

#LondonLeads

How one Canadian city switched from first-past-the-post to ranked ballot elections, and how yours can too.



First-past-the-post distorts election results, pushes out new voices, rewards negative campaigns, and amplifies polarisation.

These traits feed our collective cynicism, frustration and apathy.

Ranked ballots are a small and simple change that can make our local elections more fair and friendly. They increase choice, diversity, and civility, while eliminating ‘spoilers,’ vote-splitting strategic voting. And, most importantly, they result in a real mandate from voters.

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Canada's dubious distinction

Of the 35 members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Canada is the only country that uses first-past-the-post for every level of government.

Australia

House: **R** Senate: **P**
States + Local: **R/P**

Austria

President: **R**
Council, State & Local: **P**

Belgium

All elections: **P**

Canada

Federal: **FPTP**
Provincial: **FPTP**
Local: **FPTP**

Chile

President: **R**
Everything else: **P**

Czech Republic

President & Senate: **R**
Deputies, regional & local: **P**

Denmark

All elections: **P**

Estonia

National & local: **P**

Finland

President: **R**
Parliament & local: **P**

France

All elections: **R**

Germany

All elections: **P**

Greece

Parliament: **P** Local: **R**

Hungary

National: **MMP** Local: **P**

Iceland

President: **FPTP**
Parliament & local: **P**

Ireland

Local President: **R**
Parliament & local: **P**

Israel

All elections: **P**

Italy

National: **MMP**
Local: **PR**

Japan

Upper House: **R** Local: **P**
Lower House: **MMP**

Latvia

National & local: **P**

Luxembourg

National and local: **P**

Mexico

President: **FPTP**
Congress & local: **MMP**

Netherlands

All elections: **P**

New Zealand

National: **MPP**
Local: **FPTP**

Norway

Parliament & local: **P**

Poland

President: **R**
Parliament & local: **P**

Portugal

President: **R**
National & local: **P**

Slovakia

President: **R** National: **P**
Local: **FPTP**

Slovenia

President: **R**
Parliament: **P**
Local: **R/P**

South Korea

President: **FPTP**
National: **P** Local: **MMP**

Spain

All elections: **P**

Sweden

All elections: **P**

Switzerland

Council: **R**
Assembly & local: **P**

Turkey

President: **R** National: **P**
Local: **FPTP**

UK

National: **FPTP**
Local: **R + MMP**

United States

National & state: **FPTP**
Most local (+ Maine): **R**

P: Proportional systems

MMP: Mixed Member
Proportional

R: Runoff majority
system (either ranked
ballots or top-two)

FPTP First-past-the-post



What ARE ranked ballots?

First-past-the-post has one simple rule: Whoever has the most votes wins. Sounds fair, at first. But it doesn't really work. Imagine one hundred people trying to decide what to eat for a mid-afternoon group snack:



Under first-past-the-post, the winner is beets—even though the vast majority (70%) wanted ice cream.

That doesn't seem fair. Now let's look at a ranked ballot election. Instead of "Whoever has the most votes wins" (which is also called a 'plurality'), candidates have to pass a threshold to win. For a single-winner election (like a mayor, for example) the threshold is 50%. For a multi-winner election (like a municipal ward with three councillors) the threshold is lower.

Number of winners	1	2	3	4
Threshold to win	50%	33%	25%	20%

Using a ranked ballot is as simple as it sounds: Voters are asked to rank their choices in order of preference, rather than just marking an X beside a single choice. On election day, everyone's first choice is added up, and if a candidate has passed the threshold, they're declared the winner. Otherwise, the candidate with the least votes is eliminated from the race and all their votes are transferred to the second choice listed on each ballot.

In our snack example, no one has 50% on the first round, so the option with the least votes is eliminated: chocolate ice cream. Each chocolate ballot is then transferred to caramel, vanilla or beets, depending on the 2nd choice on each ballot.

With a ranked ballot, if your first choice can't win, your ballot still counts! This process of elimination continues until a candidate passes the threshold.

With first-past-the-post, all 100 people are eating pickled beets, leaving most of them unhappy. With single-winner ranked ballots, one of the ice cream flavours will win - a compromise that pleases the majority. And with multi-winner ranked ballots, *everyone* gets a buffet with all four options. That's called proportional representation, which simply means: you get what you vote for.

It gets better. In our first-past-the-post snack analogy, three things are likely to happen:

- 1) Ice-cream lovers will complain that chocolate and caramel "split the vote" and "spoiled" the outcome.
- 2) Chocolate and caramel lovers will be pressured to vote "strategically" for vanilla next time, to ensure that pickled beets don't win.
- 3) The three ice cream groups will start attacking each other.

None of these problems happen with ranked ballots, because there is no such thing as a spoiler. This translates into more choice on the ballot—and often more diversity.

Ranked ballots also encourage civility in campaigns, as candidates try to secure second choice votes from their opponent's supporters.

For these reasons, ranked ballots are used widely around the world, and they are spreading quickly across North America including recent adoption in New York City and the entire state of Maine.

Ranked ballots are a small and simple change that make elections more fair and friendly.

How did London Ontario become Canada's #1 democratic pioneer?

Provincial bill sets stage for electoral reform

In 2016, the Ontario government took a historic step by adopting Bill 181, The Municipal Election Modernization Act, which for the first time allows any municipality in the province to switch to ranked ballots for local elections.



This unprecedented piece of legislation, the first of its kind in Canada, offers *both* versions of ranked ballots: as a majority system with a 50% threshold to win, or as a proportional system that uses multi-member districts (ie: a ward with two or more councillors). Both of these versions are transformative reforms with measurable benefits.

Adopting ranked ballots: Risk aversion, hesitation and the status quo

Even in Canada, ranked ballots are actually quite common. All of our parties use ranked ballots to elect their own leaders and candidates. And when city councillors vote to appoint an interim councillor to fill a vacancy, they too use a runoff system! But Bill 181 created the opportunity for ordinary voters to use ranked ballots as well.

The only question was: Would any city actually do it? Would any Council dare challenge the coast-to-coast monopoly that first-past-the-post has maintained?

In September 2016, Unlock Democracy Canada launched **"Who Will Lead?"**, a province-wide campaign aimed at all 444 Ontario municipalities.

City clerks and administrators were universally (and understandably) reluctant to be the “guinea pig” tasked with implementing a new system. Politicians, meanwhile, tend to prefer whatever system got them elected in the first place. Indeed a small group of political insiders formed a well-funded campaign called *Keep Voting Simple*, urging Ontario councils to maintain the status quo.

London takes on voting reform

While reluctance and risk-aversion dominated most councils, a small group of young rookie councillors in London led by Josh Morgan, Jesse Helmer and Tanya Park slowly began to push the idea forward, and won a key committee vote that triggered a city-wide public consultation.

Local grassroots groups got involved, including the Urban League of London and Women & Politics.

women
politics &



City staff held consultations across London and discussions and debates were organised by community groups. But as months passed, with a May 1st deadline set by provincial regulation, time was running out. When City Council announced a special meeting for the final decision, our supporters were nervous. The meeting was scheduled for May 1st.



Wearing **#LondonLeads** stickers, citizens attended the meeting and waited as Councillors debated the proposal. The meeting dragged into the evening, and then—with only three hours remaining before the deadline—London City Council made history and put themselves on the map as Canada’s #1 democratic pioneers.

Years of advocacy and organising had paid off for volunteers across Ontario. After decades of thwarted attempts at reform, Canada finally had a government that was prepared to ditch first-past-the-post and offer voters a fair election.

“Electoral reform is finally coming to Canada and not a moment too soon”  National Post

“Ontario city rushes in where first-past-the-post adherents fear to tread”  Globe & Mail

“London voters make history with first ranked ballot election for a city in Canada”  CBC

“London to use ranked balloting in a first for Canadian politics”  Toronto Star

Spreading the word



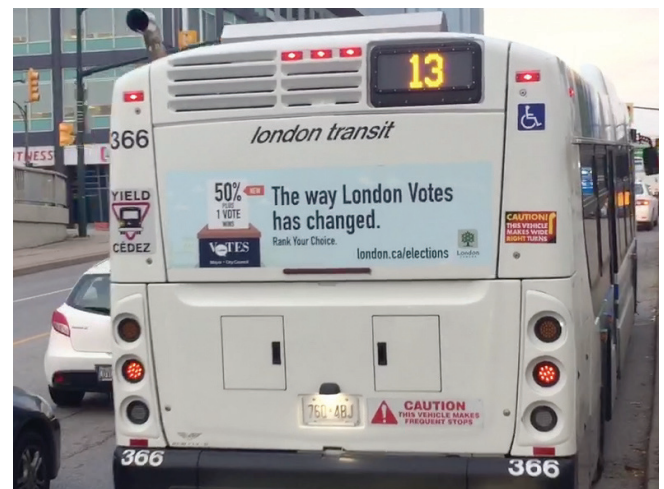
London city staff did an incredible job of educating voters about the new system, by:

- holding information sessions
- posting advertisements across the city
- distributing thousands of leaflets
- attending 160+ community events.

Over \$140,000 dollars were allocated exclusively to outreach and education, ensuring an informed electorate. When election day finally came around, voters were aware and prepared.

“One of the most important aspects when introducing a new process is to ensure that those individuals that will be participating in the process have been given sufficient information to fully engage in the process.”

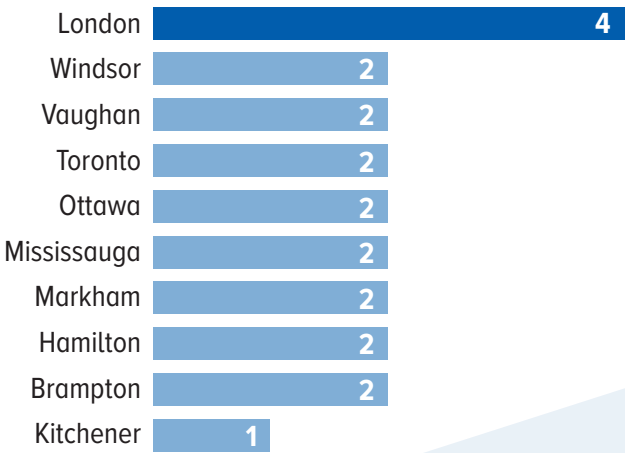
~ March 2019 City of London staff report



More choice for Londoners

Like most cities in Ontario, London’s mayoral races have traditionally had only two frontrunners in each election. But moving to ranked ballots opened up the field and created noticeable change in 2018.

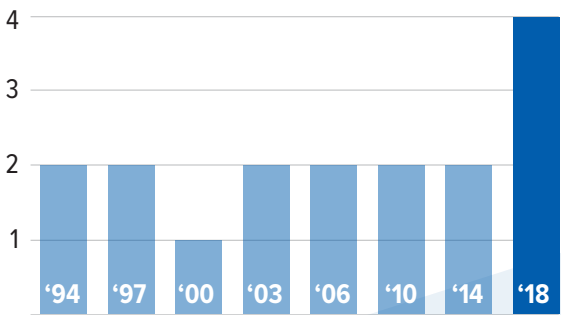
First-past-the-post tends to push us towards a two-party, or two-candidate race. Anyone else is accused of being a “spoiler” or “vote-splitter”. This discourages qualified candidates from running and punishes candidates through the phenomenon of “strategic voting”. With ranked ballots, there’s no such thing as a spoiler. So anyone can run and voters can choose with their heart. How did this play out in London? If we consider a “frontrunner” as someone who can attract at least 10% of the vote, then we see a familiar two-horse race all across Ontario. Except for London.



Mayoral frontrunners in the 2018 election

The benefits of ranked choice voting begin months before election day. Using a fair system means you’ll have more options on the ballot, and you can always vote with your heart.

And looking back over the last 15 years, London too has also seen two-horse races... until they switched to ranked ballots.



Mayoral frontrunners in London

“This was very different from my first campaign, under FPTP, when another challenger candidate (Sheryl Rooth) decided to drop off the ballot and endorse me. No one was forced to drop off the ballot under the ranked ballot system. This is a huge improvement, as it gives voters more choice and empowers them instead of reducing the choices available to avoid vote splitting amongst challenger candidates.”

Jesse Helmer, London City Councillor

Effect on campaigning

Using ranked ballots in an election doesn't just change *who* runs, but also *how* they run.

One benefit, for example, is that ranked ballots encourage positive campaigns. Candidates are trying to secure not only first-choice rankings, but also second-choice rankings from their opponents' supporters. So attacking other candidates hurts your own chances of winning.

While the London election wasn't immune to negative campaigning, it seems that any attacks were carried out anonymously rather than part of any official campaign. (Anonymous campaigning happens to be illegal, and the

OPP are investigating two attack websites). The candidates themselves were on their best behaviour.

Another common theme we heard from candidates is that they wanted to talk to ALL voters, even if they knew they supported another candidate, in the hope of securing their second or third choice. This is a far cry from typical campaigns that only target their identified base while ignoring everyone else.

"The Mayoral campaign did seem more civil than others I had witnessed prior to entering municipal politics. The positive impact on civility was most apparent in debates where some candidates would openly campaign to be a voter's second or third choice. There also seemed to be less in the way of pointed attacks during debates as candidates did not want to risk alienating voters who might take personal offence on behalf of their preferred candidate."

Ed Holder, Mayor of London

"Ranked ballots changed my entire approach with deeper voter engagement through longer conversations".

Elizabeth Pelosa, Ward 12 Councillor

"I canvassed with several candidates and all of them were aware that because of ranked ballots they needed to focus more on their own strengths and less on their opponents' downfalls. ... Being able to vote for more than one candidate brought a level of depth to the decision that wasn't as apparent under first-past-the-post. I had more to consider, which was a good thing".

Shawna Lewkowitz President, Urban League of London

"When I saw a house with a competitor's sign, I still knocked on the door to ask them if they would mark me as their second choice so that was a change."

Michael Van Holst, Ward 1 Councillor

"It took away people's ability, I feel, to be one-issue candidates, and if they were one issue, they very quickly fell to the bottom of people's rankings"

Shawn Lewis, Ward 2 Councillor

"You get to interact with every voter... and you don't feel the intimidation of them having already made their decision."

Arielle Kayabaga, Ward 13 Councillor

"My volunteers were more comfortable having meaningful conversations with folks, rather than heated debates."

Melanie O'Brien, Ward 1 Candidate

Oct 26 2018: The Big Day!

So... did they rank?

Opponents of ranked ballots often claim that most voters don't really have a second or third preference. In this hypothetical scenario, a ranked ballot is an inconvenience, forcing voters to ponder something they have no interest in. "Keep Voting Simple", they argue.

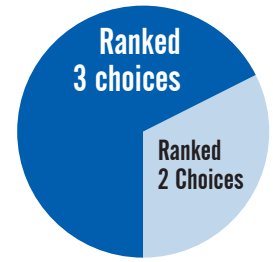
But London voters proved the cynics wrong. When given the choice of ranking candidates, they most certainly did.

"The majority of voters embraced the system. They understood it. Even if your preferred candidate didn't win, at least you had an opportunity to make a selection for others."

~ Aaron Moore, political scientist



68% of voters in London chose to voluntarily rank their ballots.



Of those who ranked, 67% ranked three candidates.

"I'm surprised that for the first go-round in Canada, almost 70 per cent took advantage of using that system. Don't forget, several of the mayoral candidates actually encouraged their supporters to only rank one."

~ Former City Councillor Paul Hubert

Quick Facts

244,962 Eligible voters

199 Polling stations

225 Vote tabulators (Dominion Voting)

1,710 Election workers

214 Ballot boxes

8 Winners on election night.

7 Run-offs, announced by 3pm following day.

**Ranked ballots are easy as 1-2-3!
London voters had no problem
adapting to the new system.**

The all-star team behind the scenes

We tend to think of candidates and voters as the two primary players in an election, but one of the most important roles is invisible: the non-partisan administrators who are tasked with implementing a smooth and fair process for everyone. In London, the 2018 election was especially impressive. All eyes were on City Clerk Cathy Saunders and her team including Sarah Corman, Jeannie Raycroft and Robert Hicks along with dozens of talented staff. With no mentors available, they had to run Canada's first ever digital ranked ballot election.

"It's not always great to be the first, but everything tested perfectly. ...Despite the stress and extra hours, it was fun doing something different."

~ City Clerk Cathy Saunders

"Cathy Saunders has a kind of celebrity almost never seen in the world of municipal clerking. She's the person behind London's first-in-Canada switch to ranked-ballot voting."

~ Megan Stacey, London Free Press

"We commend the London City Clerk Cathy Saunders, her managers and staff on their excellent performance in the conduct of this election. In addition to the usual challenges of running a successful election, there was also the added pressure of being the first entity in Canada to use Ranked Choice Voting tabulation. Their performance was exceptional and their success stunning."

~ Freeman, Craft, McGregor Group (Auditor)



City Clerk Cathy Saunders receiving the Award of Excellence from Western University's Local Government Program Alumni Society, for implementing Canada's first ranked ballot election.

A mandate to govern

Politicians often talk about their ‘mandate’ to make decisions on behalf of their constituents. But a close look at Ontario’s city councils reveals that many of these so-called mandates are quite flimsy. In fact, a shocking number of politicians in Canada are surprisingly unpopular, yet continue to ‘win’ their seats because of vote-splitting amongst a large selection of candidates.

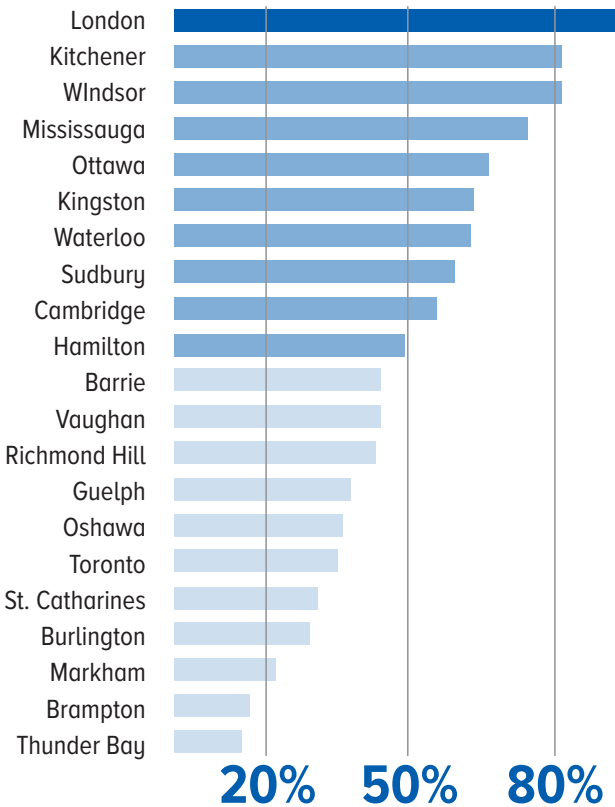
In 2018, for example, eighty Ontario mayors were “elected” despite receiving less than 50% of the vote. The lowest was 27%. And more than 1,500 city councillors in Ontario currently represent voters despite coming short of any type of mathematical mandate.

If we look at entire councils, the numbers are astounding. In Toronto, for example, only 9 out of 26 council members have a genuine mandate. The numbers are even worse for cities like Brampton and Markham.

Meanwhile, 93% of London’s city council has a genuine majority mandate. [Chart 1]

Now, you might be wondering why London’s number is 93% and not 100%. Technically, it is indeed possible to win a run-off election without securing a genuine mandate. This is due to something called “inactive” or “exhausted” ballots. As candidates are eliminated round by round, some ballots become obsolete, or “exhausted”, because all three choices have been eliminated (or because the voter chose not to rank at all.)

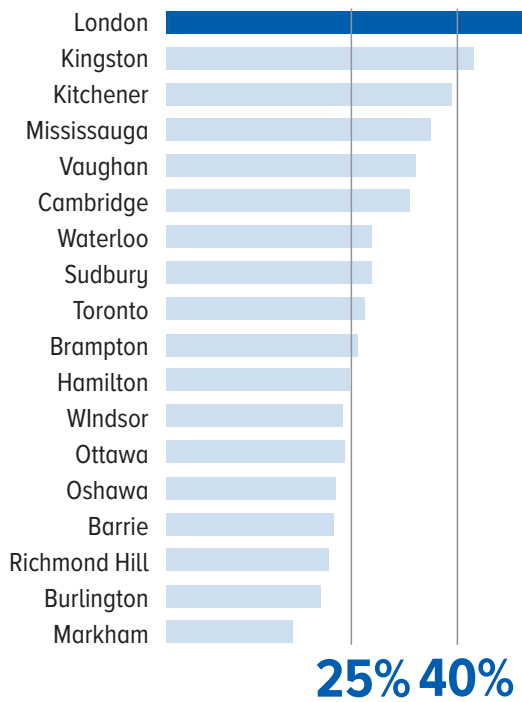
So in London, for example, one candidate won their seat with only 48.79% of the original votes cast.



1. Percentage of councillors who have a genuine mandate

“Some people who didn’t make me their first choice still feel like they participated in electing their city councillor”

~ Arielle Kayabaga, City Councillor



2. Elected councillor with the lowest result

Critics argue that this disproves the idea that ranked ballots ensure majority support. But whereas ranked ballots can't always ensure a majority mandate, first-past-the-post doesn't even try. If we compare the councillors with the lowest result on each council, the results are clear. [Chart 2]

On top of this, London councillors had to compete with more frontrunner candidates than in other cities, making their victories even more impressive. (It's not hard to win a majority if you're only running against one opponent!)

Nothing is more sacred in a democratic process than to secure an outcome that reflects the genuine will and desires of the electorate. Only one city in all of Canada currently uses a system that aims to achieve that goal.

Ranked ballots give politicians a genuine mandate from voters



Survey Says!

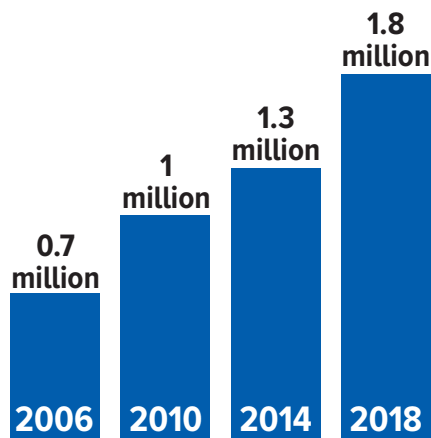
The Canadian Municipal Election survey asked London residents whether the new mayor “has a mandate to govern”. Half of the respondents were told the vote share he received during the first round of counting (34.3%) and the other half were told the vote share in the final round of counting (in which he received a majority of the vote). Data reveals that this framing has a significant effect upon attitudes towards Holder’s legitimacy. When told first round vote shares, 57% indicated they thought the mayor had a mandate. When told the final-round share, however, that number rose to 79%, a difference of more than 20 points.

(Excerpt from the forthcoming book, *Big City Elections in Canada*. London chapter by Cameron D. Anderson and Laura B. Stephenson)

The financial cost: Myths and facts

Elections cost money. And any kind of change or upgrade will come with a price tag. But London's experience reveals that ranked ballots are an affordable reform, with very little long-term impact on election costs.

Opponents of change will use "cost" as a scare tactic, so let's look at London's numbers and set the record straight.



Total cost of London's local elections

To start, here are London's costs for the last 4 elections.

As you can see, election costs increase naturally over time, due to external factors such as population growth and inflation. Further, if we break down the budget of London's 2018 election, we see that many of the costs are one-time 'startup' expenses (for doing it the first time), rather than ongoing or recurring costs of using ranked

ballots. For example, \$141,000 was spent on outreach and education to make sure that voters understood the new system. Other costs were discretionary expenses that are not required by legislation, but were used for extra precaution and as determined by the City Clerk. For example, the city contracted an outside auditor to oversee the implementation, at a cost of \$147,000.

So while detractors of ranked ballots will warn about the high costs, our estimate for London's additional fixed costs of using ranked ballots is only \$24,500. (\$12K for the software license and 12.5K for printing larger ballots). **That's less than ten cents per taxpayer.**

But even using the most conservative numbers, *including direct and indirect expenses*, expenses related to the public consultations in 2017, all not-legislated discretionary items and all one-time expenses, the total cost was still only \$515,446 - ***less than two dollars per taxpayer.***

**Ranked ballots are a
low-cost reform, with
high impact.**

London Voices



Ed Holder

Mayor of London

“This is consistent with London’s front runner status on so many product tests—everything from Tim Horton’s Dark Roast, to Chicken McNuggets, and ATM machines have all been test-marketed in our city before being mass produced elsewhere. It only makes sense that we find ourselves on the leading edge of this important exercise in electoral reform.”



Jesse Helmer

London City Councillor

“I’m proud of London for showing how electoral reform can be done. Making it is easier for more candidates to run, making it harder for incumbents to be re-elected on name recognition alone and allowing voters to express their preferences fully is a great step forward for local democracy—even if it made my re-election campaign much more challenging!”



Arielle Kayabaga

London’s first female Black City Councillor

“I chose to run because the ranked ballot seemed much more approachable as a young woman and as a Black woman. It pushed everyone to dig deeper to what they brought to the table other than slandering, minimizing and discriminating others. Ranked ballots are more equitable, more inclusive and fairer.”



Shawna Lewkowicz

President, Urban League of London

“One of the reasons we advocated for ranked ballots was because we knew it could mean more diversity. People would be more likely to run even if there was a strong candidate already on the ballot. We saw the results of this in several wards where more women of colour ran than in previous elections—Ward 13 that elected Arielle Kayabaga and Ward 8 that had 3 women of colour run. The ward 8 candidates didn’t ultimately win but they ran and built more exposure for a run in the future.”

Who's next?

In addition to London, two other cities have taken a leap forward. Kingston and Cambridge each held a referendum in 2018, to ask voters if they would like to switch to ranked ballots for the next election in 2022. Volunteers got together in both cities and coordinated vibrant “YES” campaigns. **In both cases, they won!**



Population 129,920
18th largest city in Ontario

56% support



Population 123,798
19th largest city in Ontario

63% support

Municipal referendums aren't binding in Ontario, but we're hoping that both councils will respect the clear decision from their voters.

As for the other 441 municipalities in the province, it's anyone's guess which will be the first to modernize their local elections. As with any reform, there will be leaders, and there will be followers who eventually catch up with the others.

**Ranked choice voting
is the fastest-growing
democratic reform
in North America.
#LondonLeads.
Who's next?**



Moving forward

Options for municipalities

How should city councils decide if they want to switch to ranked ballots? Here are four approaches to consider:

The London method

London city council consulted the public with town hall sessions across the city and then went full speed ahead, without a referendum. After all, that's the job of a City Council. They're elected to make decisions!

Citizens assembly

Pioneered in British Columbia in 2004 and now being replicated all over the world, Citizens Assemblies consist of ordinary residents who are randomly selected—just like a jury! They learn about an issue from experts, consult with the public, go through a process of deliberative dialogue and then make a policy recommendation.

Deliberative referendum

A referendum process can be divisive and frustrating or, if done properly, can be educational and constructive. Financial resources should be allocated to educational materials, distributed to all voters, explaining the options in plain language.

Pilot project

Not sure about ranked ballots? Why not take the car out for a spin? Try them as a pilot - for one election cycle. The best way to learn about the benefits, and any potential drawbacks, is to give it a try! A pilot can also be followed by a referendum, giving voters the final say. That way, citizens have been given an opportunity to try both systems and make an informed decision based on their own experience.

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Change happens because people like you
choose to get involved and take action

Join us on

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Patreon.com/UnlockDemocracy

Take action: We're building small teams of volunteers in cities across Ontario to organise for local change. Visit our website to find your city's group. If you don't see one for your municipality, get in touch with us and we'll help you start one!

Not in Ontario? We'll help you in *any* province or territory!

This report was funded by 140 generous supporters. **THANK YOU!**

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PC Party of Ontario 2018 Leadership Election

Please rank the candidates in order of your preference,
with your most preferred candidate as your first selection.
You may rank as many or as few candidates as you want.

Maximum number of ranks: 4

1 2 3 4

ALLEN, Tanya Granic

ELLIOTT, Christine

FORD, Doug

MULRONEY, Caroline