

Dear Mr. Chairman and Honorable Members of the Commission:

My name is Michael Garman. I am a lifelong resident of Newport's Second Ward and a strong supporter of ranked choice voting (RCV).

Gen Z Americans like me are by far the most diverse age group in our country's history. Almost half of Americans born after 1996 are people of color, and over a fifth of us are LGBTQ+.

Women, gender minorities, and people of color are dramatically underrepresented in our politics. Rhode Island has only ever been represented by one woman in Congress and never by a person of color. I'll leave the bulk of the discussion about that to people whom it directly affects – it's not my place to speak about that as a white man – but I do want to point out that this underrepresentation is becoming more and more of an issue as our country diversifies.

Something about which I can speak is queer representation. I'm bisexual, which makes me part of the 20.8% of Gen Z who identifies as LGBTQ+. Our community needs fair representation to ensure that our voices are heard in critical conversations, especially in this dangerous era in which our rights are threatened.

One other area of representation worth discussing is geographical representation, especially in local elections. In cities and towns across our state, the same few competitive wards or neighborhoods get all the attention, year in and year out, while the rest of town is overlooked. It's a similar phenomenon to what happens in presidential elections, where states like Georgia and Pennsylvania are the center of attention but Rhode Island is completely ignored.

How does RCV help? There are two key factors: eliminating the spoiler effect and promoting consensus-building. In plurality elections, members of marginalized groups are often discouraged from running against each other, for fear of cutting into each other's support and taking each other down. With ranked choice voting, that's not an issue – if one person can't win, their supporters' votes are reallocated, not wasted. Similarly, by requiring candidates to get a majority to win, it incentivizes coalition building and taking the interests of all their constituents

into account. Even if a candidate isn't directly part of a community, they can still represent it by advocating for its needs. When there's an electoral incentive to do so, it's much more likely to happen.

Why is representation so important? People are much less likely to vote when they don't feel represented. I've talked to hundreds of young voters – Democrats like me, Republicans, third-party supporters, and Independents – in recent months, and I can tell how passionate people my age are about political issues. Without electoral reforms like ranked choice voting to treat them like the stakeholders they are in our governing institutions, though, they'll be much less likely to turn out. Young people from across the political spectrum want the fair representation they deserve, and RCV needs to be in place for that to be possible. The same is true for every other underrepresented group.

I'd also like to say a few words about the advantages of RCV over top-two primaries, which I know the Commission is also considering. Although a top-two primary system would represent an improvement over plurality elections, it would be much less significant an upgrade than RCV would be.

For one, top-two primaries fail to ensure that the ultimate winner is the candidate preferred by the most voters. Take the example of next year's U.S. Senate primary in California, which will likely feature a crowded field of candidates vying to replace the retiring Senator Dianne Feinstein. Three high-profile Democrats – Reps. Barbara Lee, Katie Porter, and Adam Schiff – have already declared their candidacy, and there will probably be at least one Republican (likely attorney Eric Early) in the field as well. It's very plausible that the runoff will be between one of the three Democrats – whoever receives the most support from the divided majority-party base – and Early, representing a tiny but united minority.

For the sake of argument, imagine that the primary results are as follows: Schiff (D) 29%, Early (R) 26%, Lee (D) 25%, Porter (D) 20%. Such an outcome is highly plausible based on polling of the race thus far. In this case, it's quite possible that the Democratic-dominated electorate overwhelmingly prefers Lee to Schiff – that is, that Lee is the second choice of most Porter

supporters – but the Golden State’s top-two primary makes it impossible to account for that reality. With RCV, though, those preferences would be accounted for instantaneously.

Another danger posed by top-two primaries is the risk of a lockout, in which a party wins the majority of the primary vote but is left without a candidate in the general election. In 2016, Democrats won 51.6% of the vote in the top-two primary for the office of Washington State Treasurer. Despite this fact, Republicans controlled both slots in the runoff, because the GOP ran two candidates and the Democrats three. The votes split as follows: Davidson (R) 25.1%, Waite (R) 23.3%, Lias (D) 20.4%, Comerford (D) 18.0%, Fiskens (D) 13.2%. Dissatisfied, nearly 600,000 voters who turned out in the general election abstained from the race, which was won by Davidson. Of course, citizens do not always prefer candidates from one party to the other, but it is remarkably unfair to entirely exclude the party whose candidates the majority of primary voters supported from the general election.

This could easily happen in Rhode Island. While, of course, the CD1 election will not be conducted under any new electoral system, imagine how it might play out with a top-two primary. It’s certainly not inconceivable that two enterprising Republican candidates could enter the field and emerge, each with a tiny fraction of the vote, taking advantage of a Democratic field split 17 ways at last count.

Since our goal is to pursue reforms to eliminate the spoiler effect, why would we ever support a policy that amplifies it? Instead, we should follow the Alaska model, implementing nonpartisan blanket primaries from which the top four (or five) candidates advance to a ranked choice general election. In this system, voters are guaranteed sufficient options to avoid a lockout and choices at different points on the political spectrum. For instance, a top-five primary might advance a progressive Democrat, a moderate Democrat, a Never Trump Republican, a MAGA Republican, and an independent. Voters would then use RCV to determine the winner.

Rhode Island voters deserve freedom, choice and representation. In order to promote these values and undermine the toxic forces of polarization and bitter division that plague our state and country, we need Ranked Choice Voting.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. Please feel free to contact me at michaeljgarman10@gmail.com or (401) 644-4108 with any questions you might have.

Michael J. Garman

michaeljgarman10@gmail.com | (401) 644-4108

22 Burnside Avenue, Newport