

Ranked Choice Voting Empowers Oakland Voters

A Comparison with Top-Two Runoff

Oakland's first use of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) successfully demonstrated how RCV empowers voters to effectively participate in democracy. This is seen especially for the election of Oakland's mayor in comparison to the traditional top-two runoff system it replaced. The following figures show how voter participation increased with the introduction of RCV.

Three important observations are evident from these figures:

- 1. By every measure, RCV shows significant improvement over the system it replaced.**
- 2. There were more voters who fully participated with RCV than there were voters with any kind of involvement using the old top-two runoff, even after adjusting for the overall growth in registered voters, as shown in Figure 2.**
- 3. Regressing to the old top-two runoff system would have the effect of excluding the extra 30% or more of Oakland voters who participated with RCV – more than 28,000 voters.** See Figure 3.

Figure 1 compares four measures of voter involvement in terms of the number of voters.

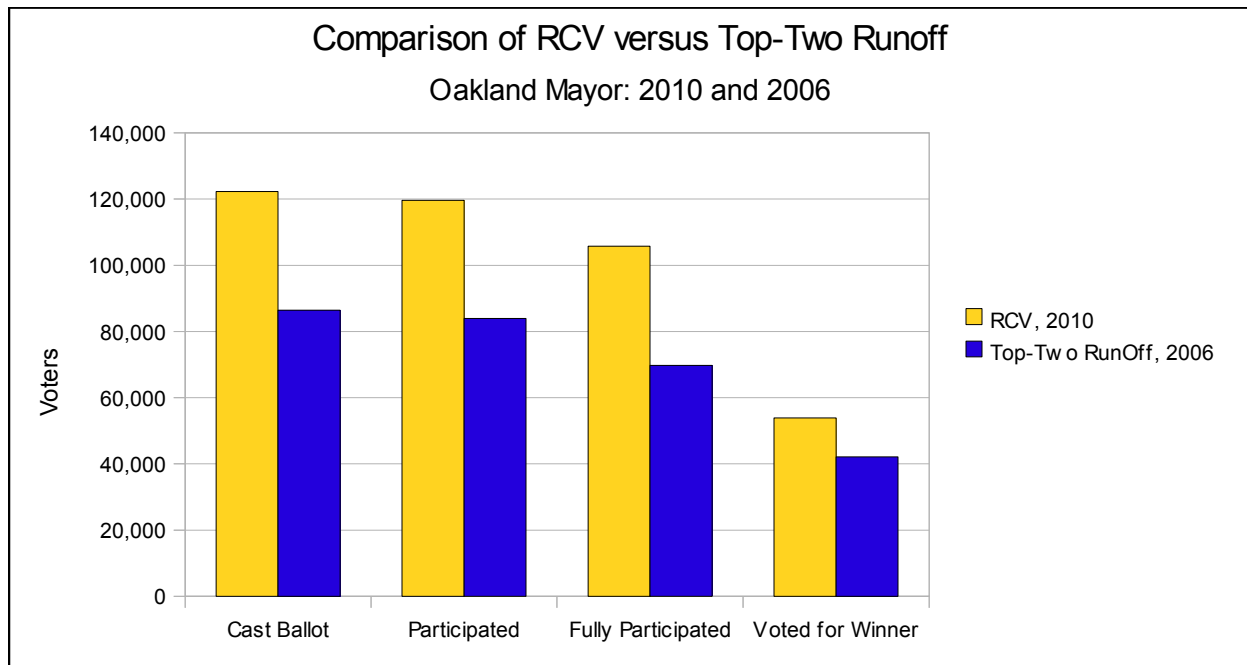


Figure 1. RCV increases voter participation

For this analysis, a voter participates if that person cast a ballot that counts for any candidate in at least one round. Undervotes and overvotes are excluded. A voter fully participates if that person's ballot also counts in every round effectively and decisively – the

ballot counts for the winner(s) of the round or for the runner up. The 2006 race using top-two runoff was decided in a single round, so fully participating means having the vote count for the winner or the runner up in that round. Undervotes, overvotes, and wasted votes are excluded. In the 2010 race using RCV, fully participating means having the vote count for a candidate in every round, including the last round. Undervotes, overvotes, and any ballots that ever became exhausted are excluded.

Figure 2 shows the participation levels as a percentage of registered voters. This provides a comparison between the two elections that removes the effect of the 8.4% growth in registered voters from 2006 to 2010.

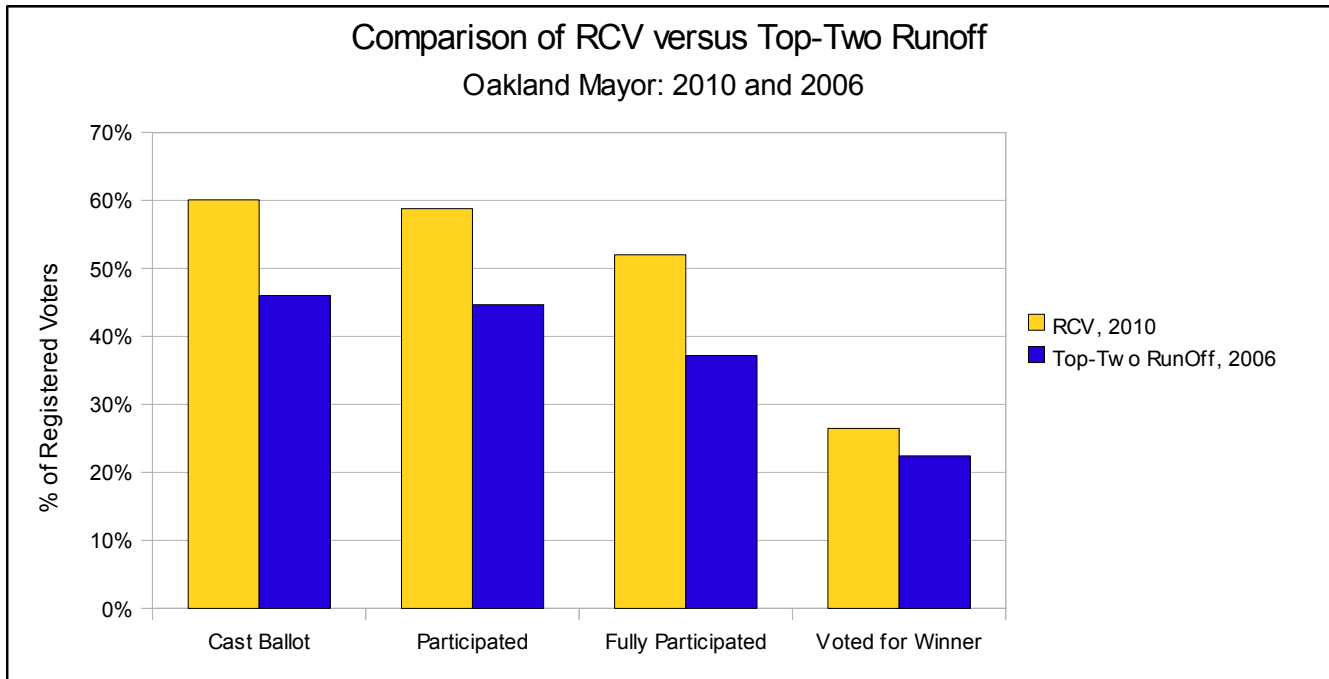


Figure 2. RCV increases voter participation, even after adjusting for growth in the number of registered voters

RCV improves voter empowerment by:

- reducing the number of elections
- avoiding low-turnout elections
- permitting greater expression of voter preference
- counting votes more effectively
- reducing wasted votes

RCV counts votes more effectively than top-two runoff does when there are a larger number of competitive candidates. As a result, it encourages greater competition among more candidates. It also discourages non-democratic processes that suppress how many candidates, or that pre-select which candidates, are on the ballot. Such non-democratic processes reduce voter choice and voter empowerment.

Top-two runoff systems typically rely on at least one low-turnout election. For Oakland, it was the low-turnout, first-round election in June. Low-turnout elections reduce the legitimacy of the democratic process and allow government to be less responsive and less accountable to voters. Low-turnout elections typically most under represent those groups of voters who are most

dependent on voting to have their voices heard and to influence government policy. RCV avoids low-turnout elections and reduces some barriers for all voters, but especially for groups of voters that have most suffered from other such systemic barriers to effective voting.

The increased voter participation, expressed as percent increases, is shown in Figure 3. For example, Figure 3 shows that the "Fully Participated" bar for RCV in Figure 2 is about 40% taller than the corresponding bar for top-two runoff.

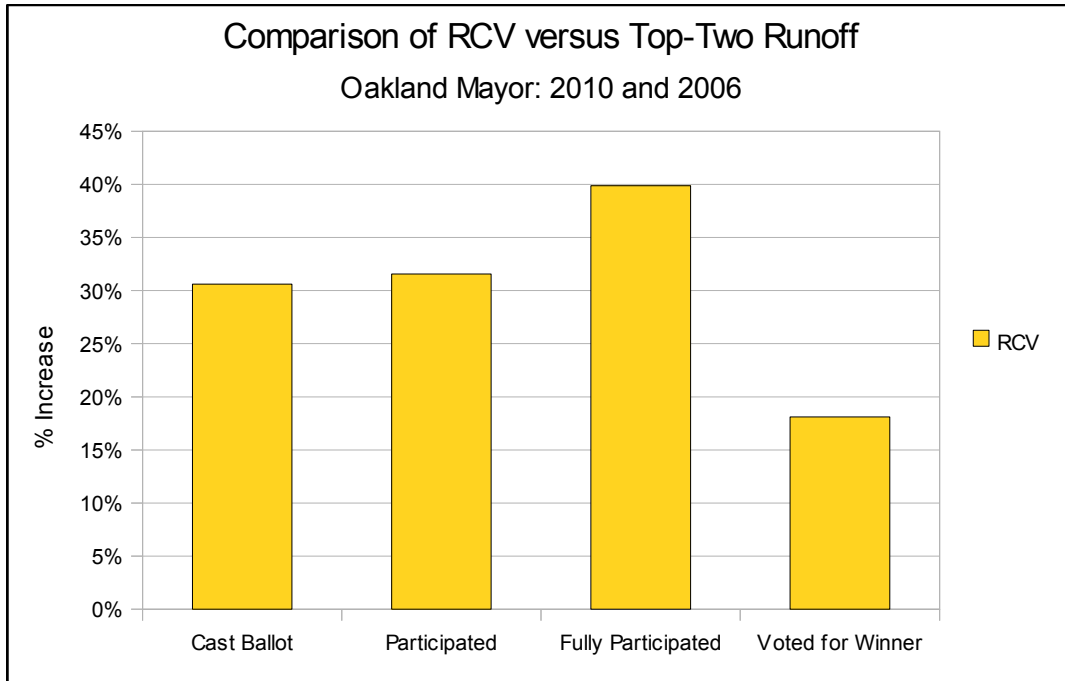


Figure 3. RCV percent increase in voter participation

Some detractors of RCV have focused on how Oakland's first use of RCV may have missed some standard of perfection, on how the "Fully Participated" bar is not as high as the "Cast Ballot" or "Participated" bars. A review of RCV's performance is important, but it should not obscure the fact that all three of those bars for RCV are taller than any of the bars for top-two runoff. Some of the reported problems are real, some are exaggerated, and some are the result of misinterpreting the election results. As an early adopter and first-time user of RCV, it will be important for Oakland to accurately assess where and how future uses of RCV can be made even better. Top-two runoff systems on the other hand are mature systems that offer no significant opportunities to improve their clearly worse performance.

Most of all, it is important to recognize that despite any of its possible first-use imperfections, RCV has already brought significantly increased empowerment to Oakland voters.

Without choice, voting is nothing.

Don't take our
ranked **choice** voting
away!