



## **MEMO: Implementing Proportional Ranked Choice Voting (PRCV)/Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) for Los Angeles municipal elections**

**Election costs for the City: Initial cost upfront, followed by lower ongoing costs with each election**

**By: Marcela Miranda-Prieto, Executive Director, CalRCV  
Michael Feinstein, former Santa Monica Mayor and City Council member  
January 16, 2026**

**Executive Summary:** The City of Los Angeles' municipal elections are conducted by the County of Los Angeles, using the County's custom [Voting Solutions for All People](#) (VSAP) voting system. It was designed without RCV capability, which would need to be added for RCV and/or PRCV elections. To add RCV capability to VSAP, Los Angeles County would incur initial one-time costs. These costs would likely be passed on to the cities that request this capability, either partially or in full.

At the same time, transitioning to single November general elections using PRCV (and/or RCV) would save money for the City of Los Angeles, by only having to fund one City Council election every two years, instead of two. This would save the cost of City Council run-off elections each two-year cycle. Based on recent history, we'd estimate a savings of \$1.5 million every two years on a 15-member city council - and perhaps even more savings with the same proportion of run-offs on a larger city council; plus over \$3 million in savings for every off cycle special election runoff (the last was in 2023). Additionally, all council members would be elected in the higher turnout November election, and the election costs to candidates for a runoff election would be eliminated.

Moreover, voter education on a new electoral system is crucial. There would be relatively higher education costs per voter initially, with the expectation that this education investment would decrease over subsequent cycles and stabilize. As part of this process, cities implementing PRCV and/or RCV have sub-granted education funds to community-based good government and election reform organizations to aid in the public education process.

### **Table of Contents**

- Executive Summary**
- Implementing RCV capability in VSAP**
- Election cost savings by eliminating run-off elections**



- Education of Voters
- Possible implementation Timeline

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**Implementing RCV capability in VSAP**

Los Angeles County did not develop VSAP on its own. They contracted with Smartmatic to develop it.

Then Smartmatic turned over the source code to LA County, which owns the intellectual property for VSAP.

VSAP was designed without an RCV module. To conduct RCV elections. LA County would have to design or obtain and integrate an RCV module, two of which are already certified by the California Secretary of State (Hart Intercivic and Dominion Voting Systems).

It is possible that the LA County Registrar does not have the technical expertise (and programmers) in-house to add PRCV/RCV capability to VSAP. This suggests the Registrar would have to contract with either Smartmatic or some other third party contractor to do this work.

This might require an RFP process, unless the County’s contract with Smartmatic allows it to further develop VSAP without a new RFP.

To understand the scope of work necessary, Smartmatic could be queried to explain what they believe would be necessary, and LA County Registrar Dean Logan would do the same. Ideally the LA County Board of Supervisors would request this information – on their own or in response to a query from a local government in LA County. Ultimately such a system would need to be certified by the California Secretary of State.

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**Election cost savings by eliminating run-off elections**

Implementation of ranked choice voting, either multi-seat (PRCV) for city council or school board or single-winner for mayor, city attorney or council districts, can be done in a cost-effective and timely manner. Other jurisdictions in California, including in San



Francisco, Alameda County, Humboldt County and Riverside County, have previously completed this process so there is no reason that LA County cannot do it as well.

**Cost savings:** Transitioning to a single November general election without the need for a June or March primary using PRCV (and/or RCV) would save money for the City of Los Angeles, by eliminating run-offs and only having to fund one City Council election every two years, instead of two. The cities of New York City, San Francisco and Oakland previously transitioned to RCV elections, and here are their estimated savings, cited to official sources:

**- New York City. An estimated \$11 million saved each election cycle that a separate runoff election is eliminated.**

A Fiscal Policy Institute analysis found that New York City will save approximately \$11 million in public money each election cycle that it eliminates a separate runoff election. From [the report](#), page 1-2:

"Since the new system would use the same machines, the only significant investments needed for the mechanics of the election would be one-time costs of perhaps \$100,000 to \$500,000 in computer programming and other minor changes. On the other side of the ledger, we estimate a savings of roughly \$11 million in public money and \$2 million in private money in every election cycle that avoids the need for a runoff election—a recurring savings.

**- San Francisco. A minimum of \$1.6 million annual cost savings from using RCV to eliminate December runoff elections.**

In San Francisco, the city's top financial officer, the Controller, estimated the savings to be \$1.6 million per election cycle. Wrote the Controller:

"In my opinion, it would **save the City a net amount of approximately \$1.6 million annually** beginning in Fiscal Year 2002-03 by eliminating the need for run-off elections. Instant run-off voting may require additional ballot pages, voter education, and modifications to the City's voting technology. However, ***these costs would be more than offset*** by the savings associated with eliminating run-off elections." (Emphasis added).

**- Oakland. Nearly \$500,000 annual cost savings from using RCV to eliminate June primary elections.**



The city auditor's office issued the following statement:

"The city auditor's office estimated at the time that Measure O was on the ballot in November 2006 that **the city of Oakland will save approximately \$463,997 each year by eliminating June elections for candidates.**" (emphasis added)

Certainly in Los Angeles there are many unknowns in calculating how many City Council run-offs would be eliminated. In 2020, 2022 and 2024 elections, nine of 22 City Council races went to run-offs (40.9%) and 13 were decided in the primary (59.1%). Under PRCV or RCV elections, those nine run-off races would have been decided in a single election.

How much would be saved by eliminating run-offs in the future? For now, the County's costs that the City paid for in years 2020, 2022 and 2024 are [listed here](#) and came to approximately \$500,000 per City Council seat per primary or general election. Using the recent history of 9 runoffs in the last 3 elections, that's an average of 3 each election. With a cost estimate of \$500,000, that's a savings of \$1.5 million per election. In addition to savings for electing city council members, if LA also adopted RCV for single-seat, city-wide offices such as Mayor, City Attorney, and Controller, the savings would be even greater.

Special elections in the city of Los Angeles cost more because LA County can't spread the costs across other cities. A recent special election was held in an off year, April 4, 2023, because the City Council did not want the seat vacant for 2 years after the Oct. 2022 resignation of Council President Nury Martinez. Seven candidates ran, with the highest vote being 26%. A runoff was held in June. RCV would have avoided the cost of the special election runoff. The runoff [turnout was 10%](#). The cost for the two elections was [\\$7.5 million](#), thus RCV would have saved half that, over \$3 million.

Many factors would go into estimating this in the future, including the size of an enlarged city council, the level of public financing available, and the ballot access requirements for candidates.

If voters approve an increase in the size of the City Council w/o electing members via PRCV (multi-seat district) or RCV (single-seat districts), then with many new single-seat districts having no incumbents, it is very possible that even a higher percentage of the new districts would go to run-offs than today, as a result of many candidates running in the new districts and dividing the vote so that none receive a majority in the primary.

The same elimination of run-off elections would have [similar benefits](#) for the City's public matching funds program, extending the use of limited public matching funds,



because these funds would only have to apply to a single election instead of two. Additionally there would be saving to candidates, while limiting special interest influence. A single PRCV (or RCV) November election would eliminate LA’s many month runoff campaign costs and the need for candidates to go to donors for more money; and avoids distracting incumbents from their official duties for extra months of campaigning.

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**Education of Voters**

It is a national best practice to invest in robust voter education programming to ensure voters are informed well in advance of an initial Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) or Proportional Ranked Choice Voting (PRCV) implementation, as well as in subsequent election cycles. Evidence from jurisdictions that have successfully implemented RCV demonstrates that voter education is most effective when government-led efforts are paired with coordinated outreach by trusted, non-governmental community partners. When messaging from election officials and community organizations is aligned and consistent, voters are more likely to understand the ballot, feel confident participating, and successfully cast valid votes.

In Portland, Oregon—following voter approval of PRCV with 58% support—the City and County developed a comprehensive, nonpartisan, multilingual, and accessible [Voter Education Plan](#). The stated goal of the plan was to “eliminate barriers to civic participation by promoting inclusivity and ensuring that every voter, regardless of background or circumstance, has access to the information and resources needed to exercise their right to vote.” The plan included partnerships with community-based organizations, culturally competent outreach, and a strong, centralized communications strategy. Based on public reporting, the cost of this comprehensive voter education effort was approximately \$1.98 per voter.

Similarly, Alaska supplemented its statewide education campaign with a widely publicized [mock election](#) designed to help voters practice using the new ballot format. This interactive, multilingual education tool mirrored the actual ballot and voting process, allowing voters to gain familiarity with RCV in a low-stakes environment. The per-voter education cost for Alaska’s first implementation of a top-four primary and RCV general election was approximately \$1.50 per voter.

New York City provides an additional, instructive example. Ahead of its first RCV municipal elections, the city implemented a large-scale, multilingual voter education campaign that included translations of educational materials into more than 20 languages, partnerships with community-based organizations, ethnic media outreach,



and in-language trainings conducted by trusted local groups. This community-driven approach was particularly effective in reaching historically underrepresented communities and voters with limited English proficiency, reinforcing the importance of culturally competent, locally delivered education alongside official election materials.

Using a conservative estimate of \$2.00 per voter—higher than the documented costs in both Portland and Alaska—and applying it to the City of Los Angeles 2,190,205 registered voters, a comprehensive voter education program would be expected to cost approximately \$4.4 million.

At a minimum, jurisdictions implementing RCV or PRCV should maintain a clear, centralized voter education website—such as New York City’s RCV education site — showing what the ballot will look like, explaining how votes are counted, and addressing frequently asked questions. Many jurisdictions supplement this baseline with additional education strategies, including mailing sample ballots to voters, incorporating voter education into routine city correspondence (such as utility bills), providing education at city-sponsored events, hosting public town halls, and funding community-based organizations to conduct in-language, neighborhood-level outreach.

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**Possible Implementation Timeline**

April 2026: Deadline for LA Charter Reform Commission to submit its City Council enlargement/multi-seat district/PRCV plan to the LA City Council

July 2026: Deadline for LA City Council to place plan on the ballot

November 2026: Ballot measure (to elect an enlarged LA City Council from multi-seat districts by proportional ranked choice voting) approved by voters

2027-2030: LA County Registrar of Voters Office adds RCV/PRCV capability to VSAP

2027-2032: Public education about the new electoral system for Los Angeles

2030-2031: Los Angeles Independent Redistricting Commission draws new district lines, based upon the number of three-seat districts approved in 2026 ballot measure

2032: First LA City Council elections conducted by the new electoral system

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