

# EASY AS 1-2-3?



## Ontario municipalities move towards optional ranked balloting

By Sarah B. Hood

**T**hey do it in Berkeley and Oakland, Minneapolis and San Francisco. They're planning it in Memphis and Santa Fe. And in 2018, some Ontario municipalities may join the growing list of places where electors can vote for candidates using ranked ballots.

Also known as ranked choice voting (RCV), ranked ballot systems are an increasingly popular alternative to the "first-past-the-post" (FPTP) system used in most Canadian elections. All Ontario provincial parties and Canadian federal parties already use ranked ballots to choose their leaders; organizations like the National Hockey League, the National Basketball Association and Hollywood's Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences use them to choose award winners.

Instead of voting for a single candidate per office, as in the FPTP system, with ranked ballots, voters indicate a first, second and third choice. When ballots are counted, if no first-choice candidate has received a 50 per cent majority, the second-choice votes are tabulated for an "instant run-off." Third-place votes may also be counted if needed.

Supporters of ranked balloting point out that the system ensures elected candidates have the support of at least 50 per cent of voters. Also, since alienating a rival's supporters could hurt a candidate's chances in a run-off, ranked balloting tends to keep the campaign discourse on a civil footing. These advantages are thought to contribute to fairer elections and, perhaps, more voter engagement.

Since a May 28 announcement by the Hon. Ted McMeekin, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the door has been opened for Ontario municipalities to use ranked balloting as early as the 2018 municipal elections, but the idea has been around for several years. Toronto-based group RaBIT (Ranked Ballot Initiative), created by community organizer Dave Meslin, has led the cause since about 2010. It has been supported by politicians, including the Hon. Mitzie Hunter, former Toronto councillor Case Ootes and former MPP Jonah Schein.





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**– Hon. Ted McMeekin, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing**

In July of 2012, Toronto's mayoral executive committee and council's government management committee directed staff to look into ranked ballots. Their April 2013 *Report on Proposed Electoral Reforms* identified numerous important considerations, such as testing and auditing of voting technologies and "extensive public consultation," since "every jurisdiction that has contemplated alternative voting systems has appointed a task force to explore the matter in detail and held a referendum."

The report discussed the need for intensive voter education and staff training, the challenges of designing the ballots, the potential for voter confusion and polling delays, increased complexity for voting-day workers and higher administrative costs. It also stated that current vote-counting equipment would need to be replaced. (It did not suggest a cost, but in July 2012, Toronto Councillor and Government Management Chair Paul Ainslie told the *Toronto Star* that he expected new tabulation machines would cost between \$4 to \$5 million.)

Despite the challenges, support for ranked balloting has continued to spread among both politicians and members of the public. RaBIT Co-chair Katherine Skene says so many people outside Toronto were expressing interest that RaBIT decided to create a provincial umbrella called 123 Ontario, which embraces groups based in Ottawa, Windsor, Guelph, Barrie, Whitby, Sudbury and London.

Last May, Minister McMeekin announced that Ontario was taking

steps towards giving municipalities the option of using ranked ballots in future municipal elections. He also set up a working group, a public consultation and a review of the *Municipal Elections Act*. The new legislation "might be introduced before the House recesses for the winter break; that allows time for councils to consider their options and make a decision based on input from their citizens before the 2018 municipal election period," says McMeekin.

Response to the public consultation was "overwhelmingly positive," but he emphasizes that "not all municipalities are the same" and that ranked balloting will not suit everyone.

"The goal is to shine a light on the importance of municipal governance, to put in place a mechanism that will, ideally, incent more people to get involved and to make sure that whoever gets elected has a legitimate mandate," McMeekin says.

Stephen O'Brien, City Clerk for Guelph, served on the Ranked Ballot Working Group.

"The work that comes out of those consultations will dictate how administrators and clerks across the province will move ahead with recommendations to council. As municipal election officials and clerks, we probably all see that there is a very strong benefit when the community can elect a candidate with over a 50 per cent mandate," he says.

Nonetheless, the committee identified similar challenges to those brought forward by Toronto staff: training, ballot design, public education and

thorough logic and accuracy testing. When the legislation is introduced, "some councils may opt to go for ranked balloting for head of council, not councillor and we expect not the school board race," O'Brien suggests.

Casey Joe Carl, City Clerk for the City of Minneapolis, has first-hand experience with RCV, adopted in Minneapolis by referendum in 2006.

"In 2009, their first use, there were mostly incumbents," he says, "so it was much more focused on the actual tabulation. There was no equipment, so we had to do a hand count. It took 15 days!"

In 2013, even with 35 mayoral candidates and "the longest ballot in voting history," new equipment that generated results as exportable spreadsheets smoothed the process. The city actually held a mock election to demonstrate the new machines and let staff "play with these exportable data files," he says.

Carl's first Minneapolis election was 2013.

"We started planning in March 2012 for November 2013," he says. To educate voters, the city created a RCV website, bought public advertising, assembled "voter ambassadors" by reaching out to community groups to identify influencers and delivered a voter guide to every household, which included precinct-specific sample ballots.

After the 2013 election, "we decided to post everything on our website, including results of every tabulation, in our four major languages [English, Spanish, the Vietnamese language Hmong and Somali].





COURTESY OF RABIT

A RABIT group photo with Dave Meslin in the second row, on the right with a dark sweater and a white open-neck shirt

"We found in the 2013 election much more engagement and a much more civil discourse," he says.

Turnout was about 33.3 per cent, up about 10 per cent from 2009, but Carl says it's too early to say whether RCV played a role. By other standards, it has certainly been successful.

"We did surveys in 2009 and 2013 with voters, non-voters, candidates, election workers and the media," he says. "Across the board we got good results; the most important thing was the sample ballot."

RCV has been a success for Minneapolis, but may not be "a silver bullet to improve elections" for every

municipality," says Carl. "It's not as easy as 1-2-3 when you're a clerk, ensuring the integrity of the voting process for every single elector and losing sleep over it. Ultimately, you're talking about the cornerstone of democracy; any switch needs to be considered very carefully."

"City clerks want the same things we want: they want an engaged electorate and they want things to be done in a way that is transparent," says Skene. "They really do have the best interests of citizens at heart and that's why they worry about things like voting machines and education; they don't want people to give up on the system."

"I think we all recognize it's a good thing," says O'Brien. "We all just want to get it right." ■■■

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