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Seattle U's Student Government Should Consider Implementing Ranked-Choice Voting

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

The Student Government of Seattle University (SGSU) gives me hope for the future of American political leadership. In the past year, SGSU has worked towards racial justice by incorporating action steps from the Washington Employers for Racial Equity, supplied election resources to students and has taken measures to increase transparency. These efforts prove that, while the federal government may be dysfunctional, Seattle U's student government is modelling how to legislate like adults. In keeping with SGSU's tradition of handling substantive issues which the national government has not, it ought to consider implementing a ranked-choice voting system in future elections.

Ranked-choice voting (RCV) is a simple concept. A 2019 Time Magazine piece described it well: "Instead of just choosing who you want to win, you fill out the ballot saying who is your first choice, second choice, or third choice (or more as needed) for each position." This means that candidates always win by majorities in RCV systems, ensuring that the will of the people is represented by the final candidate.

Young adults often find themselves in the unenviable position of choosing between two old and out-of-touch candidates who don't represent their interests. If you were excited about a third-party candidate in 2020, but voted for President Biden instead because you were concerned that a vote for anyone else would allow an incompetent demagogue to remain in the White House, then RCV is the system for you. RCV allows voters to select their favorite candidates without risking wasting their vote by listing other candidates as second or third choices in the event that their favorite candidate does not capture a majority of the vote.

In traditional voting systems, during which a party primary is followed by a general election, polarizing candidates do well because they initially must cater to a plurality within their party rather than the general public. This was abundantly clear in the 2020 Washington State governor's race.

While the Evergreen State is often considered blue from a federal standpoint, there is a long lasting tradition of conservatism in Washington as well. While the dream of a competent and respectable Republican seems to be increasingly elusive, there had to be at least one candidate from the right-wing camp with a sense of how to approach Washington's pressing problems.

Instead, state voters were faced with candidates like Phil Fortunato, a state senator who called for teachers to be armed in response to school shootings, and Loren Culp, Chief of Police in the town of Republic, who made headlines in 2018 for refusing to enforce I-1639, a law restricting the sale of semi-automatic assault rifles to people under the age of 21. In attempting to appeal to primary voters rather than the general public, the Washington Republican party ultimately offered voters a far-right Chief of Police from a town with 1,000 people. RCV turns the temperature down by weeding out candidates that might do well by appealing to groups within their party, but don't poll well with the general public.

One of the most common rebutes of RCV is that citizens will not understand it because they have never used such a voting method. This is precisely why SGSU should consider moving from a traditional plurality winner system to an RCV method. Student governments aren't just important in their capacity to craft campus policy—they are also a means of teaching students about the opportunities and responsibilities of being a citizen.

SGSU's current representatives are intelligent leaders, and I don't expect that implementing RCV would have a substantial impact on its composition. However, it would give students experience with using a ranked-choice voting system. Federal, state and local politics would be well served by RCV systems, but each of these levels face detractors who claim that citizens are not ready for such a complicated system. SGSU can counter this narrative and contribute to the health of American democracy by giving Seattle U students firsthand experience with ranked-choice voting.

SGSU has worked in the past several years to represent what proper governments should look like. In 2019, it passed a resolution supporting the rights of student workers to join the existing union for Chartwells workers. It has expressed the intention to actively diversify since at least 2017. These actions don't just make Seattle U a better place—they set a precedent for student leaders and their constituents. The power of student governments to model policies that work their way through larger institutions is an important one.

RCV needs advocates in student governments to gain traction on a local, state and federal level. SGSU can contribute to the movement to make American politics more fair and functional by implementing ranked-choice voting in future elections.