

Hello,

I'm the Director of Operations and Programs for The Center for Election Science, a nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to empowering voters with voting methods that strengthen democracy. I'm writing in response to the Alternative Voting Methods Stakeholder Meeting that took place on 12/15/20. I'd like to provide some comments and resources for the public record.

### **Approval Voting in Fargo, ND**

Fargo, ND became [the first city in the US to adopt approval voting](#) when voters approved a ballot measure in 2018. The measure was passed with 63.5% of the vote.

In June of 2020, Fargo held [their first approval voting elections](#) to fill two seats on the city commission. The two winning candidates won with approval from over 50% of voters—a far cry from previous elections in which vote-splitting often resulted in candidates winning with as little as 23% of the vote.

In that election, we also saw that voters on average selected 2.3 candidates per ballot. That's a 28% increase from previous elections in which voters selected an average of only 1.8 candidates per ballot. This shows that even with this being voters' first time using approval voting, they were already ready and willing to put their newfound power of voting for multiple candidates to use.

In a poll of 505 likely voters in Fargo between June 3-8, 2020, we also found that 71% thought that approval voting was easy; 62% said that overall, they liked approval voting; and 69% said they felt they could vote for their favorite candidate without worrying about electability.

These polling results show that not only is approval voting easy to understand and simple to implement, but it also gives voters the ability to vote for their favorite candidate -- regardless of whether the candidate is likely to win.

John Strand, a Fargo commissioner who was re-elected with 55% of the vote under approval voting, testifies to the benefits of approval voting. Of receiving such broad support from voters, Strand told us, "It tells me I don't just represent a fraction of Fargo. I represent the whole city. And that means when I go into the commission chambers, I'm able to serve them with confidence."

In addition to the benefits that approval voting has for voters and elected officials alike, it's both easy and free for election officials to implement and administer. According to Michael Montplaisir, Cass County Finance Director, approval voting didn't cause any major change to the election administration process. It also did not require any additional certification or licensing for voting machines, making its implementation essentially free. Michael Montplaisir can be reached at [MontplaisirM@casscountynd.gov](mailto:MontplaisirM@casscountynd.gov) for direct comment on these matters.

### **Approval Voting in St. Louis, MO**

On November 3, 2020, St. Louis, MO became [the second city in the US to adopt approval voting](#), with 68% of voters supporting the measure. In the St. Louis system, all candidates will run in a nonpartisan primary using approval voting, with the top-two vote-getters then moving on to a runoff election. The new system will be used for the first time in March of 2021.

While we don't yet have election data to look at in St. Louis, we do have [results of polling](#) conducted there before the initiative was passed. In a poll of 502 registered St. Louis voters from October 4-9, 2019, we found that 53% said that they would be more likely to vote in city elections under approval voting. That includes:

- 74% of African Americans
- 68% of people with some college or less
- 64% of people ages 18-35
- 63% of people currently very dissatisfied with St. Louis elections

The poll also found that the initiative was popular across partisan lines, with 75% of Democrats, 60% of Republicans, and 72% of Independents saying they'd support the initiative based solely on the ballot language.

### **Critiques of Approval Voting**

There is no perfect voting method—every method comes with both pros and cons. The reason that The Center for Election Science focuses most of our work on approval voting is because (1) it is a simple change that's easy to understand and explain; (2) it's simple and free to implement and administer; (3) the results are transparent and easy for the public to understand; and (4) it virtually eliminates vote-splitting and spoilers which can lead to candidates winning without broad support and voters feeling that their voices were diluted.

One common critique of approval voting is that voters will choose to "bullet vote" (vote only for one candidate/ the minimum number of candidates to fill the number of open seats). What we tend to see is that the average number of votes per ballot increases as the number of candidates increases. That is, fewer candidate options tends to mean that voters choose fewer candidates, and more candidate options tends to mean that voters choose more candidates. This is intuitive.

The important part is that voters have the option to support multiple candidates when they need it—even when it's only a fraction of voters who need that option. And it only takes a fraction of voters who support multiple candidates to change the outcome of an election. Even in an extreme situation if 90% of people were to bullet vote, those 10% choosing multiple candidates can still sway the election for the better if necessary.

Being able to support multiple candidates is a big deal for third parties and independents. As those candidates' support grows, it's essential that voters be able to support them to give their ideas credibility when it's warranted. Many third-party voters who normally feel forced to vote for a major party candidate for fear of "wasting" their vote under choose-one plurality voting would likely support both a major party candidate and a third party candidate if given the opportunity under approval voting. There is nothing for them to lose and everything for them to gain.

For a look at cases where it makes sense to bullet vote and when it doesn't, look at our [approval voting tactics page](#). You'll find that while there are cases when it makes sense to bullet vote, there are essential cases where voters need the opportunity to approve multiple candidates to cast a meaningful ballot.

Some critics are bothered that approval voting doesn't let you differentiate candidates in more than two groups—approve/ not approve. It's not the same expression as a numbered ordering. Approval voting has you either approve each candidate or not. But when you have more candidates, approval voting makes up for that flexibility by letting you say yes or no for all the candidates, whereas under ranked choice voting, the number of candidates a voter is able to rank is sometimes limited.

A subtlety here is that with ranked choice voting, not all the information is necessarily used—particularly as voters rank more candidates. For instance, ranked choice voting only looks at first-choice preferences in any particular round. The remainder of each ballot is ignored, and may be completely ignored throughout the entire tally depending on which candidates are eliminated. We've [consistently found this issue in RCV](#) with candidates missing out on support in comparison studies we've run. You can also see this low support for third parties in actual elections such as the [presidential vote in Maine that used RCV](#).

All said, approval voting remains competitive in expressiveness among other classes of voting methods. Importantly, this is reflected in the final tally for all the candidates—where it really matters.

Responses to eight other common critiques of approval voting can be found here: <https://electionscience.org/voting-methods/ten-critiques-and-defenses-on-approval-voting/>

You can also find an article highlighting benefits and limitations of ranked-choice voting here: <https://electionscience.org/voting-methods/runoff-election-the-limits-of-ranked-choice-voting/>

Please let me know if we can be of service in providing additional information or resources related to approval voting. Thank you for your time and service in collecting and recording these comments for the public record!

Best,  
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