

Questions from ELi to Ron Zimmerman, Executive Director of RankMIVote

ELi sent the following questions to RankMIVote on June 13, 2023, while the petition campaign was active in East Lansing. We received the following answers on July 1, 2023, from Ron Zimmerman, Executive Director of the RankMIVote campaign.

1. The ballot language about changing to ranked choice voting for East Lansing City Council elections is extremely confusing. Can you tell us in plain English how this would change what kinds of candidates might be elected – or might have an increased chance of being elected – to East Lansing’s City Council? (Please note the history of East Lansing is to elect candidates who personally identify with Progressive causes and take that history into account in your answer.)

Sorry it is confusing. We strive to keep it simple and straightforward, it can leave out a lot of detail.

The answer is the same for every community that implements RCV [ranked-choice voting], no matter where the majority of citizens stand on the political spectrum. RCV get a majority winner. By definition, RCV produces outcomes more aligned to the majority positions of the community. That is a major fault of plurality voting. Plurality voting often splits majorities within a community. Ann Arbor is extremely progressive. No chance of a progressive not winning in Ann Arbor. But there are different flavors of progressive. Not everyone thinks homogenous. Ann Arbor wanted to increase the chances that the most supported progressive ideas win elections. And not have those candidates get their votes split and not win. The goal is always to get the candidate that best supports the majority of the community...whether that’s a city community or a state community scope.

2. Why should someone in East Lansing want to see the charter change that provides for ranked voting in Council elections?

I think the answer above applies here. I would add one additional point. RCV required 50% to win, and/but also requires 50% to get re-elected. That is setting a higher bar for public servants to best serve in office. If they would like to continue serving, it keeps them motivated to serve for the outcomes wanted by the the majority of the community, not the loud extremes.

3. What would be the potential downsides of changing from our current voting system to ranked choice voting for City Council?

The biggest challenge with RCV any place, is the more knowledge voters need to have about all candidates. It’s a little easier to pick the 1 candidate you like versus a little deeper insight to rank the candidates in preference. Any community or state that chooses RCV has to commit to developing resources and platforms that allows the candidates to be better understood and express their priorities beyond current big media sound bites. (But don’t we need that anyway?)

The other key challenge, or success factor, is the initial education of the community voters. During transition it's critical to educate the voters of how to rank on the ballot and how winners are determined.

As more cities rollout RCV, these lessons have been embraced. NYC's first RCV election was the second biggest turnout in history. It certainly didn't scare people away.

4. Are you at all concerned the confusing ballot proposal language will scare away potential "yes" votes?

No. The language is exactly the same as Ann Arbor. RCV won with 72%. In Ann Arbor and every city we send 3 rounds of mailers in the fall focusing on 1) How it works 2) how it improves voting and strengthens democracy, and 3) community leaders that endorse it.

We look to identify aspects that could be confusing in a community and work to clarify. Gerrymandering was confusing at first too. We actually reject the characterization of "extremely confusing" and "scary". Those are usually terms used when more understanding is needed. Thanks to the work of people with skills like Kevin, education always makes things less confusing or scary.

5. If the voting method change described in your ballot proposal were to pass, when would it actually take effect in East Lansing? What is the likelihood it would take effect any time soon?

It takes effect when the state Bureau of Elections and board of canvassers certifies an RCV process. We have legal reviews and many legal experts that feel it's the constitution right for cities to use RCV based on the Home Rule City Act, and the constitutional duty of the BoE to certify. They believe any judge in a legal suit would rule the BoE to be depriving cities of their constitutional rights.

If the BoE elections does not certify an RCV process by 2026 for all cities that have passed it, our statewide constitutional petition force them to do their constitutional duties.

6. If passing the ballot question would NOT lead using ranked choice voting in East Lansing Council elections because of statewide restrictions, why should East Lansing voters care about or support the proposal?

As an East Lansing citizen myself, I believe this community believes strongly in democracy. They feel strongly in supporting reforms that strengthen our democracy. They believe in reforming things at the root of keeping democracy from functioning as designed like gerrymandering and plurality voting that supports split voting and keeping us polarized and extreme. Passing it is cities, not only supports a better process for the city community, but sends a message to the state BoE that they should be responsive to voters and not politicians that put party before country and democracy. The state not doing what voters are asking for and have the constitutional right to do, is exacting why groups like us and VNP started in the first place. East Lansing adopting is also supporting the greater good of strengthening our democracy across the state and eventually nationally.

7. Council is currently deciding whether to put to the voters a charter amendment on changing the council elections from odd-numbered years to even-numbered. Your proposal specifically speaks to elections in odd-numbered years. What would happen if your proposal were to pass and the council elections were to be shifted to even-numbered years? (It seems like this would be a significant problem?)

That is something that would need to be dealt with when we come to the bridge. The highest priority is first determining if the EL citizens want to enact the benefits of RCV for the community. As of now, and at the time of the Nov elections, it is odd year. If voters change to even year, we will deal with it. Most likely, it would be dealt with at a future point when the state BoE is in the process of certifying a RCV process.

8. The East Lansing petition seeks to change, in the City Charter, not only how votes are cast and counted but how Council vacancies are handled. Why is Rank MI Vote interested in changing how East Lansing Council vacancies are managed?

Let me check with our lawyer. I remember there being a reason unique to the rest of the East Lansing language, but I want to get it right. I have not gotten a response from the lawyer yet. My guess it was avoid subverting RCV election outcomes, but I want to make sure.

9. Why should someone in East Lansing want to see the charter change that allows Council to decide to do a special election instead of an appointment when there is a Council vacancy?

See above. Let me confirm with our counsel.

10. The proposed change with regard to Council vacancies seeks to allow Council the option of holding a special election to fill a vacant seat. It does not appear to provide any time frame required for holding a special election. Doesn't this mean Council could choose to put off filling a vacant seat, effectively shrinking the size of Council for months for political reasons?

See above.

11. Are you offering educational forums for East Lansing voters in the near future? If so, where and when?

Yes, as soon as the team finishes the signature petitioning portion of the campaign, the focus will shift to a more traditional campaign mode focused on continued education and awareness not achieved in the previous phase.

12. You are the Executive Director of the statewide campaign, Rank MI Vote. How did you come to be the statewide ED of this initiative? Where is your residency? What is your professional background? Are you being paid or are any of your family members being paid in conjunction with this work?

We are 100% volunteer grassroots organization. At times to our detriment. I have never been paid a dime and neither is any RMV leader. We did get a grant from Unite America to help the

Ann Arbor campaign in 2021. Same reform funders that provided VNP 5-6 million for Prop2 in 2018 and will likely supplement this fall campaigns in Royal Oak, East Lansing and Kalamazoo. Almost all the grant goes toward mailers to educate the community and a part-time experienced campaign manager to help organize the local teams.

My career has been in process engineering. Always looking to make any process better. I was on the Lansing Leadership team for VNP Prop2 in 2018 under Susan Skidmore, and still volunteer for VNP. Katie Fahey and Jamie Lyons Eddy have been advisors almost since our beginnings.

I have this position by vote of the RMV organization leadership and approval of our board.

13. Why has Rank MI Vote chosen to target the cities it has (East Lansing, Lansing, Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, and Royal Oak)?

It's where we have the greatest volunteer support in the state. Both from grassroots volunteer numbers and local leadership support.

14. What did your experience working to bring ranked choice voting to Ann Arbor teach you?

It re-enforced the incredibly important role progressives play in our country. Every major needed reform in our country's history starts in progressive communities. Most progressives in AA that took the time to research and understand RCV got beyond the scary and unknown and saw the inherent virtues. Saw the long term benefit for not only their community but the country. And it wasn't easy. Because there are still progressives in today's politics that put party above all else. Leaders in the Wash. Dem party that spread lies about RCV if they didn't like it. Or were scared of it. Even the county clerk had to be invited to party meetings to refute the inaccurate narratives.

But my confidence was renewed that enough party progressives stood up to refute the lies. They continued to bring in experts to speak the truth and counter the emotional party narratives of their peers. That's not easy to do. Something you rarely see on the "other" side.

And it's something I see initially here in Ingham Dem members also. It disappoints me to see this from public servants that I have voted for multiple times. But in the end, AA taught me truth and clarity more often win in progressive circles.

15. Anything else you'd like to add?

Yes, I would love to find time locally to review these responses in more detail where needed. Also share success stories of equitable representation and reduction of negative campaigning and other results. And also help connect us to important EL audiences that want to hear facts, and truth and clarity before they form opinions and positions.

Attached is the final "endorsement" mailer we sent in Ann Arbor. We couldn't even fit all the leaders that endorsed it once they had their concerns answered.

On July 27, Zimmerman sent new answers to the following questions:

8. The East Lansing petition seeks to change, in the City Charter, not only how votes are cast and counted but how Council vacancies are handled. Why is Rank MI Vote interested in changing how East Lansing Council vacancies are managed?

There was/is no intention to change any preferences to fill vacancies. It was only written to provide the Option to use RCV to fill openings. The wording has an “or” so that council/citizens have the option to use either. That is how all the charters have been drafted that have language to fill vacancies.

9. Why should someone in East Lansing want to see the charter change that allows Council to decide to do a special election instead of an appointment when there is a Council vacancy?

See Above. The option is there to allow for a special election, but not mandatory. I would think that the council would seek public input and make good decisions on which option.

10. The proposed change with regard to Council vacancies seeks to allow Council the option of holding a special election to fill a vacant seat. It does not appear to provide any time frame required for holding a special election. Doesn't this mean Council could choose to put off filling a vacant seat, effectively shrinking the size of Council for months for political reasons?

This is a good point Alice. The specific language does not dictate a timeframe if the RCV option route is chosen. Although inclusion of the 30 days does indicate legally that the city wants a very timely resolution for vacancies. It is pretty strong state MEL standard that filling vacancies is done during the next available election cycle. Historically when charters do not specify, and many don't, it is usually setup to be addressed at the next election. To be honest, our lawyer was a little shocked that vacancies in EL are ONLY filled via appointment of council. This is far more likely to be politically manipulated.