

OP-ED

Lexington should change how it votes by ranking candidates

BY JOSHUA A. DOUGLAS

May 18, 2018 10:27 PM

Updated May 22, 2018 03:07 PM

With seven candidates for mayor and 10 candidates for council at-large, what is a voter to do?

This year's Lexington mayoral race exemplifies a persistent problem in American elections: Our way of voting may not accurately reflect the electorate's true preferences. Two mayoral candidates and six council-at-large candidates will move on to the general election in November (with one winning mayor and three winning council at-large), but will those candidates be the individuals who most people actually favor? Even this newspaper's editorial board did not select just one candidate, endorsing two candidates for mayor and six candidates for council at-large.

Consider what happened during the past few election cycles in Lexington. In the May 2010 primary for mayor, Jim Newberry received the most votes at 44 percent and Jim Gray received 36 percent, when there was only 28 percent turnout. Neither candidate garnered a majority until Gray won in the November general election, when turnout was 50 percent. In the May 2014 primary, the highest vote recipient for council at-large received only 15 percent of the vote. And, of course, who knows if these results truly reflected Lexington's overall sentiment given the abysmally low turnout in the May primary.

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There's a better way to vote. It's called ranked choice voting and is sweeping the country. Lexington should jump on board.

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The idea is fairly simple: Instead of having to select one candidate at a low-turnout primary election, voters rank-order their preferences among all or some of the candidates during a single general election. If a candidate receives more than 50 percent of first choice votes, then that person is the winner. If not, then the person who received the fewest first-place votes is eliminated, and voters who selected that candidate have their second choice count instead. The process is repeated until there is a winner with at least 50 percent. For multi-seat elections like council at-large, the system works essentially the same way, with a threshold established for determining the percentage needed to win. The nonprofit, nonpartisan organization FairVote has some excellent videos on its website explaining how it works.

Few of us like only one beer or ice cream flavor. The same is often true of candidates. We might prefer one candidate but think that a second or third choice would also be just fine. Ranked choice voting allows our elections to reflect that reality.

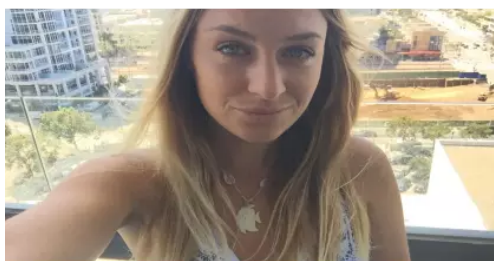
The system eliminates the concern about voting for a “spoiler” candidate, reduces negative campaigning (who would go negative if they also need second choice votes?), improves turnout because voters feel like their votes truly count, and saves money because there is no need for an expensive yet low-turnout primary election. Most significantly, the winner will have majority support. No longer could a candidate with less than 50 percent of the vote eventually win the election.

Several jurisdictions use ranked choice voting, also known as instant runoff voting, with great success. Cities across the country, from San Francisco to Santa Fe to Minneapolis to Portland, Maine have employed ranked choice voting to improve their elections. Maine will become the first state to use the system in a statewide election this June. Even the Academy Awards uses ranked choice voting to select the Best Picture winner.

The Urban County Council should consider changing its charter to adopt ranked choice voting for city elections. Lexington is a leader in so many ways; it should also be a leader in how it runs its elections.

Joshua A. Douglas is a law professor at the University of Kentucky College of Law who specializes in election law, voting rights and constitutional law. He is the co-editor of “Election Law Stories” and is currently writing a new book on positive voting rights expansions. Find him at www.joshuaadouglas.com and follow him on Twitter @JoshuaADouglas.

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