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Testimony from Rob Richie **In SUPPORT of** House Bill 580

Hearing on February 18, 2026, House Government, Labor, and Elections Committee

Dear members of the House Government, Labor and Elections Committee:

I am writing to express my personal support based on voter experience and my organization Expand Democracy's support based on extensive research for House Bill 580, authorizing Montgomery County to adopt a ranked choice voting method or an approval voting method for elections for certain local offices. This bill will empower voters and local government in Montgomery County, whose County Council and House Delegation want to adopt ranked choice voting to respond to local needs. Ranked choice voting works - and stands up to scrutiny.

- **In-state experience:** My community of Takoma Park enacted ranked choice voting in 2005 after ballot measure won more than 80% support. It is widely popular here.

- **Ranked choice voting keeps growing in use and support everywhere:**
 - **New York City** passed ranked choice voting for primaries with 73% in 2019, with its strongest support in African American areas of the City. It has been used in 2021 and 2025 and secured strong support and effective voter use in the City.
 - **Maine** first adopted ranked choice voting as a citizen initiative for elections for all state primary and congressional elections. The legislature adopted it for presidential elections in 2020 and has voted to extend it for governor elections.
 - Since 2010, ranked choice voting has gotten a majority of the vote in 32 straight ballot measures in cities, including a vote of 73% in **Washington, D.C.** in 2024 that included winning by greater than 2 to 1 in all eight wards of the City..
 - **Arlington, VA** carefully piloted RCV, first for county council primaries and then for general elections, before voting to make it permanent. The **Virginia** state legislature right now is passing a bill to expand the pilot.
 - **Maryland Congressman Jamie Raskin** is the lead sponsor of legislation to have all Congressional elections held with ranked choice voting

I am aware that you may be receiving information that ranked choice voting is hard for voters. This simply is not true. In fact, ranked choice voting is proven to: 1) make nearly 100 votes count toward deciding the winner for every one vote with a disqualifying error;; 2) promote positive, issues-focused campaigns that reward candidates for engaging with voters, and 3) level the playing field for female candidates and candidates of color.

I lead Expand Democracy, which is a national nonpartisan organization based in Montgomery County that studies elections and lifts up promising ideas. On the following pages are examples of what we have learned about ranked choice voting (often using the abbreviation "RCV").

- As of February 2026, 48 American jurisdictions use ranked choice voting in public elections or have passed it for upcoming elections, reaching nearly 14 million voters across 22 states and Washington, DC.
- New York City in 2021 and 2015 held the largest citywide ranked choice voting races in U.S. history, conducted successful voter education campaigns and experienced the highest voter participation since 1989 and a low error rate.
- Five Democratic presidential primaries and caucuses used RCV ballots in the 2020 presidential election, with more than 90% of voters backing withdrawn candidates having their ballots count for an active candidate as a backup choice. That number of states is expected to grow in 2028
- The Virginia Republican Party in 2021 used ranked choice voting to nominate candidates for governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general.

Ranked choice voting is particularly well-suited for elections with crowded fields, like those often seen in primary elections in Montgomery County; this may account for the Montgomery County Council and House Delegation’s support of HB 580. Ranked choice voting makes far more votes count and avoids the need for costly, inefficient runoff elections. Voters rank candidates in order of choice: their first choice, with an option to rank backup preferences as a second choice, third choice and so on. If a candidate receives more than half of the first choices, they win, just like any other election. If not, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and voters who picked that candidate as ‘number 1’ will have their votes count for their next choice. The process continues until two candidates remain.

Winners in ranked choice voting elections for a single office always have a majority of the vote when matched head-to-head against their final opponent, and most winners have even more than majority support – generally being ranked in the top 3 choices by two-thirds of voters or more, demonstrating a measure of broad consensus among voters. Winners of RCV races usually earn the most first choices as well.

Importantly, RCV addresses the problems of “vote-splitting” and “spoiler” candidates. Under our current system, a majority of voters may support a particular ideology, but split their votes among candidates who support that ideology – resulting in a winner whose views reflect the minority of voters. Green Party candidates Jill Stein and Ralph Nader won enough votes to affect the outcomes in key swing states in several residential elections.¹² In ranked choice voting elections, voters could rank the Green candidate 1st and then rank either the Democratic or Republican candidate as their 2nd choice. Their votes would not be “wasted.” Instead, they would be counted in the final tally and would count for the next candidate who best represents the voter’s values, rather than accidentally helping elect the candidate they want least.

¹ Presidential election in Michigan, 2016. Ballotpedia.

https://ballotpedia.org/Presidential_election_in_Michigan,_2016

² November 7, 2000 General Election. Florida Department of State. Division of Elections.

<https://results.elections.myflorida.com/SummaryRpt.asp?ElectionDate=11/7/2000&Race=PRE&DATAMODE=>

One of the most powerful aspects of RCV is that it offers voters greater choice, creating space for both voters and candidates to express a wide range of views. Voters may rank as many or as few candidates as they like but, in practice, most voters choose to use multiple rankings in order to express their full preferences. Typically, over 70% of voters choose to rank multiple candidates³. In highly competitive or highly publicized elections, the rate is even higher. For example, 89% of New York City voters ranked multiple candidates for mayor in 2021.

Voters like and understand RCV. Exit polling results find that voters in RCV cities overwhelmingly report that they like RCV and prefer it to their previous voting method.⁴ Exit polling in Utah found that 81% of first-time RCV voters found RCV easy to use and 88% were satisfied with the method they used to cast their ballot⁵. In New York City, 95% of poll respondents found the ballot simple and 77% want to keep using RCV.⁶ Understanding of RCV is comparable to plurality voting and better than the “top-two” voting used in California and Washington.⁷ Researchers have found no evidence of racial or ethnic differences in understanding of RCV.⁸

Research shows that RCV decreases negative campaigning because candidates need to reach beyond a single base in order to win. Sometimes, this means appealing to be the second or third choice of voters who support a different candidate as their first choice. Studies have found that candidates use more positive language in debates⁹, voters in RCV cities perceived less negativity compared to voters in non-RCV cities^{10,11}, and newspaper articles in RCV cities are more positive than in non-RCV cities¹².

Recent research has found that RCV tends to result in greater election rates for women and

³ Data on Ranked Choice Voting. FairVote. (2021). https://www.fairvote.org/data_on_rcv#research_ballotuse

⁴ FairVote. 2020. Exit Surveys: Voters Evaluate Ranked Choice Voting. <https://fairvote.app.box.com/s/hlzeu53uw0nrw9yzhbjk4flx2uf9x4fg>

⁵ Survey shows positive response to ranked choice voting. The Daily Herald. (2021). <https://www.heraldextra.com/news/local/2021/nov/18/survey-shows-ranked-choice-voting-got-positive-response-in-pilot-test/>

⁶ Rank the Vote NYC Releases Edison Research Exit Poll on the Election. Rank the Vote NYC. (2021). http://readme.readmedia.com/RANK-THE-VOTE-NYC-RELEASES-EDISON-RESEARCH-EXIT-POLL-ON-THE-ELECTION/17989282?utm_source=newswire&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=media_pr_emails

⁷ 2014 Eagleton Poll California RCV Survey Results. FairVote. (2021). <https://www.fairvote.org/2014-survey-results>.

⁸ Self-Reported Understanding of Ranked-Choice Voting. Donovan, T., Tolbert, C. and Gracey, K. (2019), Social Science Quarterly, 100: 1768-1776. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12651>.

⁹ Effect of Instant Run-off Voting on Participation and Civility. McGinn, E. (2020). http://eamonmcginn.com.s3-website-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/papers/IRV_in_Minneapolis.pdf

¹⁰ Socioeconomic and Demographic Perspectives on Ranked Choice Voting in the Bay Area. John, S. & Tolbert, C. (2015). <https://fairvote.app.box.com/v/perspectives-on-rcv-bay-area>

¹¹ Santa Fe Voters Support Ranked Choice Voting and Have High Confidence in City Elections. FairVote. (2018). <https://fairvote.app.box.com/v/SantaFeExitReport>

¹² Using Campaign Communications to Analyze Civility in Ranked Choice Voting Elections. Kropf, M. (2021). <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/4293>

candidates of color.¹³¹⁴ A FairVote report also found that voters of color are more likely to rank multiple candidates on their ballots.¹⁵ This has played out in practice in cities across the country – the first-ever majority-female City Council, with a larger majority of people of color; the first all-female City Councils have been elected by ranked choice voting in cities like St. Paul, Minnesota and Las Cruces, New Mexico; and the first City Councils in Minneapolis and Salt Lake City that are majority people of color.

RCV's simplicity, representative outcomes, and positive experience for voters have made it an increasingly popular election method. Recommended by Robert's Rules of Order and used in hundreds of private association elections, RCV is fully constitutional, having been twice upheld in federal courts, including in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in 2011 and in federal district courts in Maine in 2018 and 2020. It is also widely used internationally, including in elections in Ireland and Australia.

The issue of RCV has come before the legislature in Maryland in previous years. However, the evidence has never been so strong that voters like RCV and engage with the ranked ballot, parties can produce strong nominees with RCV, and implementation is a smooth process.¹⁶

Additionally, RCV would be an ideal choice for both parties in Maryland's presidential primary in 2028. RCV lets primary voters navigate a crowded field, ensures every voter's voice is heard even if their first-choice candidate withdraws just before the primary, and incentivizes presidential candidates to speak to issues important to Maryland voters in order to increase support. Five state Democratic parties used RCV for presidential primaries in 2020, including Kansas, Alaska, Wyoming, and Hawaii for all voters and Nevada for early voters only. Voters in these states took advantage of the opportunity to rank multiple candidates, made very few ballot errors, and turned out in large numbers. RCV is a sensible complement to people voting early in presidential primaries. In 2020, nearly 3 million early voters in states without RCV cast ballots for presidential candidates who had already withdrawn by the time ballots were counted. RCV can make more votes count.¹⁷

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I strongly hope that you will support and advance this important legislation to improve the voter experience in my county.

¹³ In Ranked Choice Elections, Women Win, RCV in the United States: A Decade in Review. Represent Women. (2020). https://www.representwomen.org/research_voting_reforms.

¹⁴ The alternative vote: Do changes in single-member voting systems affect descriptive representation of women and minorities? John, S., Smith, H., & Zack, E. (2018).

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0261379417304006>

¹⁵ Ranked Choice Voting Elections Benefit Candidates and Voters of Color. Otis, D., Dell, N., Zawora, C., & Danaf, O. (2021)

https://www.fairvote.org/report_rcv_benefits_candidates_and_voters_of_color

¹⁶ Additional resources on RCV implementation are available from the Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center at www.RCVResources.org.

¹⁷ Ranked Choice Voting in 2020 Presidential Primary Elections. FairVote. (2020). Available at https://www.fairvote.org/ranked_choice_voting_in_2020_presidential_primary_elections