

## **Ranked Choice Voting in a Global Pandemic: Running for Office has New Meaning...or Does It?**

Running for public office is inherently a difficult process. I jumped into the City Council race for the 40<sup>th</sup> Council District (CD) in Brooklyn under no illusions that this race was going to be a tough, yet transformative process. Running would allow me the opportunity to utilize all the skills that I accumulated throughout my 15 years in government. While also providing me with the honor of serving the community I love. Still, running for local office during a global health pandemic, under a new voting system called [Ranked Choice Voting \(RCV\)](#) seemed to bring new challenges that myself and approximately 259 other candidates could not have fully anticipated. This election cycle was full of many variables. I'm not sure if even [Nate Silver](#) could have predicted every single outcome in each jurisdiction. Nevertheless, it was fascinating to watch the evolution of different campaigns and how they adjusted to RCV and pandemic demands- including mine. So, the question after the June 22<sup>nd</sup> election remains relevant: was RCV a good thing for our local electoral politics, or was it indeed a waste of taxpayer dollars?

In the immortal words of Sophia Petrillo from the Golden Girls, “picture it, New York, [2019] ...” the [NYC Charter Revision Commission](#) put forward a winning ballot referendum that would change the local primary voting system to Ranked Choice Voting to create greater choice and voter representation. According to the Campaign Finance Board (CFB) 2019-2020 Voter Analysis Report, RCV was aimed at reducing plurality voting and increasing voter preferences, reducing the need for costly run-off elections<sup>1</sup>. Like the hip hop generation and Black barbershops across the country, who excitedly debate the top 5 greatest rappers, voters would now have the option to choose their top 5 candidates for each level of local office. Rank Choice Voting would mitigate the advantage that often accompanies incumbents and other candidates supported by the political infrastructure and interests. These candidates were the consistent beneficiaries of low-voter-turnout, built-in political and financial infrastructures, and bullying/negative campaign tactics. RCV was going to address this once and for all.

Rank Choice Voting and COVID-19 drastically changed the landscape of campaigning across the city. As many may be aware, political campaigns- for those on the less intense end of the spectrum- is a sprint within a marathon. Meaning, you may have a year until election day, but every day is a fast-paced hustle. And for those who revel in the art of politics, campaigning is war. Therefore, the strategies in traditional times have been to build and activate your base (no matter how small it might be). Ensuring that candidates are viable, extremely visible, and vested within the community. Once the infrastructure, name recognition and active ancillary support system are solidified, the rest of the campaign is about inundating one's base until your campaign knows the base is going to come out and vote for you on Election Day. If conditions are right, the more candidates there are in a race, the more diluted the vote count would be increasing the chance a candidate could win with less than 50% of the vote. This is what

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<sup>1</sup> [Campaign Finance Board \(CFB\) 2019-2020 Voter Analysis Report](#), April 2020, XV

happened in my district where the outgoing Councilmember, a 14-year incumbent, kept winning by marginal numbers.

Strategies to win a RCV election varied depending on where you received your advice. A friend from Cambridge, MA which has used a model of RCV for their local elections advised that our campaign do as much outreach as possible, casting a wide net. Creating a broad coalition of support. Something that would prove difficult under semi-quarantine conditions and general hesitancy from voters to engage in person. Moreover, a former consultant suggested that we partner with one or more candidates in my 11-person race, to pull votes away from the rest. There was heavy conversation amongst the women in the race to form a coalition. However, trust was a major factor and, in the end, the coalition failed to materialize. Another suggestion, which I used frequently, was to ask to be a voter's 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> choice if I could not be their first choice. The thought process was that if no one had majority support on the 1<sup>st</sup> round, I could win on the subsequent rounds by having broader 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> round support. This indeed had a cumulative impact once the RCV rounds took place. Though it would have been more effective had some of us candidates trusted the process and each other to create a coalition.

Rank Choice Voting is a game changer in providing greater choice, but I believe its promise has yet to be fully realized in many areas. It is still unclear to me the impact of how overall name recognition and political infrastructural support played a factor in a candidate's win. A fact that would make your choices seemingly false choices, especially if a voter does not vote for the "Condorcet Winner."<sup>2</sup> In the 40<sup>th</sup> CD, the top three candidates, including myself, all had varying degree of name recognition and political establishment support. My two opponents who had a two-year head start (one was a 3-term District Leader) were supported by the Kings County Democrats (County). While I was supported by a competing political conglomerate. We ended up being the top three candidates with a combined 64.8% of the votes<sup>3</sup>. This is within an 11-person race. This distribution looks more like a traditional election, than the nuance of a RCV election. Additionally, much of the political endorsers, especially the unions, did not follow a RCV process. Many ended up supporting and supplying resources to the top two establishment supported candidates. It did not seem as though RCV made too much of an impact in the 40<sup>th</sup> CD.

On the other hand, Kristin Richardson Jordan running in the 9<sup>th</sup> CD in Harlem and Shekar Krishnan in the 25<sup>th</sup> are RCV success stories. Kristin surprisingly surpassed incumbent, Councilman Bill Perkins, in subsequent RCV rounds. She won by 100 votes in the last round. Shekar beat his opponents in subsequent rounds by 800 votes. Although rare occurrences, I believe these embody the spirit and promotion of RCV.

RCV was also promoted to increase civility amongst the candidates because they must appeal to a broader voting base. I can attest, my race was more civil than most, but because it was a targeted race by County leadership, there were times when it got negative and down-right dirty. We witnessed this firsthand within the Mayoral race as well. Either New York's political

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<sup>2</sup> [FairVote- Winning Candidate Analysis](#): "The Condorcet criterion states that the candidate who would win a one-on-one match-up against every other candidate should win the election."

<sup>3</sup> [NYC Board of Elections RCV Primary Rounds](#)- DM Council Member 40<sup>th</sup> Council District

infrastructure is too entrenched in its Tammany Hall corruption-like culture or we as New Yorkers have a general gruff and sarcastic disposition. I am not sure negative campaigning will ever go away, regardless of voting systems, especially when the electorate participates in its consumption and promotes the drama.

Lastly, I have learned that the key to winning an RCV election is winning broad support. That was extremely hard during a pandemic. In a context that promotes “shaking hands and kissing babies,” (with permission of course!), statewide quarantining and general apathy towards social engagement made it extremely difficult for candidates who haven’t declared their candidacy before the pandemic to adequately reach their constituency. Although we shined in multiple zoom forums and debates, “door-to-door [still] wins the war.” Especially in a tactile community that on a regular day, demands tangibility and one-on-one engagement. So, we had to still knock on doors and have conversations, even before the vaccine was available to us. It was a conflict that prevented me from fully engaging the projected 20,000 voters and adequately conveying my platform and intentions for the district. That is why timing and preparation is foundational to any campaign, especially hamstrung by a pandemic. It will be interesting to see how the 2023, redistricting elections play out, now that we have more freedom of movement, and more voters are willing to engage the public.

All in all, running during COVID-19 and with a new voting system was indeed a labor of love. It was also one big social experiment that social scientist will be studying for decades to come. Although many, in heavily gentrifying communities, worried that RCV was a part of an insurgent campaign by White progressives to take back control of historical voting rights districts, I believe it accomplished at least one thing. It allowed for greater choice, no matter how impactful that choice might have been in the overall election. Additionally, with the expansion of public finance, RCV has given those who would never think of running for office, the option. No matter how qualified a candidate may be. I undoubtedly think increases in voting access and options are inherently good things. The jury is still out on whether RCV was the right choice for New York voters and the future of our city. Only time will tell.