



# Multnomah County Charter Review

## Equitable Representation Subcommittee

March 7, 2022, 7:00 – 8:30 pm

### SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING 3

Purpose: To learn about voting systems and Ranked Choice Voting.

#### Attendees

##### Committee Members Present:

- Samantha Gladu (she/they)
- Annie Kallen (she/her)
- Maja Harris (she/her)
- Timur Ender (he/him)
- Meikelo Cabbage (he/him)

##### Absent:

- *Jude Perez (they/them)*

##### Staff:

- Kali Odell (she/her), Charter Review Committee Program Coordinator

##### Invited Speakers:

- Georg Cheung, More Equitable Democracy
- Colin Cole, More Equitable Democracy
- Mike Alfoni, Oregon Ranked Choice Voting Advocates

In addition, members of the public were welcome to observe the meeting as non-participatory attendees. There were four observers at this meeting.

#### Welcome

Kali welcomed everyone and went over Zoom logistics. Samantha gave an overview of the agenda and introduced the evening's guest speakers from More Equitable Democracy and Oregon Ranked Choice Voting Advocates.

#### Presentation from More Equitable Democracy

George Cheung presented on behalf of More Equitable Democracy (MED), a racial justice advocacy group that advances racial equity by transforming electoral systems.

George shared a list of values for an electoral system and asked committee members to choose their top three and share them in the chat (Appendix A).

George defined an electoral system as the methods and rules of counting votes to determine outcomes of an election. The current system used in the U.S. is winner-take-all and George shared the history of how that system has developed historically since it was introduced in England in 1430. However, he said, as the franchise has expanded to include more people, like women and people of color, representation has become more complex. The U.S. still kept the winner-take-all system.

In 1965, the Voting Rights Act passed and one thing that followed from that was the creation of majority minority electoral districts to combat efforts to dilute the voting strength of protected communities. The drawbacks George identified with majority minority districts are that they only work when groups are highly segregated, which not all protected communities are, and that the current Supreme Court seems to favor striking down race-conscious policies, which could mean the end of majority minority districts as an option.

MED favors proportional elections as an alternative option, which would mean that if a community delivers 30% of votes, it should get 30% of seats. Proportional elections have been implemented in a few places in the U.S. through ranked choice voting + multi-member districts. George shared some examples, such as New York City between 1937 and 1945. This allowed for the election of the most diverse city council in history, but was followed by a backlash that led to repeal. George shared a video about how gerrymandering in Londonderry (Northern Ireland) allowed Protestants to leverage their winner-take-all system to give outsized power to Protestants over Catholics. The Good Friday Accords negotiated in the 1990s included an agreement to implement proportional elections, giving Catholics more power in their political system. More recently, Albany, CA voters approved a measure to use proportional representation in local elections.

MED argued that while winner-take-all elections are easy to understand and administer, they perform poorly on measures of representation, especially when it comes to giving minority communities a voice in the system. George said proportional elections more closely represent the electorate, although they are somewhat more challenging to administer.

Samantha noted that the current Multnomah County system – four commissioner districts and a chair elected at-large – has been in place since 1984.

Prompted by Timur, George clarified that proportional elections can focus on either political parties or candidates. In U.S. elections, voters cast their votes for individual candidates rather than parties, and proportional elections can still operate with voters choosing individual candidates that way.

## **Presentation from Oregon Ranked Choice Voting Advocates**

Mike Alfoni presented to the subcommittee on behalf of Oregon Ranked Choice Voting Advocates, a group that has coordinated advocacy for Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) around the state. The presentation focused on what RCV is and how it works. Oregon RCV does also recommend the elimination of primaries in favor of a single election and exploring the use of multi-member electoral districts.

Mike explained that RCV is designed to address the issues that arise in an election with more than two candidates, which can result in one candidate winning with only a plurality of the vote; this candidate may be the least popular with the electorate overall but still win if the other two candidates split the vote of the majority. Oregon RCV argues that this can be a barrier to entry for a lot of candidates and it can force voters to have to make a choice between voting for their favorite candidate and who they think is “most electable.”

With RCV, if no candidate gets a majority of the vote, there is an “instant runoff.” The last place candidate is eliminated and the votes that candidate received are reallocated to those voters’ second choice candidates. Last place candidates continue to be eliminated with their votes reallocated to remaining candidates until one candidate has a majority of the vote.

Mike argued that RCV provides more responsive and reflective representation; allows more women and people of color to run and win; is popular with voters and gives them more choice and power; and leads to more positive and less expensive campaigns. He cited studies that supported these claims and spoke about the uptick in use of RCV across the U.S. in different types of elections.

Oregon RCV also advocated for the elimination of primaries, with a single election run on the date the general election is held. RCV allows people to express their candidate preferences on one ballot. Mike noted that there is typically a smaller turnout in primaries, which means that the electorate is less representative of its community in those elections and may lead to the selection of general election candidates who are less favorable to the general election electorate. Also, he said that eliminating primaries allows candidates to run a single campaign, which saves them time and money. Administering one election instead of two in a year would also save Multnomah County money.

Timur asked whether Oregon RCV has a position on no longer staggering the election of commissioners so that they are all voted into office by the same electorate. Mike said he could see pros and cons for each and did not have an established recommendation.

Maja asked: if Multnomah County implemented multi-member districts, what would that mean for the election of the Chair; should that still be at-large? Mike said that he did not want to speculate about that and would want to hear input from community groups and research the potential outcomes for Multnomah County. It was pointed out that a discussion about multi-member districts would be most relevant to the County Commissioners, as other elected positions are already voted on by the County at-large.

Mike shared that there is funding available through the Oregon Secretary of State’s Office to help fund a transition to RCV.

Samantha asked Colin from MED if he would be willing to share his perspective on why it’s important to pair multi-member districts and RCV together. She also asked if he could address Timur’s question about not staggering the election of commissioners.

Colin clarified that having a voting method like RCV helps make representation in multi-member districts actually proportional and MED would not recommend multi-member districts without some method of preference voting being paired with it. Addressing the switch to non-staggered commissioner terms, Colin cited a presentation to the Portland Charter Commission by Prof. Michael Latner that aligns with MED’s perspective. He pointed out that there are demographic differences in who turns out for different elections; turnout for non-presidential elections is older, whiter, and wealthier. This means that staggered commissioners end up being accountable to different electorates, and one of those electorates tends to be less representative of the community overall.

Annie shared that she started out as an RCV advocate, but her study of voting methods led her to support STAR voting, instead. She shared a video link in the chat (Appendix A) that discussed how votes can be split using RCV. She also said that in the U.S. there are often limits on how many candidates a voter can rank,

which means that if a voter's choices are all eliminated before the final round, their ballot is exhausted and would not be counted in the final total.

Mike responded that all voting methods have their strengths and weaknesses, but RCV is much better than the current system. He said that the chances of an exhausted ballot remain low. He also pointed out that RCV has been used in elections and does have a proven track record of working.

Colin echoed Mike's point about strengths and weaknesses of different methods and recommended focusing on questions like how *often* a system would fail its communities, and would that be less often than the current system? He said currently 8-9 million people in the U.S. are using RCV and there have been robust studies showing its efficacy and the infrequency with which scenarios of concern have actually arisen. Colin also argued that if RCV is paired with multi-winner proportional districts a lot of the potential concerns with RCV are resolved.

Maja asked if Colin's or Mike's recommendations for multi-member proportional districts + RCV assumed an increase in the number of Multnomah County Commissioners, or if they were envisioning this with the current four commissioners and one chair.

Mike said it could work either way and while he thought it was worth looking into the number of commissioners, he couldn't recommend a change without a lot more information specific to the County.

Colin said that Multnomah County could have multi-member districts without changing the number of commissioners; Multnomah County could be a single district, for example, with all of the commissioners elected at-large. He added that Dr. Latner's research concludes that increasing the number of legislators is an important tool for increasing representation and the U.S. has particularly small legislative bodies.

Timur commented that if the subcommittee recommends increasing the number of commissioners to a number comparable to European jurisdictions, it would dilute the Chair's power to be more on par with that of other commissioners.

Meikelo said he is on the fence about switching to something like RCV and has concerns about the major structural issues in switching over. He also pointed out that the subcommittee is hearing from interest groups on these topics, which meant they had well-practiced arguments in favor of their positions and Meikelo was concerned that they are not and would not genuinely engage with the critiques of and potential issues with the systems that they favor.

Annie mentioned that the subcommittee hoped to hear from the Multnomah County Elections Office at a future meeting, and that that office could address some of the subcommittee's questions about administration.

## **Public comment**

A written public comment was submitted by James Kahan. Kali summarized the comment, which was somewhat favorably to RCV, but strongly opposed STAR voting.

Annie thanked James for their comment, but stated that James had miscalculated how STAR voting was counted.

## **Wrap-up**

Maja asked whether the subcommittee operated under the same voting requirements as the full MCCRC. Kali said she was pretty sure they did, but that she would review the bylaws and get back to the subcommittee.

Kali shared that at the subcommittee's request she had reached out to Benton County, Oregon, which used RCV in its 2020 election. She said that a representative from Benton County was not able to attend one of their meetings, but they would be willing to answer written questions if the subcommittee poses them.

Kali committed to working on surveying subcommittee members about their availability for future meetings.

## APPENDIX A: ZOOM CHAT

19:05:17 From Samantha Gladu (she/they) to Hosts and panelists:

[https://multco-web7-psh-files-usw2.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Equitable%20Representation%20Subcommittee%20Agenda%2003.07.22\\_0.pdf](https://multco-web7-psh-files-usw2.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Equitable%20Representation%20Subcommittee%20Agenda%2003.07.22_0.pdf)

19:05:29 From Kali Odell (she/her) to George Cheung, he/him, More Equitable Democracy(Direct Message):

Do you want me to promote Colin to panelist?

19:05:40 From George Cheung, he/him, More Equitable Democracy to Kali Odell (she/her)(Direct Message):

Yes please

19:09:59 From Kali Odell (she/her) to Everyone:

Committee members, if you have questions as George presents, feel free to pop them in the chat or raise your virtual hand.

19:10:12 From Samantha Gladu (she/they) to Everyone:

So hard to pick three!

19:10:23 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Everyone:

true...

19:10:50 From Samantha Gladu (she/they) to Everyone:

High voter turnout, close link between constituents and elected, ease of administration

19:11:00 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Everyone:

Range of Choices/ Sincere Voting/ Ease of Administration

19:11:08 From Maja Harris (she/her) to Everyone:

1. High voter turnout 2 . competitive elections 3. Sincere voting

19:11:28 From Timur Ender (he/him) to Everyone:

minority rep, high voter turnout, close link b/t electeds and residents

19:12:58 From Meikelo Cabbage to Everyone:

majority rule, ease of administration, strategic voting/viable strategy voting (not on the list, but I think its important)

19:32:39 From Timur Ender (he/him) to Everyone:

I love this graph!!

19:34:52 From Timur Ender (he/him) to Everyone:

I have some questions too

19:35:00 From Samantha Gladu (she/they) to Everyone:

Multnomah County hasn't always had four commissioner districts?

No, actually the number of commissioners has ranged from three to four to five and back to four as we are now. And, there haven't always been districts; in the early days of the county and at various later times the commissioners ran at-large, or county-wide. The existing arrangement of having a Chair elected at-large and having four Commissioners elected by districts (resembling the current geography) was established in 1984 and approved by the voters in November of that year.

19:35:10 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Everyone:

I don't want to interrupt, but we're at the end of time for this presentation and we should make sure we give RCV Oregon time to speak.

19:37:05 From Maja Harris (she/her) to Everyone:

Thanks so much for putting this together, George!

19:47:13 From Kali Odell (she/her) to Annie Kallen she/ her(Direct Message):

We only had the one written comment submitted for tonight, so we can repurpose our time for that toward presentation and reflection time.

19:47:20 From Kali Odell (she/her) to Samantha Gladu (she/they)(Direct Message):

We only had the one written comment submitted for tonight, so we can repurpose our time for that toward presentation and reflection time.

19:48:06 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Kali Odell (she/her)(Direct Message):

OK, sounds good.

19:48:37 From Samantha Gladu (she/they) to Kali Odell (she/her)(Direct Message):

Thank you

19:49:08 From Timur Ender (he/him) to Everyone:

I have a question, when the time is appropriate

19:50:28 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Everyone:

We have approx. 10 minutes left for questions on this presentation.

19:54:19 From Colin Cole to Hosts and panelists:

Nothing to add there -- I think that was really well put!

19:56:09 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Everyone:

There are also other single-winner positions such as district attorney.

19:57:44 From Colin Cole to Hosts and panelists:

Just off sound for some technical issues

19:58:26 From Mike Alfoni (he/him) OR RCV to Hosts and panelists:

That's to you Colin

20:02:21 From Samantha Gladu (she/they) to Everyone:

Totally, I love dogs

20:06:27 From Maja Harris (she/her) to Everyone:

Thanks, Mike! Thanks, Colin!

20:07:19 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Everyone:

Spoiler effect in RCV: <https://youtu.be/FKCWNNYOOkw>

20:11:11 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Everyone:

About 10% of ballots are exhausted in RCV on average (and that was roughly the percentage in the recent NY election).

20:11:46 From Samantha Gladu (she/they) to Everyone:

Maja next!

20:13:29 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Everyone:

Agreed, single-winner RCV is much worse than multi-winner RCV.

20:15:26 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Everyone:

Mike, does RCV Oregon have a copy of the written responses to the Portland Charter Commission? That would be useful for us to see.

20:15:49 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Everyone:

I have the Equal Vote/ STAR ones, but it would be nice to compare the two.

20:18:34 From Annie Kallen she/ her to Everyone:

If there's only one chair, that chair has more power with a large number of commissioners.

20:26:02 From Meikelo Cabbage to Everyone:

Would the best way to send email correspondence to reply to the email Kali sent about meeting materials?

20:27:30 From Meikelo Cabbage to Everyone:

I got it!

20:34:04 From Maja Harris (she/her) to Everyone:

Great idea!