A Ranked Ballot Primer

Introduction:

The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing has been mandated by the Premier to undertake a review of the *Municipal Elections Act* to ensure it **"provides municipalities with the option of using ranked ballots in future elections, starting in 2018, as an alternative to first-past-the-post."** Municipal governments are to have the flexibility in what method to use. This primer is to provide some information on how ranked ballot voting works and where it is used.

Ranked Ballot Voting:

Ranked ballot voting (RBV) is an election counting method where voters can rank candidates by preference. Voters mark ballots with a first, second, third, etc. until all preferences, or a specified number, have been used. The specified number is a decision point in designing RBV.

Elections are decided when a candidate has a majority vote. If one candidate for a position (e.g., for head of council) receives a majority (i.e. 50% or more) of the vote in the first count, that candidate is declared the winner. If no candidate wins a majority after the first vote, the system then uses an instant run-off method of voting. The candidate receiving the least votes is eliminated, and that candidate's votes are re-allocated to the voter's second choice candidate. Run-offs continue until one candidate has a clear majority of the vote and is declared the winner. Some systems limit the number of runoffs by eliminating a greater number of candidates after the first round if they cannot reach a majority even on preferences (e.g. in London, UK).
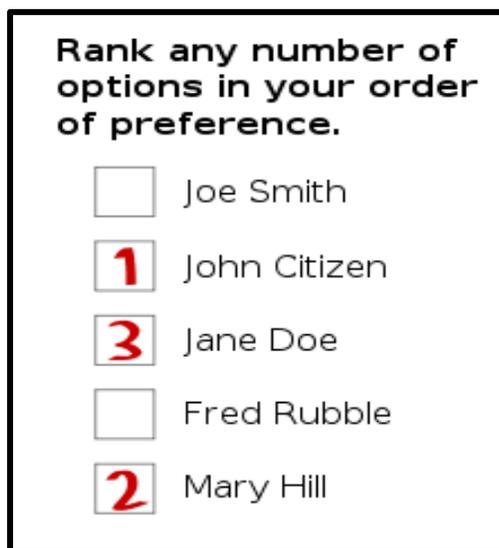
In a multi-member election where more than one candidate is elected (either at large or per ward or per constituency) a threshold is established based on the proportion of votes needed to win. A number of methods exist to establish this threshold, the most common of which is called a Droop Quota (see below). Once a candidate has reached or exceeded the threshold, they have won and their excess votes are then transferred to voters' subsequent choices. There are a number of methods for doing this.

Calculation:

$$\text{Threshold} = \left(\frac{\text{number of votes cast}}{\text{number of candidates being elected}+1} \right) +1$$

2 seats: 33.33%+1
3 seats: 25%+1
4 seats: 20%+1
...and so on.

In both single and multi-member elections, those candidates that do not reach a set threshold (e.g. the one with the least amount of votes) are removed for the subsequent ballot counting rounds. While it is possible to hand count RBV elections, the use of technology makes the process easier and faster.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/1/1c/IRV_counting_flowchart.1.p
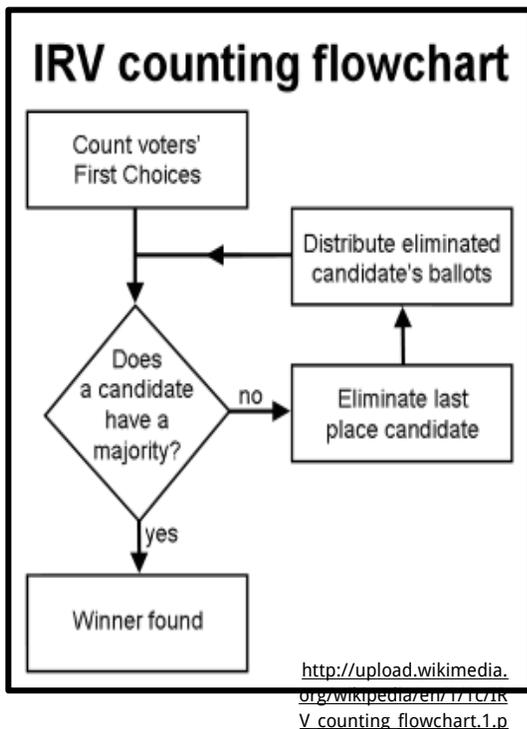
Where is it used?

Canada

Run-off and **Instant Run-off** voting is currently used in Canada, by national and Ontario political parties during leadership races. **RBV** was also used in the first half of the twentieth century for provincial elections in Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia. Research indicates RBV had a minor impact on election outcomes relative to First-Past-The-Post.

Australia: Australia has used a system of ranked ballots and proportional representation for a long period of time. Experience shows that a low but growing number of seats have been decided by preferences. At the federal level, "full preferential voting" is used to elect the House of Representatives; this means that voters have to rank every candidate on the ballot. At the local government level, some states use full preferential voting to elect the Legislative Assembly members, while others use "optional preferential", meaning voters can rank as many or as few candidates as they wish, with the option of voting for one candidate only allowed as well.

London, UK: London has a mixed system of voting in place which includes **RBV**. The Mayor is elected on preferences, Constituency Representatives are elected in a certain area through First Past The Post, and a portion of assembly seats (City Wide Representatives) are elected through proportional representation based on a party system. Batch elimination for unviable mayoral candidates takes place after the first round count so that subsequent counting rounds concentrate on those candidates that are more likely to gain office.

Scotland: All 32 Scottish local governments are elected through Single Transferable Vote (STV) – a preferential voting method for multi-member constituencies. This began when devolution took place after the 1997 referendum. The changes have been said to make elections more competitive, required better policy platforms of candidates, and increased consensus-building.

United States: Several jurisdictions across the US have instituted **ranked ballot voting** (instant run-off voting as it is known across the USA) as their electoral system. This has often been done through municipal referenda.

- **Minneapolis, MN** – Minneapolis uses ranked ballots for Mayor, Council, Board of Estimates and Taxation, and the Parks and Recreation Board.
- **San Francisco, CA** – The Mayor, members of the Board of Supervisors and other local offices are elected using RBV. Voters provide up to three preferences.
- **Berkeley, CA** – Used for Mayor, Council seats, and the Auditor. Voters provide up to three preferences.
- **Oakland, CA** – The Mayor, City Council, City Attorney, and School Directors are elected with this method. Voters provide up to three preferences.
- **Portland, ME** – RBV is utilized for Mayor, City Council, School Board, and Water District elections. Voters provide up to 15 preferences.

Considerations:

Advocates of **RBV** usually point to the fact that the system provides greater choice to voters which can reflect their true preferences and that the need to court preferences by candidates can lead to platforms designed to appeal more widely. Some say this can help to re-engage voters who feel the FPTP system cannot reflect their values as well.

To critics, the added complexity of **RBV**, particularly on the ballot paper, is a drawback of the system. People holding this view may also point out those candidates do not need to offer as stark a choice in platforms and see this as a negative. Where there are many candidates for one position, complexity can be increased. However, this can be managed by limiting the number of preferences a voter can choose (e.g. up to three) and by allowing the elimination of those candidates that cannot gain enough votes to win (mathematically impossible) after the first ballot. This narrows the election count more quickly while safeguarding the democratic right to run for office and for voters to choose their preferred candidate.

On a practical level, these types of adaptations may benefit more efficient RBV election administration processes, especially if the RBV is done through electronic systems that eliminate the need to hand count votes. Municipalities will have to weigh these implications against the outcomes they desire for their electorates and decide on whether and how to implement the changes.

Summary:

The use of Ranked Ballot Voting by Ontario municipal governments in their elections will be optional, not to be mandated as the Premier and Minister have said. It is to be another possible approach. Municipalities already have latitude in their local election systems including the use of wards or at large, multi-member proportional representation, and the size of council (above a minimum of five).

AMO has prepared a submission to the Minister with recommendations for changes to the Act, as well as advice on implementation of RBV. See [submission here](#) for more information.

Further Reading

ABC Elections. *Antony Green's Election Blog*.

All Party Group on Electoral Reform, Electoral Reform Society. *Review of Voting Systems Condensed.* London: England. 2008.

City Clerk, City of Berkeley. *Ranked Choice Voting*.

City of Minneapolis. *Ranked Choice Voting in Minneapolis*.

City and County of San Francisco. *Ranked-Choice Voting*.

City of Toronto. *Report on Proposed Electoral Reforms.* Toronto: ON. 2013.

Dr. Alan Renwick, University of Reading. *The Alternative Vote: A Briefing Paper.* Political Studies Association.

Dr. Martin Steven, Electoral Reform Society. *Working with STV: A Report for Parties and Councillors - Scottish Local Government*. London: England. 2010.

Electoral Reform Society. *Electoral Reform at the Local Level: A Red Line Issue in 2015.* London: England. 2015.

Electoral Reform Society. *English Local Elections*. London: England. 2011.

Electoral Reform Society Scotland. *Democracy Max: A Vision for a Good Scottish Democracy.* Edinburgh: Scotland. 2013.

Fair Vote Canada. *The Alternative Vote (or Instant Run-Off Voting)*. Toronto: ON. 2009.

Government of Ontario, Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. *Municipal Elections Act Review.* 2015.

Government of Western Australia, Department of Local Government and Communities. *How to Vote*. 2013.

Harold J. Jansen. *The Political Consequences of the Alternative Vote: Lessons from Western Canada*. Canadian Journal of Political Science 37(3): 647-669, 2004.

Harold J. Jansen. *The Single Transferable Vote in Alberta and Manitoba* (Doctoral Dissertation). University of Alberta, 1998.

Jess Garland, Electoral Reform Society. *Reviving the Health of Our Democracy*. London: England. 2013.

Lewis Baston & Ken Ritchie, Electoral Reform Society. *Turning Out or Turning Off? An Analysis of Political Disengagement and What Can be Done about it?* London: England. 2004.

London Elects. *How to Vote*.

Louis Massicotte. *Alternative Voting or Mixed Member/ Proportional: What can we expect?* Policy Options, July 2001.

New South Wales Division of Local Government, Department of Premier and Cabinet. *The Election Process*. NSW: Australia. 2012.

Patrick Dunleavy, The London School of Economics and Political Science. *London Voting*. 2012.

Prof. John Curtice, Electoral Reform Society. *2012 Scottish Local Government Elections*. London: England. 2012.

Prof. Yvonne Galligan, Electoral Reform Society. *Irish General Election 2011.* London: England. 2011.

Queensland Government, Department of Local Government Community Recovery and Resilience. *Local Government Electoral Act Review Discussion Paper*. Queensland: Australia. 2013.

RaBIT. *Ranked Ballot Initiative of Toronto*.

State Government of Victoria, Department of Transport, Planning and Local Infrastructure. *Guide to Councils: Council Elections*. 2014.