



Boulder, Colorado: Making Sure Every Voice Counts

By Katherine Davis, August 13, 2021

How Boulder's Ballot Measure 2E is helping increase the effectiveness of local governments in the name of democracy.

Every election cycle, the citizens of Boulder, Colorado cast their ballots to elect candidates who will represent their voices on a local, state, and national scale.

These voters, however, do not elect their own mayor.

Instead of being elected by their constituents, the Mayor of Boulder is appointed by the members of City Council. Boulder is the largest city in Colorado to have its mayor appointed. Many citizens don't even know that their mayor isn't elected by the public.

This is about to change.

Thanks to the passing of [Ballot Measure 2E](#) in November of 2020, Boulder will start electing its mayor through Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). With this change, the people of Boulder increase the transparency of their local democracy and set a precedent for how other communities can do the same.

This effort was spearheaded by [Our Mayor, Our Choice](#), "a coalition of Boulderites passionate about [voting] reform." Matt Benjamin served as the

Campaign Chair of Our Mayor, Our Choice during the campaign. He views the passing of Ballot Measure 2E as “a big leap forward in empowering Boulder voters.”

I was lucky enough to interview Benjamin to discuss what motivated him to establish fairer elections in Boulder. In 2017 he ran for Boulder City Council in an election where he unintentionally became a “[spoiler candidate](#)” or a “non-winning candidate whose presence on the ballot affects which candidate wins.” This led to the phenomenon of vote-splitting. [Vote-splitting](#) is when “votes among multiple similar candidates reduces the chance of winning for any of the similar candidates, and increases the chance of winning for a dissimilar candidate.”

With the splitting of votes, neither Benjamin nor other like-minded candidates were able to snatch the victory. Instead, a candidate who did not align with his views, or the views of many voters, was elected. This is when Matt Benjamin realized that having more like-minded candidates as options in an election actually put voters in a worse position— the election system was flawed.

Ranked Choice Voting acted as a solution for the issue of vote splitting. As Our Mayor, Our Choice explains, in [RCV](#), voters “simply rank [their] preferences. If no candidate has a majority, then candidates with fewer first-choice votes are eliminated. If [their] first-choice is eliminated, then [the] vote goes to [their] next-choice until there is a consensus of the majority.”

Thus, as Benjamin and the Our Mayor, Our Choice team began to push true citizen-led elections in Boulder, they also began to push for the adoption of RCV.

Boulder is not alone in its movement towards RCV and a fairer democracy. Within Colorado alone, many cities are considering adopting RCV. [Denver](#) has

received recommendations from both the city clerk and the city recorder to consider adopting RCV. [Broomfield](#), Colorado has also adopted RCV for the election of the Mayor and City Council. And this voting reform is not just present in Colorado.

In the United States, [261 jurisdictions](#) have moved to adopt an alternative voting system that differs from the plurality system that most Americans are used to.

RCV is the most common alternative form of voting to be adopted in the United States. Since 2000, it has been adopted in “Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, along with several of their suburbs; San Francisco and Oakland, Calif., and several smaller Bay Area communities; Salt Lake City and 22 other cities and towns in Utah; and Santa Fe and Las Cruces, New Mexico.” RCV is already used widely in [Maine](#) for the election of U.S Senators, Representatives, and the President.

[FairVote.org](#) states that “American democracy is strongest when more voices are heard,” and RCV allows for this by minimizing vote-splitting. In plurality voting, the number of candidates allowed to compete is often limited in order to avoid vote splitting. RCV, however, eliminates the threat of vote splitting without having to limit the number of candidates. It allows for similar candidates to compete without fear of splitting the vote amongst like-minded voters and knocking each other out of the running.

Voters are not forced to choose between two like-minded candidates, they simply are asked to rank their preferences.

While there is no doubt that the success of Our Mayor, Our Choice should be celebrated, there is always the question, “what’s next?”

At a time like this, it is easy to get overwhelmed by everything that needs to get done to protect our democracy. In order to counter these anxieties, Benjamin suggests focusing on local government first. “We seem to have this idea that change trickles down, but it really percolates up,” remarked Benjamin.

Change starts with individual voters and works its way up to the federal level.

In an effort to help percolate this change, Benjamin is currently running for Boulder City Council. On the issue of effective local governance, Benjamin has several [suggestions](#) ranging from changing the fiscal year cycle for the city of Boulder to moving the date of the annual retreat.

When we talked, Benjamin seemed most passionate about implementing fair pay for the City Council. In a city where the Median Income is roughly \$70,000 per year, members of the city council only make around \$11,000 per year.

Due to this [pay gap](#), there are qualified residents of Boulder who are motivated to run for city council but “can't run for office because they simply can't afford to do so.”

Benjamin is pushing for a much-needed philosophical change in the City Council to create a more effective government where more voices are represented, including the voices of the excluded middle, so often forgotten by our current electoral systems.

Elected officials should not act as an executive board, but as a conduit for the voices of their constituents.

When talking to Benjamin there is a lot to learn about the journey of Ballot Measure 2E and lots to be excited about in regards to the future of Boulder. Perhaps most memorable, however, is his keen insights into the nature of democracy and what must be done to protect it.

He reminds us that “Democracy isn’t stagnant. It isn’t a fixed object. It is a living object in a state of perpetual improvement.”

Many of us know that change can be incredibly scary, almost paralyzing. Change requires a departure from the status quo that we have grown up in, grown comfortable in. It also often requires a jump into the unknown where success is not guaranteed and the fear of failure looms over us. But this discomfort and possible failure cannot prevent us from pushing for a better democracy.

Change can be scary, but it is an integral part of a healthy democracy.

But what if the change does not go as planned? What if failure is the outcome? You can always find hope in trying to fix the issues you see present. As Benjamin states, “it is okay if you make a mistake, you just have to be willing to try a different solution.”

It is easy to get jaded in the face of mistakes, fear, and national indecision. Benjamin, however, finds hope in the younger generations of activists who push for a better future for themselves and the generations to come.

This future generation, Benjamin observes, “understands the impacts of governance and they see that if they don’t have a hand in shaping their future, then their future gets shaped for them. They want to write their own future.”