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< [Back to Regular Story Page](#)

Results are in: 63 percent disliked Ranked Choice Voting

Auditor defends ranked choice

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Pierce County spent a lot of money on a new voting method for a few county offices in November's election, and most voters didn't like it a bit.

Auditor Pat McCarthy said ranked-choice voting will cost county taxpayers about \$1.7 million, which is half of the overall \$3.4 million it cost to put on the 2008 general election.

Although Pierce County voters changed the county charter last year to allow the new voting method, it appears they've changed their collective mind. Two of three voters who responded to a survey were opposed to the concept.

"It was overwhelming," McCarthy told members of the state Senate Government Operations and Elections Committee on Friday. "The majority did not like it."

That was based on nearly 91,000 voters who filled out a questionnaire that accompanied mail-in ballots.

Ranked-choice voting, sometimes called instant runoff voting, allowed voters to indicate their first, second and third choice in a race. If no candidate gets more than 50 percent of the total number of votes in the first round of counting, the second choice on ballots of the last-place candidate are then counted. That continues until one candidate finally gets a majority.

McCarthy, who won a close election in a four-way race for county executive, joined election officials from Yakima and Chelan counties to give state lawmakers a report on the election. The state used online voter registration, and 37 of the 39 counties – all but King and Pierce – conducted their elections entirely by mail.

Pierce was the only county to use ranked-choice voting, and for only a few county races. Pierce voters got a second, conventional ballot to vote for president, governor, Congress and local races.

McCarthy said she considered the election "an amazing success," even though she didn't care much for the new method. She said the computer system and algorithms worked and that most voters understood how to fill out the ballots.

State Sen. Pam Roach, R-Auburn, a committee member, took issue with that assessment.

"How can you say it was a success when voters didn't know who the executive was for two weeks?" Roach asked. "That absolutely was a disaster."

Processing ranked-choice ballots did slow down the tally, McCarthy said, but the method had nothing to do with how close the races were. Her own race for executive wasn't decided until three weeks. But McCarthy pointed out that a couple of legislative races were so close that even using conventional voting methods, they

required a recount and weren't decided until earlier this week.

The decision to adopt the new voting method was approved by 53 percent of voters. McCarthy said she thinks voters were eager to switch to something else because they were still angry about the previous election when they were forced to pick a Democratic, Republican or other political party's slate of candidates.

She said she hopes the County Council will give voters a chance to reconsider the charter amendment that created ranked-choice voting.

Susan Eidenschink, treasurer of the Tacoma-Pierce County League of Women Voters, blamed the long lines at the polls on Election Day on McCarthy's decision to have fewer polling places.

"We're interested in seeing it expanded," she said of ranked choice. "We feel it definitely deserves more of a trial than this one election."

Krist Novoselic, chairman of FairVote, echoed that sentiment. The former Nirvana bassist is now a local government official in rural Wahkiakum County and said he's worked to get Memphis, Tenn., and Telluride, Colo., to try ranked-choice voting.

Committee chairwoman Sen. Darlene Fairley, D-Lake Forest Park, said she's been listening for years to people and groups who are supporters of the new voting method, but she has no interest in seeing it extend beyond the borders of Pierce County.

"I'm with those folks who said they were confused," Fairley said.

"This sounds just insane," said Sen. Eric Oemig, D-Kirkland, a committee member.

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