

# Ranked Choice Voting in Western New York?

## Successes & Lessons from New York City

By Erin Carman, JD, LMSW and Jay Wendland, PhD

Western New York (WNY) should consider joining the ranks of the sixty-two jurisdictions nation-wide that have chosen Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) over the more commonly used plurality voting system. In weighing the importance of such a change, voters and leaders may consider lessons and successes learned from New York City (NYC) in its adoption and implementation of RCV. NYC is the largest city in the country and the first city in New York State to use RCV. The results of the election and exit poll data from the June 2021 primary show that voters liked the new choice system, participated heavily in the opportunity to rank, understood the instructions and ballot, and selected a record-breaking number of diverse nominees that won with a majority in the final round.<sup>1</sup> With the largely positive results, cities considering adoption of RCV can examine lessons learned from the NYC experience before enacting RCV locally.

### What is RCV?

Right now, voters in WNY use plurality voting; voters can only pick one candidate to vote for in primary and general elections. This system places voters in the position of choosing the candidate they perceive will win and not their preferred candidate, choosing the candidate endorsed or promoted by their political party, *or* choosing a preferred candidate who they believe will not win and feeling like they wasted their vote.

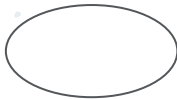

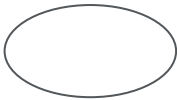
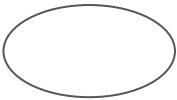
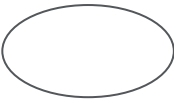

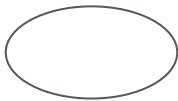
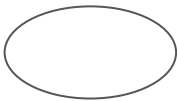
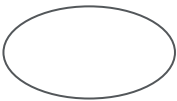
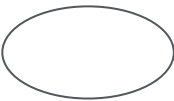















RCV is an alternative. Instead of being faced with choosing only one candidate, RCV lets voters choose multiple candidates and rank them on the ballot in order of preference. The number of lines to rank candidates on the ballot are determined by the jurisdiction (city, county, or state) that enacts RCV. If a jurisdiction allows for voters to rank their top five choices on their ballot, it may look like the sample ballot below. This voter has chosen Candidate B as their first choice, followed by Candidate A, Candidate C, Candidate E, and Candidate D.

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Questions and feedback should be directed to the authors. This brief explores Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) and looks at the impacts of RCV in New York City's 2021 election. It also examines whether RCV could be a good fit for elections in Western New York. The authors find that RCV can have a variety of positive impacts on elections and that RCV could be an effective tool for Western New York elections.



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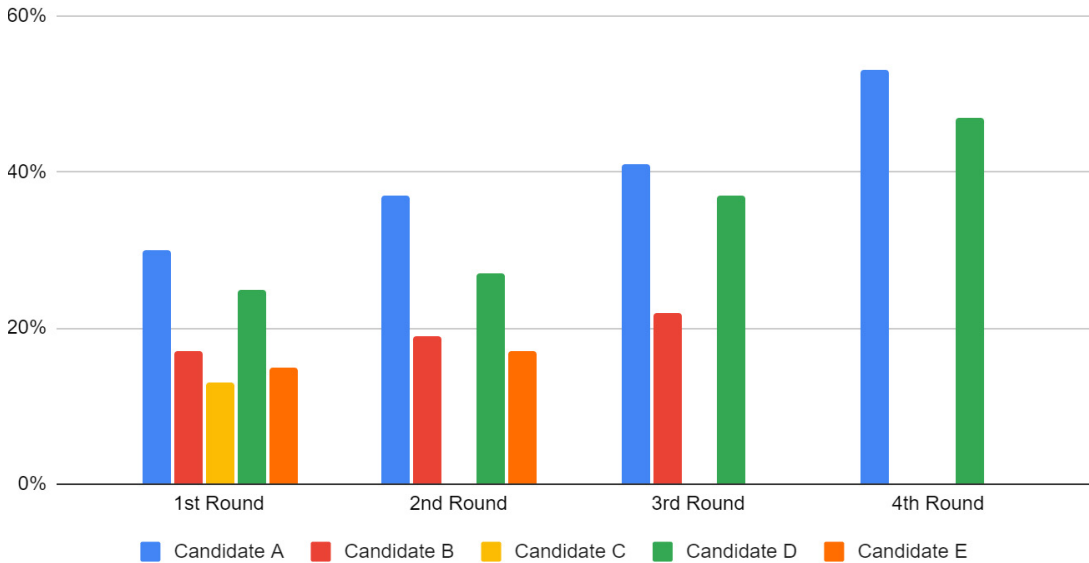
	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
<b>Candidate A</b>					
<b>Candidate B</b>					
<b>Candidate C</b>					
<b>Candidate D</b>					
<b>Candidate E</b>					

Ranking is an option and not a requirement. Voters increase their opportunity for making their voice heard by ranking; however, if a voter only likes one candidate, they may vote for only that candidate. They can also choose to only rank two, three, or up to the total number of ranking lines on the ballot. If a voter only prefers one candidate, that choice will be counted only one time. Ranking the same candidate on multiple lines would count only as one vote for that candidate.

### RCV Vote Tallying

Once the voting period ends and ballots are counted, the first-ranked candidate on all ballots is reviewed. If one candidate won more than 50-percent of these first-choice votes, that candidate is declared the winner. However, if no candidate achieved this 50-percent threshold, then the rounds of review continue. The candidate who received the fewest votes is then eliminated. The votes from the eliminated candidate are redistributed to the next candidate ranked on that ballot. This continues until one candidate wins more than 50-percent of all votes (including those redistributed). In the example here, the first round ended with Candidate C getting the least number of votes. Therefore, Candidate C is out of the race. The votes for Candidate C are then distributed to the second-choice candidate that those voters ranked. This continues until the fourth round, when Candidate A wins the race with over 50% of voter support.

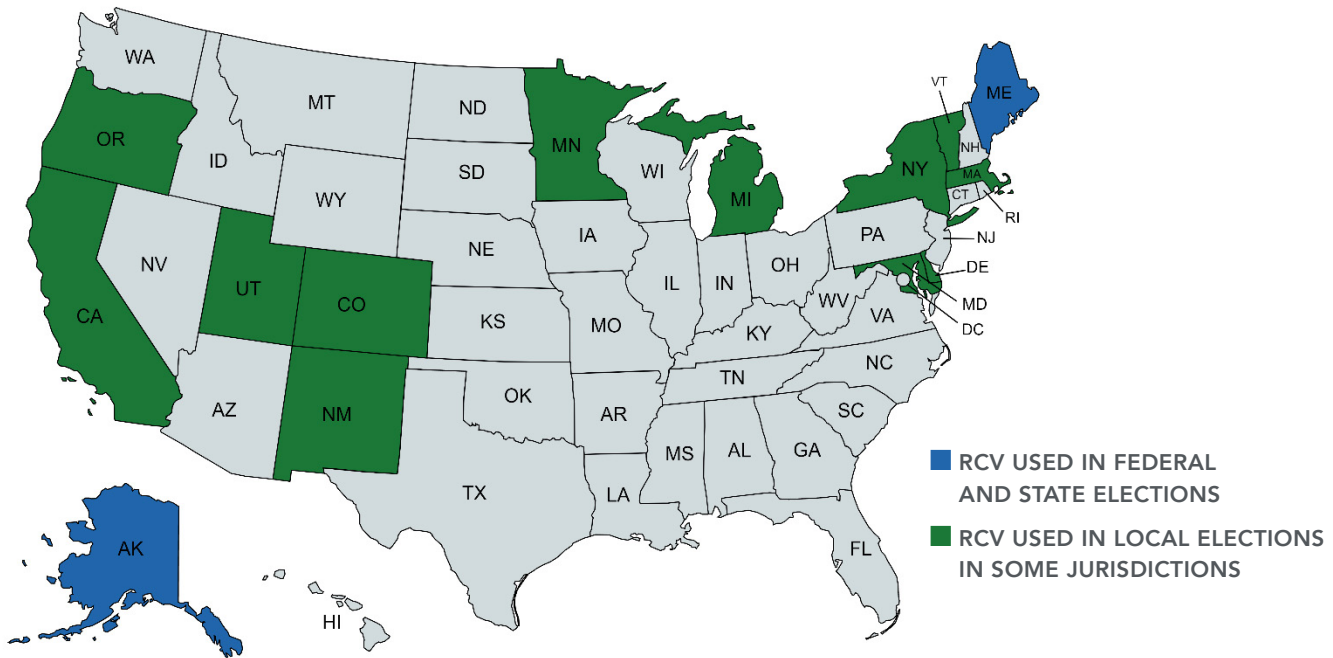
RCV VOTE TALLYING: TRANSFER OF VOTES UNTIL MAJORITY REACHED



Where is RCV used?

With roots in American history dating back to the early to mid- 20th Century, RCV reemerged in the United States in 2004. It is now used in sixty-two jurisdictions throughout the nation (two states, two counties, and fifty-eight cities).<sup>2</sup> San Francisco has used RCV since 2004, Minneapolis since 2009, and twenty-three cities and towns in Utah as of 2021. In 2019, New York City became the largest municipality to adopt RCV and then implement it in the June 2021 primary election.

Most jurisdictions have adopted RCV on the city and county levels. However, it has also been adopted on the state level by two states: Maine and Alaska. Both Maine and Alaska use RCV for federal and state elections. Most other jurisdictions currently use RCV for city or county level elections. Voters, leaders, and advocates decide which elections RCV will apply to when they adopt the policy.



## Why Adopt RCV?

RCV can improve voter participation and satisfaction. It can also increase opportunities for diverse candidates to run and win. This is largely achieved through the ranking option, which creates greater choice. When voters experience greater choice, many voters perceive RCV as fairer than plurality voting, and they are more satisfied with their voting experience.<sup>3</sup> When voters are not faced with the threat of “spoiler votes” (the risk of splitting or taking away votes from a candidate with similar ideologies to the voter), they may be more interested in and satisfied with the process. Additionally, there is some evidence that RCV increases the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of candidates running and winning. It also incentivizes candidates to use a positive tone when they campaign, which may result in greater voter satisfaction.<sup>4</sup> The RCV method is still being studied. Some studies show mixed results and suggest more research is needed to strengthen our understanding of RCV. However, there is strong evidence that RCV positively impacts voter participation, voter understanding, campaign tone, and that it increases candidate and winner diversity.

## Case Study: The NYC 2021 Primary Election<sup>5</sup>

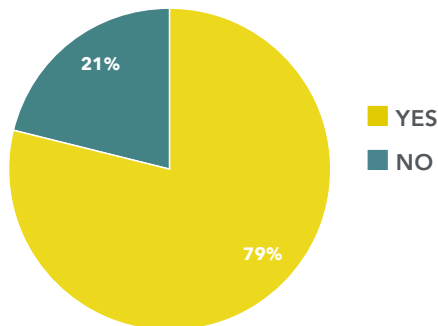
In 2019, NYC voters went to the polls and voted to adopt RCV for use in primary elections. The ballot measure passed with 73.5% of the vote.<sup>6</sup> RCV was then used for the first time in the NYC June 2021 primary election. Voters chose mayoral and city council candidates through the RCV process. Eric Adams received the Democratic nomination for mayor after

eight rounds of tallying among thirteen mayoral candidates. Voters chose more women and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) City Council nominees compared to prior elections. Exit poll data from 4,020 voters reveals several key findings: the majority of voters liked RCV, chose to participate in the ranking option, and understood both the RCV instructions and ballot. Additionally, we can learn from challenges NYC faced in its implementation of the RCV process. The following data is from an exit poll of voters following participation in the RCV June 2021 primary. In this exit poll, voters were asked questions about how they experienced and felt about RCV.

• **Voters liked RCV and want to use it in the future.**

Seventy-nine percent (79%) of voters want to use RCV in future city elections, and 63% thought RCV should be used in other American elections. Most voters within each age group report majority support for RCV in future elections. However, there is a steady decline in support by age, with 68% of those age 60-64 supporting compared with 82% for those 30-39.

SHOULD RCV BE USED IN FUTURE NYC ELECTIONS?



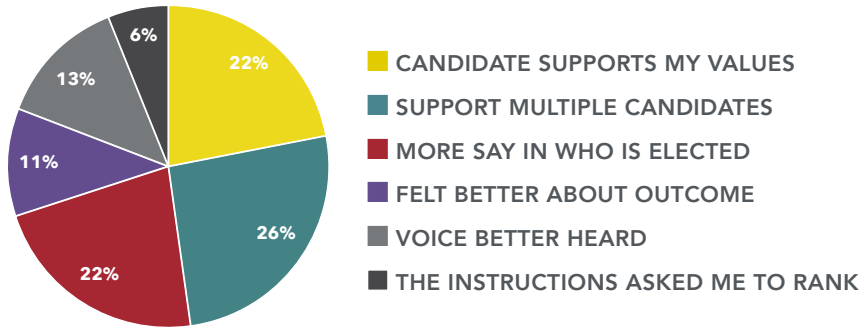
• **Across demographics, most voters chose to use the ranking option.**

Over 82% of white, Black, Hispanic, and Asian voters chose to rank more than one candidate for mayor, and over 46% chose to rank on all five lines. Though most voters of each race chose to rank, white voters ranked slightly more often. However, there was even less variation by race when ranking on all five lines. Across ages, more than 88% chose to rank more than one candidate for mayor, and about 48% chose to rank on all five lines.

Voters used the ranking option because they felt it provided an opportunity to choose candidates that more represented their values and gave them greater say in our democracy. Voters expressed this through their top three reasons for ranking: the opportunity to rank allowed them to vote for multiple choices, vote for someone who represented their values, and increased their influence in who gets elected.

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WHY RANK CANDIDATES?

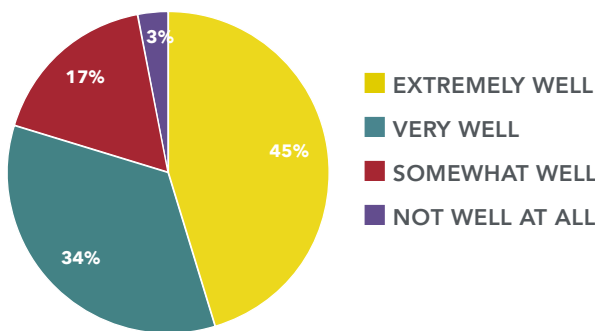


Eleven percent of voters chose not to rank and voted for only one candidate. Most of these voters said they did this because they only liked one candidate. A small percentage of this subset of voters (10%) reported that they did not rank because they thought ranking would hurt their top-choice candidate’s chances of winning. These voters’ understandings of ranking are incorrect. By ranking, a voter doesn’t impact their candidates’ chances of winning. However, the fact that even this small group of voters thought this shows us that we need to educate voters more about RCV.

This information mirrors research findings on RCV. Research has suggested that RCV appears to increase voter participation. It also suggests that participation may increase over time as voters become more comfortable with and understand RCV. Voting systems like RCV increase voter-reported satisfaction with election results and the perception of fairness.<sup>7</sup>

- **The majority of voters understood the RCV process, ballot, and voting instructions.**
  - Just over 96% of voters expressed understanding RCV at least somewhat well, and over 79% of voters expressed understanding it very well or extremely well. Only 3.5% of voters felt they did not understand RCV well at all.

HOW WELL VOTERS UNDERSTOOD RCV



“Voting systems like RCV increase voter-reported satisfaction with election results and the perception of fairness.”

This did not vary much by voter race, but it did vary by education level and age. Again, though the very large majority of voters across education level and age expressed understanding, voters with no college education had more difficulty understanding RCV (29.1%) than voters with some college education (19-22%). This was similar by age. Only 1% of 18-29 year old voters expressed difficulty understanding RCV compared with almost 5% of those aged 65 and up.

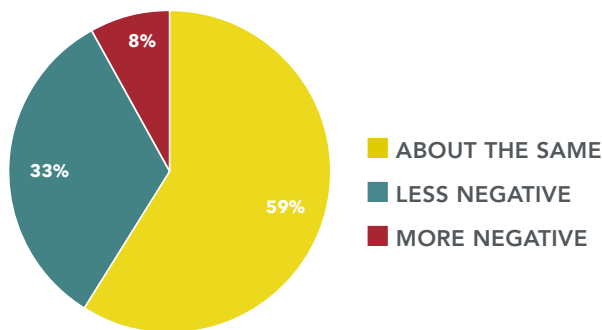
- Voters also reported similar levels of understanding of the RCV ballot and RCV voting instructions.
- The NYC results are promising and align with study findings that show little disparity in voter understanding by race or socioeconomics.<sup>8</sup> However, more research is needed as there are some mixed results. Critics and skeptics of RCV note that the task of ranking and any lack of understanding can lead to depressed turnout, increased confusion, and more ballot errors.<sup>9</sup>

- **The majority of voters felt that the campaign tone for the June 2021 primary was about the same as in prior elections. However, they reported receiving useful information from candidates.**

It is unclear whether there was significant change in campaign tone in NYC’s first RCV primary, and more research may be needed. Research on RCV has shown that one benefit of RCV is increased civility and less negative campaigning as a result of the ranking option.<sup>10</sup> Because voters may (and likely will) choose to rank, candidates have more incentive to appeal to a wider swath of voters. They can do this by being collegial and using a positive tone when campaigning. That way, they avoid alienating potential voters. Additionally, research has shown that voters in RCV cities are more satisfied with campaign tone than in non-RCV cities.<sup>11</sup> This may be promising for future RCV elections in NYC as candidates and voters adjust to the RCV process.

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PERCEPTION OF CAMPAIGN TONE



- **The primary results have led to record-setting racial, ethnic, and gender diversity in NYC government.**

- With Eric Adams elected as mayor, the city has its second Black mayor (after two women candidates came very close to winning). Women candidates won 29 of the 51 Council seats (the most in NYC history), and 26 of these winning female candidates are women of color. In total, 35 of the Council seats were won by candidates of color (also historic) and the Council now has an increase in Hispanic representation (from 21% to 25%).
- This increase is in line with other RCV research. In a comparison between RCV cities and non-RCV cities, RCV cities' representatives were found to more closely mirror their constituents' demographics than non-RCV cities. For example, more candidates of color ran and won in RCV cities.<sup>12</sup>

- **The NYC RCV implementation process can be improved.**

- Experts, voters, and advocates have called on the NYC Board of Elections (BOE) and other NYC governmental entities to urgently address the underlying causes of major errors in the preparation and implementation processes for the RCV primary.<sup>13</sup> Critics have argued that local and state governments failed to put adequate resources toward wide-spread voter education regarding the RCV process, training poll workers, and ensuring quality vote tallying procedures.<sup>14</sup> For example, the NYC BOE mistakenly reported results that included system testing results and had to retract their announcement and make adjustments.<sup>15</sup> Some leaders also reported language barriers at the polls.<sup>16</sup> These areas for reform are necessary to build and maintain trust and effectuate our democracy.
- Some critics have noted that the RCV ballot initiative was initiated in a traditionally low turnout year, was embedded with multiple topics on the ballot, and (as a result) may not actually represent the will of the electorate. Critics therefore suggest that fewer voters showed up and, of those voters, they were faced with the potential for ballot exhaustion (being overwhelmed by the quantity of ballot questions to answer). Though this is countered by the fact that local elections often have low turnout, RCV was the primary topic, and voters chose it with 73.5% of the vote, this may inform advocacy initiatives in other cities and states.

**“Women candidates won 29 of the 51 Council seats (the most in NYC history), and 26 of these winning female candidates are women of color.”**



## Should RCV be Used in WNY?

Western New Yorkers could choose to adopt RCV for state, county, or city elections. The City of Buffalo may be a prime starting point for RCV in the region. It is the second-largest city in New York State. The 2019 and 2021 election cycles have involved political polarization and internal party conflict, both of which are prime conditions for the adoption of RCV.<sup>17</sup> Voters are more likely to vote to adopt RCV when the electorate is polarized. Additionally, groups are more likely to push for reforms when there is a perceived chance of winning in the long-run (even with temporary loss).<sup>18</sup>

In 2019 and 2021, Buffalo saw newcomer candidates challenging long-time incumbents in the Common Council and Mayoral races. In 2019, five women candidates even coordinated campaigns to run against incumbents in their respective districts.<sup>19</sup> In 2021, newcomer and progressive Democrat India Walton beat four-term incumbent Byron Brown in the 2021 mayoral primary. Brown then held an unprecedented write-in campaign that led to a win in the general election. Though 68% of registered Buffalo voters are Democrat<sup>20</sup>, this suggests that Buffalo is experiencing increasing factionalism within the Democratic electorate and within the party itself. Democratic candidates spanned the spectrum of liberal ideologies and split democratic voters, and the party struggled to nominate a newcomer in the 2021 election season.<sup>21</sup>

This factionalism within the local Democratic Party (in a majority Democratic city) and the polarized Democratic electorate may make Buffalo increasingly ready to consider RCV.

## Applying Lessons Learned to WNY

The first RCV election in NYC (and New York State), along with the growing RCV movement in the U.S., raises the question of whether more cities and states should adopt the RCV method. As other localities consider adoption, we may apply our understanding of the implementation and results of the NYC primary to our research, advocacy, and implementation efforts outside of NYC.

The results of the NYC primary were largely very positive. The large majority of voters across race, age, and education levels participated in ranking and liked RCV. They also understood the process, instructions, and ballot. Only small percentages within these demographics had issues with RCV. However, to further improve on voter participation in our democracy, government leaders and advocates should consider the following recommendations from lessons learned from NYC.

“The City of Buffalo may be a **prime starting point for RCV** in the region.”

- **Local and state government should fund voter education on RCV to better reach all voters. This education is needed to make sure that both the public and poll workers understand RCV. Ballot counters must also be educated to ensure an accurate ballot tallying process (including absentee ballots).**
  - Public education efforts should include a focus on BIPOC voters, older voters, and voters without any college education. Educational materials should be available in all languages spoken locally.
  - Voter RCV education should prioritize informing BIPOC and women voters of the benefits of RCV to BIPOC and women candidates (as opposed to educating solely about the mechanics of RCV). This has been shown to motivate engagement with the ranking process.<sup>22</sup>
  - Educational materials should also include information on how ballots are tallied. This will help address any voter fears that ranking more than one candidate may hurt the voter’s top choice.

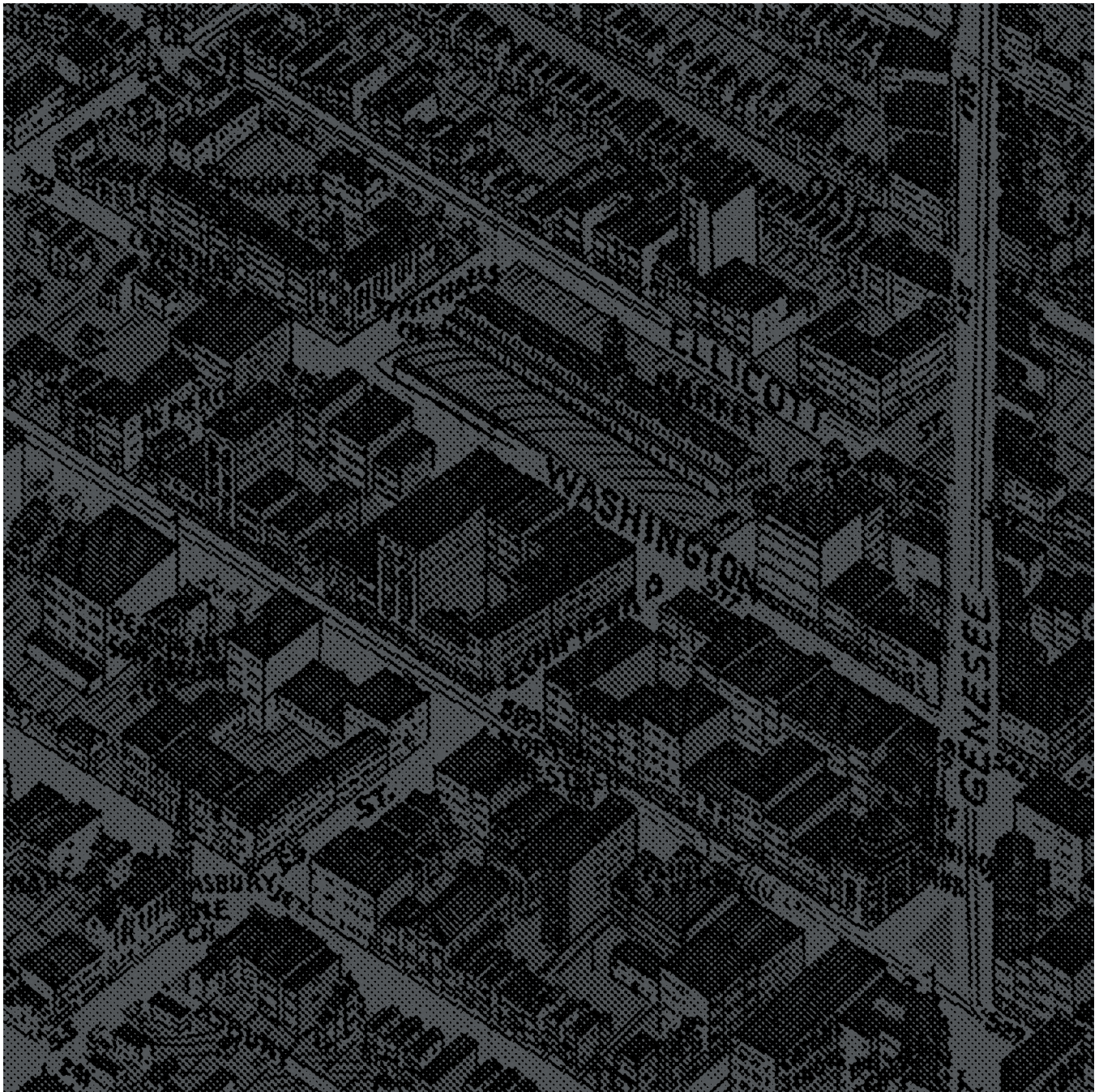
Educational campaigns should also target candidates running for office. That way, the candidates know what to expect. Also, this may help candidates understand that it benefits them to use a positive campaign tone.

- **In advance of using RCV, local Boards of Elections (BOEs) should evaluate their readiness to implement RCV. If a BOE needs more funding or additional partnerships to do RCV, they should seek those resources.**
- **The City of Buffalo’s electorate may be in a political stage that would be ideal for adoption of RCV and welcomed by the electorate (including those looking to challenge incumbencies).**

“Public education efforts should include a focus on BIPOC voters, older voters, and voters without any college education.”

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