Written Testimony of Jason Snead
Executive Director, Honest Elections Project
Assembly Joint Resolution 101
Wisconsin Assembly Committee on Campaigns and Elections
January 30, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Assembly Joint Resolution 101, a measure to ban the use of ranked-choice voting in Wisconsin. My name is Jason Snead, executive director of the Honest Elections Project, a nonprofit group founded on the principle that every American has the right to vote in free, fair, and secure elections. I also serve as the co-chair of the Stop RCV coalition, a nationwide network working to halt the spread of RCV. While I cannot endorse particular legislation, I can warn you of the dangers posed by ranked-choice voting.

To be blunt, RCV makes voting harder and puts public confidence in elections in jeopardy.

To understand why RCV is so corrosive to public trust in elections, consider how a ranked-choice election works. Though RCV has many names—"Final Five," "Instant-runoff," and more—it is a scheme with a common goal: to do away with the American tradition of "one person, one vote," and instead to ask voters to rank numerous candidates for each office by order of preference. RCV computes winners through a series of elimination rounds. If no candidate wins a majority of the first-place vote, the candidate with the least first-place votes is eliminated and ballots cast for them are redistributed to each voter's next highest pick. This process repeats until a single candidate claims a majority of the remaining votes.

RCV makes every stage of the voting process more complicated, so much so that enormous effort must be put into reeducating the public. New York City spent $15 million to teach people how to vote in an RCV election, while Maine was forced to produce a 19-page guide for voters.

All of this takes more time than voters are accustomed to. First, voters must study the platforms of numerous candidates for each office, including many who are fringe or otherwise unelectable. Then they must decide which candidates to rank, and the order in which to rank them, for every RCV race on a ballot. One MIT study found that filling out a ballot takes 12 seconds longer per candidate compared to typical plurality elections. In a "Final Five"-style system, RCV adds a full minute per race. In other words, if RCV advocates succeed in replacing federal, state, and local elections with ranked-choice voting, the time it takes to vote could easily double, risking long lines, voter fatigue in down-ballot races, and potentially deterring people from voting altogether.

Tabulating votes is also a challenge. With RCV, tabulation cannot begin until every ballot is received, meaning delayed results. Recounts only compound the issue. Candidates looking for any edge may demand recounts of close elimination rounds knowing that changing the order in which candidates are eliminated can upend the final results of the election. In other words, RCV increases the likelihood of post-election challenges, recounts, and litigation.

Because of the complexity of RCV, it is possible that tabulation mistakes can go undetected. In fact, Oakland, California experienced this firsthand in 2022. Tabulators mistakenly eliminated

hundreds of votes and certified the wrong winner in a school board contest. Were it not for an outside audit by RCV experts, that error would likely have gone undetected.

Another significant issue is the problem of so-called "exhausted" ballots, that is, if voters do not rank every available candidate, and if their choices are eliminated before a final winner is computed, their ballots are eliminated as well. With each round of elimination, it appears as though fewer people voted. For example, roughly 140,000 ballots were exhausted in New York City's mayoral race in 2021, while roughly 11,000 ballots were exhausted in Alaska's 2022 special congressional election.

Eliminating exhausted ballots is the only way RCV can deliver on its signature promise to ensure that candidates win with majority support. But with RCV, this "majority" is merely manufactured by eliminating ballots and redistributing votes. Again, consider the Alaska special election: If the roughly 11,000 exhausted ballots are added back to the vote totals, Congresswoman Mary Peltola's margin shrinks from a 51.5% majority to a 48.4% plurality.

The problems with RCV's majoritarian mirage run even deeper. A first-place vote clearly does not signal the same level of support for a candidate as a third-place vote. The latter may signify indifference, opposition—or perhaps nothing at all, if the mark was made randomly by an exhausted voter ranking his 50th candidate of the day. Yet RCV treats every ranking as a vote for a candidate, and manufacturers majorities based on second- and third-place votes.

This is hardly the only area where RCV has fallen short of its promise. A 2023 study by the Hubert Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota concluded that ranked-choice voting failed to reduce political polarization, increase diversity among election officials, increase voter turnout, or decrease negative campaigning. In fact, one study of RCV in Maine found that "negative spending increased significantly…casting doubt on the claim that RCV makes campaigns more civil."

With these deficiencies in mind, it is hardly surprising that so many jurisdictions have tried ranked-choice voting only to repeal it shortly thereafter. Proponents tout a Utah RCV pilot program that recruited two-dozen participants, yet over half of the original participants have withdrawn citing public confusion and RCV's failure to deliver on its promises. Polling suggests a clear majority of Alaskans wish to repeal RCV, and such an effort is presently underway.

The push for ranked-choice voting is not an organic, bottom-up movement led by local activists. It is a concerted national campaign by a small group of elite liberal megadonors to remake elections across the nation. They are funding local advocacy groups, hiring lobbyists, facilitating media coverage, and spending tens of millions on ballot measure campaigns.

Americans want elections with clear rules that deliver clear winners. RCV offers neither. Ranked-choice voting makes voting harder and turns elections into a complicated black box.

RCV simply puts public confidence in elections at risk, which is why five states have banned it and many more are advancing legislation to stop its spread. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

368 South Picket St., #9956, Alexandria, VA 22304