Frequently Asked Questions About Single Transferable Voting (STV)

Is an STV election really different than most elections?

Yes. The Pacifica elections for Local Station Boards use a system of counting votes known as "Single Transferable Vote" (STV), or "Choice Voting", which provides for proportional representation that is very different from "winner take all" systems that are common in most elections.

Why is proportional representation better for electing a representative board than common winner-take-all elections?

Under winner-take-all voting systems, the majority has the potential to elect every single seat on the board, which leaves minority viewpoints unrepresented. This is not possible under proportional representation. All significant (self-defined) minority groups have the chance to elect a share of seats proportionate to their share of support among the voters.

What does Choice Voting (STV) accomplish?

STV allows electors to vote for their preferred candidates knowing that their vote will transfer if that candidate cannot win; thus, eliminating the need for voting for a less favored candidate because they have more chance of winning.

The single transferable vote gives freedom of choice to electors and ensures, as far as possible, that their preference is satisfied and not distorted or frustrated.

How does STV work?

Each voter has a single vote, but that vote may end up being divided into fractions of a vote that help elect more than one candidate.

Voters indicate their preferences for candidates by ranking them (1st choice, 2nd choice, etc.) A voter's alternate rankings can be thought of as backup or contingency choices to make sure a member's vote isn't wasted on a sure winner who has a surplus of votes, or a sure loser, who can't possibly win.

Initially, only the voter's first choice is counted. Only if that first-choice candidate has more than enough votes to win, or if that candidate has so little support that he or she can't win, will a ballot count towards the election of a lower preference.

The details are spelled out in Article 15, Section 1 of the Pacifica Bylaws, as summarized:

1. First a 'winning threshold' is calculated as:

    [(the total number of valid ballots cast) ÷ (1 + the number of seats to be filled)] + 1

    This is the minimum number of votes a candidate needs to get elected. Any candidates who have enough first choice votes to reach the winning threshold are declared elected.

2. If a candidate receives more votes than needed to win a seat, the "surplus" portion of each vote in a winning candidate's pile is transferred to each of those voters' next preference candidate so that each vote is fully used.

3. If there are still unfilled places after the first preferences have been dealt with and any surpluses transferred, then the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated and voters who favored that candidate have their votes transferred to the voters' second preferences. Any candidate who now has more than the winning threshold is declared elected.

4. This process continues until all of the seats are filled.

What will the ballot look like?

Next to each candidate's name, the voter will see an array of boxes under numbered column headings. To indicate their 1st choice, they will mark the box under the heading "1"; for the 2nd choice, they will mark the box in column "2", etc.

What if I only like one or a few candidates?

Each voter can express as many preferences as they desire - from just one, up to as many as there are candidates running for election.

However - a vote for single candidate, or only a few, may be wasted if that (or those) candidate(s) either have enough support from others to win a seat – or have so little support that she or he cannot win a seat. For this reason, the best strategy is always for the voter to rank as many candidates as they have an opinion about.

Will ranking alternate candidates hurt the chances of my favorite candidate?

No. Ranking additional choices cannot hurt your favorite candidate. These are just contingency choices, in case your favorite candidate already has enough support to win a seat or has no chance of winning.

Can I give the same ranking to several candidates if I like them equally well?

Yes. If you give the same ranking to several candidates, your vote will simply be divided equally among those candidates.

Is this a standard voting method? Where else is it used?

Choice Voting (STV) has been used for over a hundred years in thousands of elections for both governments and numerous private associations. It is currently used to elect the national legislature in Ireland, and the Senate in Australia.

Cambridge, Massachusetts has used STV to elect its city council and school committee since the 1940s. At one time, STV was used by over 20 cities in the United States, including New York City at the time of Mayor LaGuardia.

Why did most U.S. cities that adopted it discontinue using it?

In most cases, proportional representation was repealed because it worked exactly as intended. It allowed full diversity on city councils, including racial minorities and third party candidates. The dominant groups in these cities were eventually convinced to repeal proportional representation so that the majority could again exclude minorities.