**

A motion to approve the minutes of the Aug. 10th meeting was made and seconded (Crowley, Ventola) and passed unanimously.

	Robert Boulrice	John Crowley	Bill Dwight	Catherine Kay	Mark Ventola
Approve Minutes from 8/10/2021 Meeting	Yes	Motion, Yes	Absent	Yes	Second, Yes

5. **Discussion - Easthampton and Amherst Legislation**

No discussion at this time.

6. **Next and (Possibly) Future Meeting Schedule**

The next meeting is scheduled for September 22, 2021 at 4:00. It will be a teleconference meeting.

7. **ADJOURN**

At 8:12 pm a motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting (Kay, Crowley). The motion passed unanimously.

	Robert	John	Bill	Catherine	Mark