



BOSTON CITY COUNCIL

Committee on Government Operations
Gabriela Coletta Zapata, Chair

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REPORT OF COMMITTEE CHAIR

April 7, 2025

Dear Councilors,

The Committee on Government Operations was referred the following docket for consideration:

Docket #0144, Petition for a Special Law Re: Ranked Choice Voting in Boston.

This matter was sponsored by Councilors Ruthzee Louijeune, Julia Mejia, and Henry Santana, and referred to the Committee on January 8, 2025.

Summary of Legislation

Ranked choice voting (RCV) is a voting system where voters rank candidates in order of preference, instead of selecting just one candidate. Under this system, voters may rank up to four candidates, including write-ins, for each contest. Initially, only first-choice votes are counted. For single-winner contests, if a candidate receives more than fifty percent of first-choice votes, they win outright. If no candidate achieves a majority in the initial round, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and votes for that candidate are transferred to each voter's next-ranked active candidate (their second choice, third choice, etc.). This process continues in rounds of tabulation until a candidate (or candidates, in multi-seat elections such as at-large city councilor contests using a different threshold, described below) reaches the threshold necessary to be elected. RCV ensures that elected candidates have broad voter support, even if this support is established over multiple rounds of counting. This system is used in various elections, including some local and national elections in places like Maine, Cambridge, and New York City.

Docket #0144 is a special law proposing the adoption of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) in the City of Boston, allowing voters to rank candidates in order of preference. If the Home Rule Petition is approved by both the City and the State Legislature, the proposal to implement RCV in Boston would be put before the voters of Boston in the form of a ballot question. Should the ballot question pass, the legislation mandates that all general and special elections for mayor and district city councilors (with three or more candidates), as well as all general elections for at-large city councilors, be conducted using RCV. Voters would be able to rank up to four candidates, including write-ins, on the election ballot.

The special law further proposes that votes in RCV contests be tabulated as follows: In single-winner elections for mayor or district city councilor, each ballot counts for the highest-ranked active candidate. If no one candidate receives more than 50% of the vote in the first round, tabulation will occur in rounds. If more than two candidates remain, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and those votes are redistributed to each voter's next-ranked active choice. This process continues until only two or fewer candidates remain, and the candidate who has received the majority of votes at that point is declared the winner.

In multiple-winner elections, such as at-large city councilor contests, each ballot counts fully or partially for the highest-ranked active candidate. A candidate is elected upon reaching the election



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threshold, calculated by dividing the total number of votes by five, rounding down, and adding one. If a candidate exceeds the threshold, surplus votes are transferred to the voter's next choices. Candidates with the fewest votes are eliminated, and their votes are redistributed. In the event of a tie that prevents further tabulation, the candidate with the fewest votes in previous rounds is eliminated. The election commission will establish tiebreaking procedures as needed.

Ballots are treated as follows in Ranked Choice Voting:

1. Undervotes (ballots with no ranked candidates) are excluded from all rounds of tabulation.
2. Inactive ballots stop counting in a contest when all ranked candidates are eliminated, or if an overvote (multiple candidates ranked at the same level) occurs above all remaining active candidates.
3. Ballots remain active and count toward the highest-ranked active candidate, even if there are skipped or repeated rankings.

The special law requires the election commission to release unofficial ranked choice voting results, which include round-by-round breakdowns, as soon as they become available on election day. These results must be clearly marked as preliminary. For final results, the election commission must publicly report the vote counts and percentages for each candidate in each round, the number of ballots that became inactive in each round with the reasons specified, and anonymized final results and data in both human- and machine-readable formats to allow for independent verification.

The election commission is authorized to create rules to implement this special law. The commission must ensure that ranked choice ballots are user-friendly, with clear instructions to minimize voter confusion. Additionally, the commission shall ensure that an appropriate ranked choice voter education campaign is conducted before each municipal election, and shall include outreach in multiple languages consistent with the City's language access policies.

Information Received at Hearing

Docket #0144 was originally filed as Docket #0996 in 2024. The Committee held a hearing on October 10, 2024, at which time the Committee heard from the City's Election Department, ranked choice voting experts and advocates, and members of the public. The Committee held working sessions on February 25, 2025 and April 4, 2025. Working session panelists included Eneida Tavares, Election Commissioner for the City of Boston, Sabino Piemonte, Head Assistant Registrar of Voters for the City of Boston, Ed Shoemaker, Executive Director of Ranked Choice Voting Boston, Cheryl Crawford, Executive Director of MassVote, Rashan Hall, President and Chief Executive Office of Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts, and Greg Dennis, Policy Director for Voter Choice Massachusetts.

During the working sessions Councilors discussed clerical corrections, differences between general, preliminary, and special election procedures, the software used by the City to tabulate votes, voter education, and the referendum process. Regarding the tabulation of votes, it was explained that the software the City already uses can be used for ranked choice voting, with an update to direct multi-winner tabulation. It was noted that the software denotes which round a candidate received a vote from. It was clarified that in a ranked choice election for at-large councilors there would still be a fifth place winner. Voter intention, use of votes, and write-in choices were discussed upon questions from the



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Administration, all of which would continue to be respected in the ranked choice system. Voter turnout, recounts, publication of results, and the City's election independence were discussed.

Summary of Amendments

Following the working sessions, the following amendments were made to **Docket #0144**, as filed:

- New definitions – inserted “Regular election” and “Special election” at the end of § 1 to clarify when RCV applies.
- Changed the title of the Home Rule Petition from “An Act Relative to Ranked Choice Voting in Boston” to “An Act to Implement Ranked Choice Voting in Boston”
- Section-number cleanup – updated outdated citations throughout (e.g., “§ 59 60,” “§ 57C 58,” “§ 60 61,” “§ 15 16,” “§ 15A 16”) to match the 1951 codification.
- Ballot-design & voter-education mandate – expanded § 6 to require the Elections Commission to (1) design easy-to-read RCV ballots, (2) print clear ranking instructions, and (3) conduct a multilingual voter-education campaign.
- Results-reporting clarification – rewrote § 5(a) to state that unofficial round-by-round results must be released on election night, clearly marked preliminary, with a best-effort deadline of 11:59 p.m.
- Data-transparency – obligated the Commission to make available machine-readable final data to enable independent verification.
- Voter-education mandate – required multilingual outreach consistent with City language-access and directed the Commission to ensure ballots are “easy to understand.”
- In section 8 added, “*Upon passage of this Home Rule Petition by the Massachusetts legislature*” and “*as hereby stated below*” to ensure clarity on the passage process for the legislation. The section now reads “Upon passage of this Home Rule Petition by the Massachusetts legislature, the following question shall be placed on the ballot to be used at a regular state or municipal election or a special election called for the purpose of presenting the question to the voters, as hereby stated below:”
- As ordered, the Home Rule Petition was amended to ensure it is adopted as written with the exception of clerical or non-substantive changes.
- New “Write-in” definition – spelled out required blank lines for Mayor/District (1) and At-Large (4) contests.
- Ballot-ranking clarification – reiterated and clarified when voters may rank four candidates including write-ins.
- In Section 2, subsection (d), removed “other” and inserted “not conducted by ranked choice



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voting”. The subjection now reads, *“At every municipal election not conducted by ranked choice voting, each voter shall be entitled to vote for not more than one candidate for the office of mayor and district city councillor and not more than four candidates for the office of city councillor-at-large.”*

- Enhanced tabulation detail – refined surplus-transfer description, reiterated inactive-ballot treatment, and added step-by-step tie-break hierarchy.
- Streamlined unofficial-results timeline – replaced the fixed 11:59 p.m. deadline with “as soon as they become available,” keeping the same disclosure elements.
- Updated voter education mandate to also require adherence to city disability policies.
- Ballot question language updated – clarified that the Law Department will finalize the summary “subject to any necessary changes required by law.”

Committee Chair Recommended Action

As Chair of the Committee on Government Operations I recommend moving the listed docket from the Committee to the full Council for discussion and formal action. At this time, my recommendation to the full Council will be that this matter **OUGHT TO PASS IN A NEW DRAFT**.

Gabriela Coletta Zapata, Chair
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