



BOSTON CITY COUNCIL

Committee on Government Operations
Gabriela Coletta Zapata, Chair

One City Hall Square 5th Floor, Boston, MA 02201 ♦ Phone: (617) 635-3040 ♦ city.council@boston.gov

REPORT OF COMMITTEE CHAIR

May 14, 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

Docket #0144 is a proposed Home Rule Petition that would implement Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) in municipal elections in the City of Boston. Ranked Choice Voting is a system in which voters rank candidates in order of preference rather than selecting just one. Voters may rank up to four candidates, including write-ins, for each contest. In single-winner elections, if no candidate receives more than 50% of first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and their votes are redistributed to the next-highest ranked active candidate on each ballot. This process continues in rounds until one candidate earns a majority and is declared the winner. In multi-winner contests, such as for at-large city councilor races, a candidate is elected upon reaching a specific threshold, and surplus votes are redistributed to help determine the remaining winners. This method ensures that the winning candidates have broad support and reflects a more representative electoral outcome.

The HRP addresses definitions related to RCV, procedures related to Preliminary, General, and Special elections, the tabulation process, reporting results, and implementation. If passed at the City and State level, the proposal to adopt RCV in Boston would be placed before Boston voters on a future election ballot. If approved by a majority of voters, RCV would apply to all General and Special elections for Mayor and District City Councilor where there are three or more candidates, as well as to all general elections for City Councilors At-Large. The legislation is designed to take effect only if the ballot question is approved and at least 365 days have passed since that date, ensuring time for implementation.

Under Section 1 of the proposed HRP, key terms related to the administration of RCV are defined, including “active candidate,” referring to any candidate not eliminated, withdrawn, or deceased; “ranking,” which denotes the order of candidate preferences on a ballot; and “election threshold,” which is used to determine winners in multi-seat contests. The section also defines the sequence of “rounds” used during vote tabulation and outlines who qualifies as a “withdrawn” or “deceased” candidate under state election law.

Section 2 addresses the use of RCV in General and Special elections, mandating that RCV be used for all General and Special elections for Mayor and District City Councilors if there are three or more candidates, and for all General elections for City Councilors At-large. This section specifies that General election ballots would allow voters to rank up to four (4) candidates, including write-ins, in order of preference. It also proposes technical updates to existing city election laws to align with the RCV system,



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such as updating the number of blank write-in lines and clarifying how votes for eliminated candidates should be counted. To support this system, the section updates existing law to require that ballots provide blank write-in spaces equal to the number of seats being elected. It also clarifies that in ranked choice elections, the number of votes credited to a candidate who is eliminated will be the total they held in the last round before elimination, providing a consistent record of candidate performance across rounds.

Section 3 addresses the use of RCV in Preliminary elections by increasing the number of candidates who advance from Preliminary to General elections for Mayor and District Councilor from two (2) to four (4). Language in this section also ensures that the top four (4) vote-getters appear on the General election ballot, even in the event of a tie.

Regarding the tabulation process, Section 4 details the process for tabulating RCV ballots as follows: In single-winner contests, each ballot counts for the highest-ranked active candidate, and if no candidate has a majority, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated in successive rounds until a winner emerges; whereas, in multi-winner contests, such as At-Large races, the threshold for election is calculated by dividing the total number of votes by five, rounding down, and adding one. Under this section, candidates who surpass that threshold are elected, and their surplus votes are transferred proportionally to remaining candidates. If no more candidates reach the threshold, the lowest vote-getters are eliminated and their votes redistributed. The section also provides rules for how ballots are treated in cases of undervoting, overvoting, skipped rankings, and repeated rankings. Finally, this section outlines how ties are to be resolved, using previous round totals or other procedures as established by the Election Commission.

With respect to reporting results, Section 5 requires that the Election Commission make unofficial results, including round-by-round breakdowns, available as soon as possible after the polls close on election night. These results must be clearly labeled as preliminary. Under this section, the Commission is also required to publish final certified results that include the total number and percentage of votes each candidate received in each round and report how many ballots became inactive in each round, with explanations for those outcomes, and final anonymized results must be made available in formats that allow for public verification and analysis.

In order to effectively carry out the new procedures required by this HRP, Section 6 grants the Election Commission authority to create the rules and regulations necessary to implement the law.

Pursuant to Section 8, implementation of RCV in the City of Boston would not take effect unless approved by a majority of voters at a future election via a ballot question that would ask voters whether they accept the act titled “An Act to Implement Ranked Choice Voting for the City of Boston.” If the question passes, the law would take effect immediately but apply only to municipal elections occurring at least 365 days after the date of voter approval.

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



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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. In reviewing the draft language of the HRP, Councilors emphasized the importance of using precise statutory references and proposed edits to eliminate ambiguity to ensure ballot instructions are culturally and linguistically accessible across all communities. Special attention was given to clarifying the distinction between different types of elections, with requests to define “regular,” “preliminary,” and “special” elections more explicitly.

Regarding the tabulation of votes, Councilors raised concerns about software capacity. In response, it was explained that the software the City currently uses—Dominion’s Democracy Suite—can be used for RCV. It was further explained that the software would need to be updated to allow for multi-winner tabulation in at-large council races but that the process of vote counting would remain largely the same, with memory cards inserted into the system and votes uploaded accordingly. Several Councilors inquired about how votes would be redistributed in the case of surplus totals or candidate elimination and it was clarified that the redistribution process follows the order of voter preferences. It was further noted that in at-large races, the system would still yield a fifth-place winner and would not eliminate the clarity of election outcomes. Discussion also highlighted that the software indicates in which round a candidate received votes, assuring Councilors that the system is designed to provide a transparent tracking of the vote transfer process.

During the working sessions, the Committee also discussed voter intention, use of votes, write-in choices, voter turnout, recounts, publication of results, and the City’s election independence. Councilors emphasized the need to ensure that voter choices are not invalidated due to confusion, incomplete rankings, or misunderstandings about how to mark a ballot. The Administration explained that such determinations are guided by statute and administrative discretion, with the primary goal of respecting the voter’s intent whenever possible, providing the Committee with examples from prior elections, highlighting how voter intent was determined when write-ins or ambiguous markings were involved. Councilors also raised concerns about ensuring that blank spaces for write-ins are properly marked to allow voters to rank them in order, especially in multilingual ballots.

Regarding the publication of results, Councilors questioned how unofficial results would be reported on election night and raised concerns about the use of vague language such as “reasonable number of precincts” highlighting that premature projections have proved inaccurate in the past. The Administration noted that unofficial results are currently updated in real time but do not become official until certification. The Committee and the Administration agreed that any results that would be published on election night should be clearly labeled as unofficial and include equitable geographic representation to avoid misleading impressions of citywide trends.

The working sessions concluded with discussion of the broader implementation process. The Committee and the Administration agreed on the need for a robust, multilingual voter education campaign prior to



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implementation, supported by updated voting equipment where necessary, and committed to reviewing similar petitions from other municipalities to inform the next draft.

Summary of Amendments

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

The HRP as amended changes the title of the Petition from “An Act Relative to Ranked Choice Voting in Boston” to:

- “An Act to Implement Ranked Choice Voting in Boston”

The HRP as amended updates outdated citations throughout (e.g., “§ 59 60,” “§ 57C 58,” “§ 60 61,” “§ 15 16,” “§ 15A 16”) to match the 1951 codification.

The HRP as amended inserts the following definitions under Section 1 to clarify when RCV applies:

- “Regular election” means the biennial election held in the City of Boston in odd-numbered years, as provided in Section 21 of Chapter 452 of the Acts of 1948, as amended by Chapter 376 of the Acts of 1951, excluding preliminary elections.”
- “Special election” means an election held outside the regular biennial cycle to fill a vacancy or for any other municipal electoral purpose, as provided in Chapter 452 of the Acts of 1948, Sections 13 and 13A, and Chapter 233 of the Acts of 1993.”
- “Write-in” means ballots for Mayor and District City Councilor must have one blank space. Ballots for City Councilor At-Large must have four blank spaces, or blank spaces equal to the number of seats to be elected to such office.”

The HRP as amended strikes and inserts language under Section 2, subsection (d), removing “other” and inserting “not conducted by ranked choice voting”. As amended, Section 2(d) reads as:

- “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.”

The HRP as amended strikes and inserts language under Section 4, subsections (b) and (d), enhancing tabulation detail, refining surplus-transfer description, and adding to the step-by-step tie-break hierarchy. As amended, Section 4 (b) reads as:

- “(b) Multi-Winner Tabulation. In all contests for City Councilor At-Large conducted by ranked choice voting, each ballot shall count in whole or in part for the highest-ranked active candidate on that ballot. In the first round, each ballot shall count as one vote for its highest-ranked active candidate, and the election threshold shall be determined by dividing the number of votes cast by five, rounding down to the nearest whole number, and adding one. Tabulation shall proceed in rounds as follows:
 - i. If the number of active candidates is equal to the remaining number of seats to be elected, all active candidates shall be elected, and tabulation shall be complete.
 - ii. If an active candidate has a number of votes that equals or exceeds the election threshold, the active candidate with the most votes shall be elected. If the elected



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candidate has a number of votes that exceeds the threshold, the excess part of each vote received by that candidate shall count in the next round for the ballot's next-ranked active candidate (i.e., the voter's second, third, etc. ranked-candidate on the ballot).

- *iii. If no active candidate equals or exceeds the election threshold, the candidate with the fewest votes shall be defeated and a new round shall begin. The excess part of each vote received by that candidate shall count in the next round for the ballot's next-ranked active candidate (i.e., the voter's second, third, etc. ranked-candidate on the ballot). iv. Once the tabulation process has proceeded through successive rounds such that either the number of active candidates equals the remaining number of seats to be filled, or no further vote transfers are possible due to exhausted ballots or the absence of additional ranked candidates, the contest shall be concluded."*

As amended, Section 4 (d) reads as:

- *"(d) Ties. If two or more candidates are tied with the fewest votes, and tabulation cannot continue until the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, then the candidate with the fewest votes in the prior round shall be defeated. If two or more such tied candidates were tied in the prior round, the second tie shall be decided by referring similarly to the number of votes for each candidate in the second-prior round. This process shall be applied successively as many times as necessary. If otherwise not provided herein, the election commission shall establish a method of tiebreaking to be used."*

The HRP as amended strikes and inserts language under Section 5, subsection (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. As amended, Section 5 (a) reads as:

- *"Unofficial Results. The election commission shall promulgate rules or guidance to ensure the release of unofficial election results on election night, including round-by-round results for each ranked choice contest. The commission shall make best efforts to publish initial unofficial results on election night, as soon as they become available. Unofficial results shall be clearly marked as preliminary and subject to revision."*

The HRP as amended inserts the following language under Section 5, subsection (b) clause (ii) to require the Commission to make available machine-readable final data to enable independent verification:

- *"iii. The election commission shall make final anonymized results and data available in both human-readable and machine-readable formats to allow for independent verification, consistent with applicable law."*

The HRP as amended inserts the following language under Section 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 that also adheres to city disability policies:

- *"The election commission shall ensure that ranked choice ballots are easy to understand, contain instructions to minimize any potential for voter confusion, and include clear instructions on how to rank candidates. The election commission shall ensure that an appropriate ranked choice voter education campaign is conducted before each municipal election, and shall include outreach in multiple languages and is consistent with the City's language access and disability policies."*

The HRP as amended changes language under Section 7 to ensure the Petition is adopted as written with



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the exception of clerical or non-substantive changes.

The HRP as amended inserts language under Section 8 to ensure clarity on the passage process for the legislation. As amended, Section 8 reads as:

- *“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:”*

The HRP as amended inserts language within the second paragraph of Section 8 to clarify that the Law Department will finalize the summary. As amended, the second paragraph of Section 8 reads as:

- *“The city law department shall prepare the summary of the question, which shall appear on the ballot along with the question provided in this section 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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