

Testimony from:
Chris Saxman
Member of the Virginia House of Delegates for the 20th District, 2002 - 2010

In SUPPORT of SF1071
February 13, 2025
Minnesota Senate Elections Committee

Chairman Carlson and Members of the Elections Committee,

I am a former four-term Republican member of the Virginia House of Delegates, and recently led Virginia Lt. Governor Winsome Sears' transition team, inauguration committee, and also stood up and ran her current PAC. I write to you today in support of SF1071 – a bill that would give more cities, counties, and school boards in Minnesota the option to use ranked choice in their elections. I'd like to share my own experience with ranked choice voting as a Republican, highlight the positive impacts it has had on the GOP in Virginia in recent years, and explain how it could have a similar impact here in Minnesota.

If you had told me during my election to the Virginia House in 2001 that in 20 years Virginia Republicans would be facing a statewide existential election, I would have laughed out loud. At the time, we had two US Senators, back to back Republican governors and attorneys general as well as a near supermajority in the state House.

Shortly after the 2020 presidential election, I called my campaign manager from 2001, Dave Rexrode, who at the time was the Executive Director of the Republican Governors' Association. Previously, Rexrode managed and deputy managed gubernatorial elections in 2009 and 2013. I asked him if the RGA had budgeted money for the Virginia gubernatorial election. He said that the **RGA was not planning on spending ANY money in Virginia.**

That meant we were going to lose in 2021.

I then offered that if the GOP loses in 2021, we would effectively be a third party in a two-party system with no chances of winning statewide ever again. Dave agreed.

At the very same time, the Republican Party of Virginia State Central Committee was deciding on the method of nomination for the '21 statewide races for Governor, Lt. Governor, and Attorney General. After multiple ballots, they had a stalemate in their deliberations. I'm being charitable with that. There has been an internal battle royale within the State Central Committee for over thirty years – at least.

To make matters worse politically, the Committee decided to live stream their debates and votes.

The running narrative quickly became that if the GOP can't even run their party, why should they run the Commonwealth?

They compromised on a hybrid convention/primary via an unassembled convention but with Ranked Choice Voting. While new to the rest of Virginia, the Republican Party of Virginia used ranked choice voting in 2020 to elect its chairman, former Delegate Rich Anderson.

It was **a useful tool in the toolbox** that started a remarkable turn of fortune for the Virginia Republicans. Not only did it help keep all the 2021 statewide candidates in the race as Republicans (one had threatened to run as an independent as an intentional spoiler candidate), it actually encouraged MORE candidates to come

forward. In the end, 17 statewide candidates fanned out across the Commonwealth signing up delegates to the unassembled convention.

They grew the base of the party. Additionally, due to its format the **candidates had to focus on the issues** versus negatively campaigning.

It worked.

Glenn Youngkin was nominated, the base quickly unified around him due to a lack of lingering campaign animus, and his unfavorable numbers statewide were very low.

Youngkin did a lot of positive name ID-building ads and raised his favorable ratings to the point where the RGA entered the race with \$15 million in the middle of summer and took over the ground game operations. That was a huge boost to the entire ticket which swept the top three statewide offices and won back the House of Delegates with a 7-seat pick-up.

Following that very successful campaign, Virginia Republicans used ranked choice voting in the nominations for four Congressional Districts in 2022 and a state House race in 2023. Moreover, the State Central Committee defeated a resolution denouncing the use of Ranked Choice Voting, the same resolution the Republican National Committee (RNC) adopted in January 2023. The vote was **63% to 37% AGAINST the resolution** to ban ranked choice voting. Please note the **RNC did not even debate** the resolution due to the priority of the race for RNC chair.

The 2024 election cycle demonstrates why Republicans should consider ranked choice voting in general elections, too. In Virginia's 2nd Congressional District, progressive dark-money organizations spent hundreds of thousands backing a conservative independent candidate, hoping to split the Republican vote and defeat incumbent Congresswoman Jen Kiggans. **With ranked choice voting, we could "stop the spoil."** Instead of Libertarians and conservative independents splitting the vote with Republicans, their voters can simply rank the Republican second and consolidate behind us.

Nationally, the absence of ranked choice voting likely cost Republicans three U.S. Senate seats and three House races in 2024, with third-party spoilers exceeding razor-thin margins of defeat in Nevada, Wisconsin and Michigan.

Given the recent successful use by Virginia Republicans of ranked choice voting in electing strong conservative Republicans, I would hope the Republicans on this committee and across the Minnesota legislature will seriously consider expanding its use in the state.

In my experience, the loudest complaints about ranked choice voting have come from campaign consultants who have spent decades winning elections by attacking their opponents with negative ads. They've built their business on dividing voters, and ranked choice voting would make it much harder to win elections that way. Ranked choice voting is not something Republicans should fear, but rather celebrate. Ranked choice voting creates an opportunity for strong, conservative candidates to compete in parts of this country long written-off as "impossible."

But regardless of your feelings about ranked choice voting, SF1071 simply respects the right of Minnesota's cities and counties to choose how they elect the people who lead their communities. It does not force them to use ranked choice voting, it simply gives them the option to do so – an option five cities have already exercised. The principle of keeping government limited and keeping it local to the people it affects is something

that unites all Republicans. SF1071 upholds that principle, no matter how one feels about ranked choice voting.

Thank you, and I hope you will support SF1071.

Sincerely,

Chris Saxman

Virginia House of Delegates 2002-2010