



Memorandum

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL
FROM: Councilmember Cohen
Councilmember Kamei
Councilmember Mulcahy
Councilmember Tordillos

SUBJECT: RANKED CHOICE VOTING FOR VACANCIES
DATE: May 27, 2026

Approved:

David Cohen *Anthony Tordillos* *Michael Mulcahy*
Rosemary Kamei

Recommendation

Place on the November 2026 Ballot a measure instituting:

- a. Amending the City Charter to allow the option for the Council to choose to utilize Ranked Choice Voting in the case of special elections to fill vacancies in Mayoral and City council races.

Background:

Over the course of 2025, it became clear the City was facing a significant budget shortfall in the order of tens of millions of dollars. That same year, the City held a special election to fill a Council vacancy that, between the primary and general elections, cost \$3.4 million— a price tag that exacerbated an already critical budget situation.

The San Jose City Council last discussed Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) in April 2022 after the Charter Review Commission recommended switching to RCV for future elections. The topic was

discussed at length and the Council at that time chose not to pursue the change. Some Councilmembers were concerned that the process would be confusing for voters; however, in the four years since, many more jurisdictions have adopted a form of ranked choice voting, including:

- Hawaii
- Washington DC
- Eureka, CA
- Ann Arbor, MI
- Multnomah County, OR
- Arlington County, VA
- Portland, OR
- Seattle, WA
- Fort Collins, CO
- Salt Lake City, UT

With the increase in the number of jurisdictions using RCV comes a clearer picture of its impacts and advantages. Earlier studies were hampered by a relatively small sample size, while more recent, substantive research, with the benefit of more real-world experience to draw on, has found that RCV does not negatively impact turnout or voter understanding; in fact, it may be associated with positive impacts.

This is not an unprecedented idea, and we have the benefit of seeing the effects that Ranked Choice Voting has had on elections in those jurisdictions—namely, that it saves money, produces a more diverse pool of candidates and elected officials, and creates more civil, policy-driven campaigns.

As we head into another difficult budget cycle we should consider creative options that could potentially save millions of dollars.

In the 2025 District 3 special election, a single RCV election would have saved the city \$1.5 million. We were unable to opt to use RCV that one time because the City Charter specifies the current two-step electoral process must be used for all elections, including special elections. We believe that at a minimum, the Council should have the option to use RCV to fill vacancies. That could be accomplished by adoption of the recommendation.

While there will be a cost associated with an educational campaign to ensure that voters understand this process, this is an investment in future cost savings for the rare circumstance of a vacancy. There have been several numbers floated for the cost of the educational campaign, but in a [Santa Clara County Registrar of Voters memo](#), the cost was cited to be at \$2.724M for a countywide ranked choice voting educational campaign. The cost of an educational public outreach program for a single district special election should be considerably less.

