Members of the Joint Committee on Election Laws:

We write to you to express our support for the use of ranked choice voting (RCV) in municipal and state elections in Massachusetts. We specifically support Bills H.2897, An Act providing a local option for ranked choice voting in municipal elections; S.380, An Act providing a local option for ranked choice voting in city or town elections; and H.377, An Act to promote better voting practices.

Ranked choice voting (RCV) is a family of voting and vote tabulation methods in which voters get to indicate their preferences in ranked order on the ballot. RCV has been implemented in many different ways since the first versions were developed in the 1850s. Instant-runoff voting and single transferable vote refer to particular implementations of RCV. Instant-runoff voting generally refers to implementations for single-seat elections (like a state representative seat), while single transferable vote generally refers to implementations for multi-seat elections (like at-large election of city council members).

The Graduate Student Council (GSC) represents the 6,900 graduate students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). We support the adoption of voting methods that more accurately reflect the preferences of voters and all other measures that increase the civic engagement of the MIT community. We use RCV ourselves in elections for our Council officers and most seats on our External Affairs Board. Many other factors can affect the environment of our elections, but RCV offers a more robust platform for voters to express their preferences than the first-past-the-post system most commonly used in US elections and we support its use in Massachusetts elections.

H. 2897 and S. 380 would make it easier for cities and towns in Massachusetts to implement RCV in municipal elections by allowing implementation through a ballot measure or passage of a regular ordinance. Currently, a city or town would need to convene a Charter Commission or secure passage of a special act from the state legislature to change their election methods. These bills establish a set of requirements that the measure or ordinance adopting RCV must include to ensure a fair and technically sound implementation. These bills do not mandate that any cities or towns change their election methods - the bill simply gives them the option. The flexibility allowed by these bills ensures that cities and towns in Massachusetts could adopt RCV while maintaining essentially all other election practices they choose to keep (at-large seats, wards, primaries, etc.).

H.377 would implement RCV in all statewide elections and state legislator elections. This bill includes specific implementation requirements, tailored for the case where there is only one seat up for election (which would be true for all affected offices). The quota (the number of votes a candidate needs to win) is a simple majority of votes cast, which assures that a ranked choice election and a first-past-the-post election would have the same result in a case where only two candidates are competing for a single seat.

RCV provides several advantages over the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system currently used in nearly all US elections:
RCV eliminates the third-party ‘spoiler effect.’ In FPTP elections, third-party voters could contribute to the victory of their least-preferred candidate and are therefore strongly incentivized to pick their more-preferred choice from the top two parties (‘the lesser of two evils’). All RCV implementations provide such voters the opportunity to indicate their 1st preference for the third party and a 2nd choice that is used if their 1st choice does not win, ensuring that their votes are never wasted regardless of the larger political dynamic of the election.

RCV incentivizes positive campaigning and public dialogue about common views. Candidates in an RCV election have an incentive to secure as many 2nd choice votes as they can and avoid having any voters completely rule them out. Negative campaigning could put a candidate at risk of alienating some voters, possibly being ranked last or not ranked at all. The more candidates there are in a race, the greater the incentive for the candidates to speak positively, focus on substantive issues, and seek common ground.

RCV could provide more voters with more candidate options by eliminating the need for primaries. An election system could still use primaries, but they would no longer be necessary. Since it is well documented that even record-setting primary elections see substantially lower turnout than general elections\(^1\), eliminating primaries would allow the larger number of general election voters to consider all of the candidates. Election results could then more accurately reflect voter preferences.

RCV has been used successfully in municipal elections in many US cities in the past and has recently been adopted or re-adopted by several jurisdictions (most notably the state of Maine for congressional and state elections). Cambridge, MA has used RCV for city council and school committee elections for almost 80 years. Intuitive ballots have been designed and demonstrated in these elections, and voters in jurisdictions that have recently adopted RCV understand the concept of ranking their preferences\(^2\). However, we recognize that any changes to an election process could result in voter confusion, so we would strongly encourage efforts to provide clear information about the new system to all voters.

Passage of these bills and implementation of ranked choice voting will help make Massachusetts elections more inclusive and fair and raise the level of political dialogue in our great Commonwealth.

Best regards,

Daniel Curtis
MIT GSC External Affairs Development Chair
MIT Nuclear Science and Engineering

On behalf of the MIT GSC External Affairs team

Prepared by the External Affairs Board on behalf of the MIT Graduate Student Council. March, 2018

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\(^1\) D. Desilver. “Turnout was high in the 2016 primary season, but just short of 2008 record.” Pew Research Center (2016)