2009 Professional Practices Program

Ranked Choice Voting Implementation

Pierce County, Washington

Submitted by:

Jan Shabro
Pierce County Auditor
2501 South 35th Street, Suite C
Tacoma, WA 98409
253.798-3189
jan.shabro@co.pierce.wa.us
www.piercecountywa.org/auditor
Ranked Choice Voting Implementation

The Pierce County Experience

Background
In 2008, the Pierce County Auditor’s office implemented a new voting system for the citizens of Pierce County, Washington. Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) became a new part of the voting experience. Major accomplishments included: the formation of a Blue Ribbon Review Panel, development of policies and procedures, extensive testing and provisional certification of software, the addition of a second ballot card, a multifaceted voter education campaign and ultimately success in carrying out the nation’s first partisan Ranked Choice Voting Election. Pierce County is the second largest county in Washington State with a population in excess of 805,000 and over 409,000 registered voters. The election was carried out by Pierce County’s thirteen full time election staff, plus hundreds of part-time election workers. This professional practices paper highlights the Pierce County experience in implementing this new voting method.

Abstract of Program
In the 24 months leading up to our first RCV election, countless hours were spent preparing for the mission at hand. A Blue Ribbon Review Panel was formed, RCV staff was hired, additional charter amendments were passed, new procedures created and a multitude of software testing occurred leading to emergency/provisional certification granted by the State of Washington. The Blue Ribbon Review Panel included important stakeholders, i.e. political party chairs, representatives and attorneys from the Office of the Secretary of State’s and Attorney General’s Office, disability community members, The League of Women Voters, Veterans Advisory Council and respected members of the community.

Objective, Methods and Benefits
Four vital components of implementing Ranked Choice Voting were identified. These components would necessitate staff to work hours of epic proportions. They were:

Voter Education
Provisional certification of voting equipment and tabulation system
Implementation
100% Success. We would accept nothing less than perfection.

Voter Education: An aggressive voter education plan was developed. The voter education campaign included the development of an enhanced website and interactive demonstration, usage of a speakers’ bureau, two countywide mailings, a billboard, an enhanced voters’ pamphlet that surpassed all expectations, detailed ballot instructions and polling place instructional posters. Public service announcements were aired on all major radio/television networks. The emphasis to “GET READY” for a new way of voting was the key message. In this message we instructed voters that they would receive two distinct ballot cards (traditional and RCV). Furthermore, they were given information on how to rank a first, second and third choice on their RCV ballot card.

Finally, voters were surveyed, although most (66%) did not like Ranked Choice Voting, over 90% of those returned said they understood how to mark the two separate ballot cards, proving that education efforts were not only important, but successful. This enormous education effort was taking place right alongside administering a Presidential Election with historic turnout. Voter education costs were approximately $137,000.
Provisional Certification of Voting Equipment and Tabulation System: Federally certified RCV software did not exist. Pierce County obtained budget funding for purchase of Sequoia Voting System’s RCV software module. Internal and public logic and accuracy testing was conducted for many weeks, finally leading to the State of Washington granting emergency/provisional certification. We are still awaiting federal certification, with the product currently under testing at the iBeta laboratory. During the latter stages of testing, it was determined that the polling place tabulators could not be utilized: they were not robust enough to handle RCV ballot images and they would not support multiple precincts on one memory pack device. A central count procedure for tabulation of all polling place ballots was implemented. This course of action called for the hiring of 114 ballot transporters and processors. A 24 hour around the clock schedule was implemented to process the increased volume. Staff would work shifts of up to 17 hours daily to check in, visually scan and tabulate polling place ballots.

Implementation: The project implementation assumed requisites, such as hiring two additional staff members and a consultant, necessary funding, timely legal assistance and feedback from political parties, Pierce County Councilpersons, the Blue Ribbon Review Panel, staff and citizens. We conducted an internal legal review to study the newly passed charter amendments and changes to the charter. Ranked Choice Voting election laws did not exist. Staff developed policies, procedures and rules to conduct the election. Our staff worked closely with Sequoia Voting Systems to assure product availability, software parameters and the critical timelines.

The addition of the second ballot card to support RCV doubled our volume. A total of 646,595 ballot cards were processed and tabulated. The election was certified as scheduled with everything working as tested and planned.

Success? YES! Success was built on the foundation we established over the prior two year period. The foundation was built on the premise of training, preparedness and the best practices of our RCV friends in San Francisco, California. It was a major accomplishment when the algorithm was applied accurately on election night, with results and ballot image reports being made available on the internet a few moments later. Success, however, did not come without a price. A gigantic price involving both financial resources and hours and hours of staff time. The 2008 General Election had a total cost of $3.29 million dollars with $1,626,798 directly attributable to the Ranked Choice Voting election.

Conclusion
The management of Ranked Choice Voting as a new method of voting was successful in Pierce County, Washington. Our efforts to administer this new voting method, while simultaneously experiencing record setting turnout was extra special and we’re proud of our accomplishment. The four vital components: voter education, provisional certification, implementation and success met our expectations as well as our harshest critics’! As more and more jurisdictions across the country consider and adopt RCV, Pierce County stands ready to share lessons learned, best practices and offer assistance and guidance.

Words of Wisdom
- Involve stakeholders early
- Establish written rules and procedures
- Research best practices
- Work closely with your vendor
- Train your workers
- Secure necessary funding
- Make your processes litigation proof
- Be Prepared
- Educate your voters
- Test, test, test and proof, proof, proof

Supporting Documents:
- Voter pamphlet cover
- Ranked choice voting envelope and brochure
- Interactive web video
- Ranked choice voting ballot insert
- Newspaper article
On November 4th, the world will be watching.
Ranked Choice Voting
Here's how to get ready.

How to Mark

Second Column
Mark your second choice in Column 2. This choice must be different from your first choice.

Get Ready
Ranked Choice Voting is coming November 4th.
Ranked Choice Voting
Screen Shot from interactive demonstration on website

www.piercecountywa.org/RCV
How to mark your Ranked Choice Voting Ballot.

1. On your Ranked Choice Voting ballot you will vote for county officials only.

2. Follow instructions on how to mark your ballot.


5. Mark your third choice in Column 3.

6. If you wish to mark only one choice instead of three, mark your single choice in Column 1 and leave Columns 2 and 3 blank. If you wish to mark two choices, mark your first choice in Column 1, your second choice in Column 2 and leave Column 3 blank.

7. Remember to vote both sides of your ballot.

8. Return both ballot cards. Postage will be paid this election.

*Select only one candidate in each column. If you mark the same candidate in more than one column, your vote for that candidate will only count once.
You chose it — now you’ll use ranked voting

Ranked-choice what? Get ready for a new voting system for Pierce County offices, starting with this election.

BY DAVID WICKERT
david.wickert@thenewstribune.com

You hated the “pick-a-party” election. You’ve tried the “top-two” election. Now, Pierce County voters get ready for ranked-choice voting.

What does that mean? It means you’ll find four candidates for Pierce County executive on the Nov. 4 ballot, instead of two. It means you’ll find six candidates for assessor-treasurer and three candidates for a County Council seat.

It means you didn’t vote for any of these people in the August primary, even if you’re convinced you did (and some of you are). Mostly, it means you’ll rank up to three choices for each of these races in your order of preference. Through a process of elimination and some nifty computer work, winners will be chosen.

Complex counting process

Whether you find the voting easy or not, counting ranked-choice votes can be complicated.

Here’s the simple scenario: No matter how many candidates are in a race, if someone gets more than half of the first-place votes, they win. It’s over. Winner declared.

But what if no one wins a majority of the first-place votes? Here’s where it gets complicated. Suppose there are four candidates. Whoever gets the fewest first-place votes is eliminated from the race.

If you voted for that candidate that doesn’t mean your vote is thrown out. It just means that your first-choice vote for that candidate doesn’t count. So, now you have to pick a new candidate. It’s a second-place choice.

If you voted for your first-choice candidate that got the fewest first-place votes, then your second-choice candidate gets your vote. Then you can pick a third-choice and so on.

Candidate B, say, for governor and a Republican for a U.S. House seat.

That ended in 2003 when a federal court threw out the primary system because it said, it infringed on the political parade to pick the people. The parties were able to veto the vote results, which voters had to go to court to get changed. That ended another way.

In 2006, voters approved an amendment to the County Charter to establish a new way to vote for county executive, council, assessor-treasurer, auditor and sheriff.

The vote was 55 percent to 47 percent in favor of the new voting system. At the time, supporters called it “instant runoff voting.” Now it’s called “ranked-choice voting.”

How it works

First, there is no primary election for county offices any more. Every candidate advances to the general election. That’s why there are four executive candidates and eight assessor-treasurer candidates on this year’s ballot.

When you get your ballot, you’ll have the option of ranking three candidates in order of preference.

You love Candidate A, like Candidate B and can live with Candidate C, you’ll rank them in that order.

Voter confusion expected

So have you got that? No? You’re not alone. There are signs of confusion out there, and the ballots haven’t even been mailed yet.

People are asking why there are four candidates for county executive on the November ballot.

Candidates talk of meeting people who swear they voted for them in the August primary, when there was no primary for county offices.

Political junkies who pay attention to this stuff are having a hard time grasping how the vote counting works.

Some people have only a vague recollection — if any — of approving the new voting system in 2006.

“Some people get upset,” McCarthy said. “They ask, ‘Who thought of this?’”

Kelly Haughton, a finance industry executive and advocate for ranked-choice voting, thinks confusion will subside when people get a chance to vote.

Haughton says the new system offers voters more choices in the general election. He says the ability to rank candidates means voters don’t have to settle for the person who wins.

“We have to spend $1.7 million to implement the system, including software, equipment and voter education,” he said.

The Auditor’s Office will survey voters to see whether they like the new system. Haughton thinks they will.

“Everywhere it’s been tried, voters have liked it,” he said.

Others — like Pierce County Executive John Ladenberg — think voters will hate it. He’s already talking about leading an effort to repeal it.

Results take a while

BY DAVID WICKERT

By David Wickert

Voters approved a new system in 2006 that expands the counting process. This allows a voter to rank their choices.

Brendan O’Hara, executive director of Pierce County’s Auditor’s Office, said the system will take some time to count.

According to O’Hara, the election will take place in four phases:

1. Counting the first-choice votes
2. Eliminating the candidate with the fewest votes
3. Reassigning the second-choice votes
4. Repeating the process until a winner is determined

Voters who rank more than three candidates may see their vote counted in three different ways. The final result will be announced on or before November 15.

David Wickert: 253-374-7341
david.wickert@thenewstribune.com

Please see Page 3 for photos of all candidates and additional information.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2008 • TACOMA, WASH.