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Ranked Choice Voting Implementation

Pierce County, Washington

Submitted by:

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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

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| Involve stakeholders early | Secure necessary funding |
| Establish written rules and procedures | Make your processes litigation proof |
| Research best practices | Be Prepared |
| Work closely with your vendor | Educate your voters |
| Train your workers | 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