

YOUR GUIDE TO BETTER ELECTIONS

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THE CENTER FOR
Election
Science



CHAPTER

1

WHY VOTING METHODS MATTER IF YOU CARE ABOUT DEMOCRACY

Immigration. Climate Change.
Healthcare.

These are just a few of the issues that presidential candidates are focusing on this election. And with good reason. They're big, contentious policy areas that most Americans really care about, but that have largely gone unaddressed. Voters are desperate for solutions.



CAN WE REALLY FIND SOLUTIONS IN OUR INCREASINGLY PARTISAN, POLARIZED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE?

Perhaps, but only if we're willing to take a step back and look for ways to elect leaders who will listen to what Americans want and better represent the will of the people.

[According to research by the Pew Charitable Trusts](#), a majority of Americans agree on many tough policy issues. For example, 62 percent of Americans think immigrants strengthen the country, rather than burden it. Roughly the same percentage feel that our elected officials aren't doing enough to reduce the effects of climate change. And even more Americans think our health care costs are too high.

Yet these are the same issues that cause the most gridlock in our political system. And [according to a 2015 study by Princeton University](#), the average American voter has a “near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy.”



SO HOW DO WE SELECT REPRESENTATIVES WHO BETTER REFLECT THE WILL OF MOST AMERICANS?

You might be thinking that we need to change the redistricting process to address gerrymandering. Or maybe you think we need to get money out of politics and address campaign finance reform. These are hot topics among activists who want to reform our democracy.

But these aren't the only issues, or even necessarily the most important. One nonpartisan, often overlooked factor is simply the way that we vote.

The way that we vote—also known as the voting method—impacts who gets elected to public office. Those elected officials decide what issues to focus on and how to spend your tax dollars. You probably already know this is how our political system works. But what you may not know is that [there are many ways that we can vote](#). And as with anything, some voting methods are better than others.

Which voting method we choose to use can have huge implications for our election results, and in fact, has historically led to some unexpected results.

In the 2000 Presidential election, Ralph Nader—a left-leaning, third-party candidate—took enough votes away from Democrat Al Gore that George W. Bush won the election. But that election is hardly an anomaly. According to William Poundstone, author of *Gaming the Vote*, at least five of our presidential elections have resulted in the second most popular candidate being elected. And that's just presidential elections



FORTUNATELY, THERE'S GOOD NEWS. WE CAN CHANGE THE WAY WE VOTE.

And when we do, we see election outcomes that are more representative of the will of the people, and [voter satisfaction increases](#). All good things for democracy.

So, what exactly is a voting method? How does the way we vote affect us?

Throughout this eBook, I'll be sharing more about voting methods and how we can evaluate them to find ones that produce the best outcomes. I'll also be sharing more about the work we at [The Center for Election Science](#) and others are doing to improve the way that we vote, and ways that you can get involved in this grassroots effort to reform American democracy.





CHAPTER

2

WHAT EXACTLY IS A VOTING METHOD? AND DOES OUR CURRENT ONE NEED TO GO?

There is [a lot of momentum behind reforming our democracy right now](#). From dark money to gerrymandering to the national popular vote, [Americans are questioning the way our democracy functions](#), and they're looking for answers. But as I mentioned in chapter one, there's another reform that is incredibly simple and often overlooked: the voting method. But what exactly is a voting method?

Although most of the people I meet tell me they don't know what a voting method is, they actually do. And so do you. The [voting method](#) is simply the way that we select the winner of an election.



AND WE SELECT THAT WINNER BY LOOKING AT THREE KEY PIECES OF INFORMATION:

- What kind of data about the candidate(s) can you provide on your ballot?
- How is that data analyzed?
- How many winners are there, and what process is used to determine those winners?

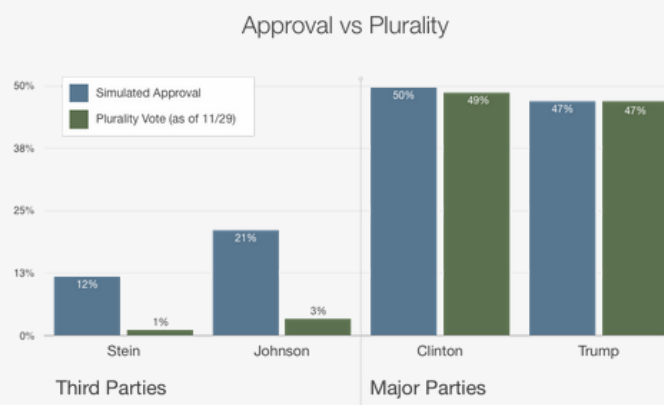


These three pieces of information determine the type of voting method you're using, and the way that it helps you select a winner. Change one piece and you have a different method. And potentially an entirely different result. Which is why voting methods matter.

Let's take the results of the 2016 election. Donald Trump was elected as President of the United States using our current voting method—plurality voting. But what would have happened if we changed the voting method?

Luckily, we studied that election, so we have a pretty good idea.

[What we found was that when voters used different alternative voting methods, Donald Trump wasn't the winner.](#) In fact, Hillary Clinton wins the race using any other voting method we studied. And when we include candidates who didn't run in the general election, such as Bernie Sanders, we find that the results again change. Clinton wins using some voting methods, while Sanders wins with others. And these results align with voters' honest feelings about candidates—not just who they'd vote for, which can often be a strategic decision.



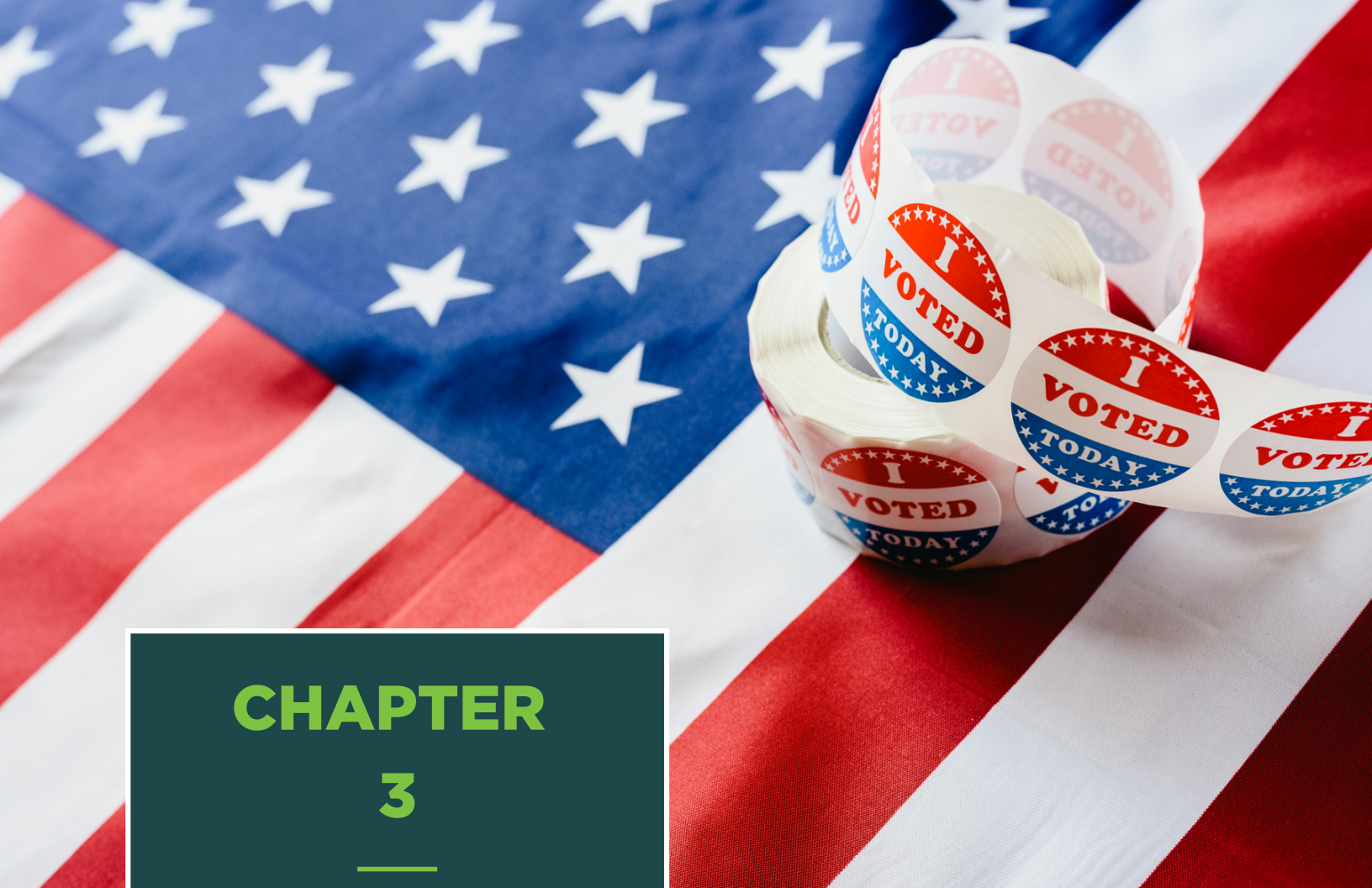
SO, WHY ARE THE RESULTS SO DIFFERENT WHEN WE USE OTHER VOTING METHODS?

Because our current voting method—choose-one/plurality voting—forces you to only select one candidate you support. And that leads to [all sorts of negative effects](#), including “spoilers”, more partisan winners, and a system that discourages good, but “less electable”, candidates from running in the first place.

But as I mentioned in chapter one, we can change the way we vote. And in recent years, we’ve seen a spike in the number of activists and funders working on initiatives to do just that. Private foundations and Mainers hungry for change poured over \$1 million into an effort to see [ranked-choice voting adopted in Maine](#), while other funders focused on getting [approval voting adopted in Fargo, North Dakota](#).

Each voting method has its strengths and weaknesses. In the next chapter, we’ll dig into a few of the voting methods being pursued right now, and how you can objectively evaluate each of those methods to decide if it’s the right solution to advocate for in your community.





CHAPTER

3

TWO ALTERNATIVE VOTING METHODS: PROS AND CONS

Now that you've heard that there are other ways to vote, you may have been investigating voting methods. What you'll soon find is that [there are dozens of voting methods out there](#). So how do you decide which is best for your community?

Well, "best" really depends on who you ask and what criteria they care about. But as experts in this field, we've developed a shortlist of criteria that we find to be critical for any voting method.



DOES IT CHOOSE A “GOOD” WINNER?

What makes a “good” winner in an election? Spoiler alert: it has nothing to do with the candidate and their platform. What we’re really asking is “How happy are voters with the chosen winner?”

Ideally, your voting method should consistently elect a candidate who has broad support and makes the most voters possible feel satisfied with the outcome—not one who leads to further political polarization.

DOES IT FOSTER REAL COMPETITION?

Nearly 40 percent of voters in the United States identify as independent, yet there are only four independents serving in Congress. Right now, independents can certainly run, but they face a low likelihood of winning as they’re labeled “spoilers” who will make it harder for the similar, mainstream candidate to win a race.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. Other voting methods allow voters to honestly vote for the candidates they like without fearing they’ll be a spoiler.

They can even help candidates really see how much support they have from the electorate, even if they don’t win. By allowing candidates to see that they’re supported, even if they’re not the favorite, we encourage those candidates to run and express their opinions. And greater diversity of candidates running means more choice for voters.

IS IT SIMPLE?

There are already many barriers that discourage people from voting, from the complicated process to get registered to the fact that life can be really busy. This election season, it’s further complicated by a global pandemic. For that reason, your voting method should remain as simple as possible so it isn’t another reason people don’t turn out to the polls.

We also want the method to be simple to implement. Some voting methods require new software that election administrators don’t have. Those software upgrades can be expensive, and not all cities have budgets that can accommodate the costs. And even if the machine’s software does support a particular voting method, it may still require added complexities such as counting every ballot at one central location.



THE ANALYSIS

So, how do different voting methods stack up against these criteria? This isn't an exhaustive academic paper on voting methods, so we'll focus on just a few of the alternative voting methods with the most momentum right now.

INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING (IRV)/RANKED CHOICE VOTING (RCV)

This is probably the only alternative voting method you've heard about, after being the first alternative voting method to be implemented at the statewide level. IRV allows voters to rank the candidates in an election in order of preference, and the candidate with the majority of first-choice votes wins. If no candidate has a majority, the candidate with the least first-choice votes is eliminated, and those voters' second-choice candidates receive their votes. This process continues until a candidate receives a majority of the vote. IRV does a better job of electing voters' true favorite candidates than our current method and encourages more competition. But, it can be costly for cities with older voting machines to implement and can lead to unexpected results in tight races.



APPROVAL VOTING

Studied since the 1970s and [often cited as one of the best alternative voting methods, approval voting](#) simply asks voters to select all the candidates they approve of and the candidate with the most votes wins. It's been shown to easily elect a "good" candidate and encourage competition. It also costs nothing to implement as all current voting machines have the ability to use it. However, this simplicity comes at a cost that frustrates some, as [voters can't differentiate between how much they like or dislike candidates](#).

As you can see, each alternative voting method has its strengths and weaknesses, and none is perfect. However, all are better than our current voting method, which is why organizations around the country are working hard to see these methods adopted. In the next chapter, we'll share more about what The Center for Election Science sees as the best solution, and how you can help make that a reality.





CHAPTER 4

APPROVAL VOTING: COMING TO A CITY NEAR YOU!

In the past few chapters, you've learned more about how [Americans across the country can take back the voice they've lost in their government](#) with an often overlooked and simple fix: changing the way we vote. If you're in agreement that the voting system is broken and that we should do something to fix it, you may also be feeling overwhelmed. After all, [we only discussed three potential solutions in chapter three](#), and each had strengths and weaknesses.



If what I just described sounds like you, then you're exactly where the co-founders of [The Center for Election Science](#) found themselves back in early 2011. They realized that our government wasn't doing a good job of representing the will of the people. But there were so many solutions out there.

So, they did what any bunch of math nerds, social scientists, and engineers would do. They approached the problem scientifically, with no preference to the solution. They wanted to examine the data that was out there to find the best approach. After looking at [existing research](#), and conducting [some of their own](#), they landed on a method called [approval voting](#).

With approval voting, voters can vote for as many candidates as they like. Each vote counts equally and the candidate with the most votes wins.

Because voters can choose as many candidates as they like, they don't have to worry about "throwing away their vote" on a third party or independent candidate. This means voters have an incentive to vote for their real favorite candidate. And that means that each candidate gets to see how much support he or she really has. This also means that voters can't accidentally "spoil" the election for their favorite "mainstream" candidate. They can vote for that person and any others they like. And, if multiple candidates with similar ideologies are running, [they can't split the vote!](#)

Approval Voting Ballot

Vote for ALL the candidates you approve of:

George Washington



Abraham Lincoln



William Henry Harrison



Herbert Hoover



Theodore Roosevelt



Perhaps even better? It's a really practical solution. Approval voting works on all existing voting machines, meaning there are no costly upgrades for cities or states that want to make the switch. Some cities, such as St. Louis, MO, have found that it would cost them millions of dollars to use other alternative voting methods. But that isn't the case with approval voting.

**SOUND TOO
GOOD TO BE
TRUE?
LIKE IT CAN'T
HAPPEN?

THINK AGAIN.**

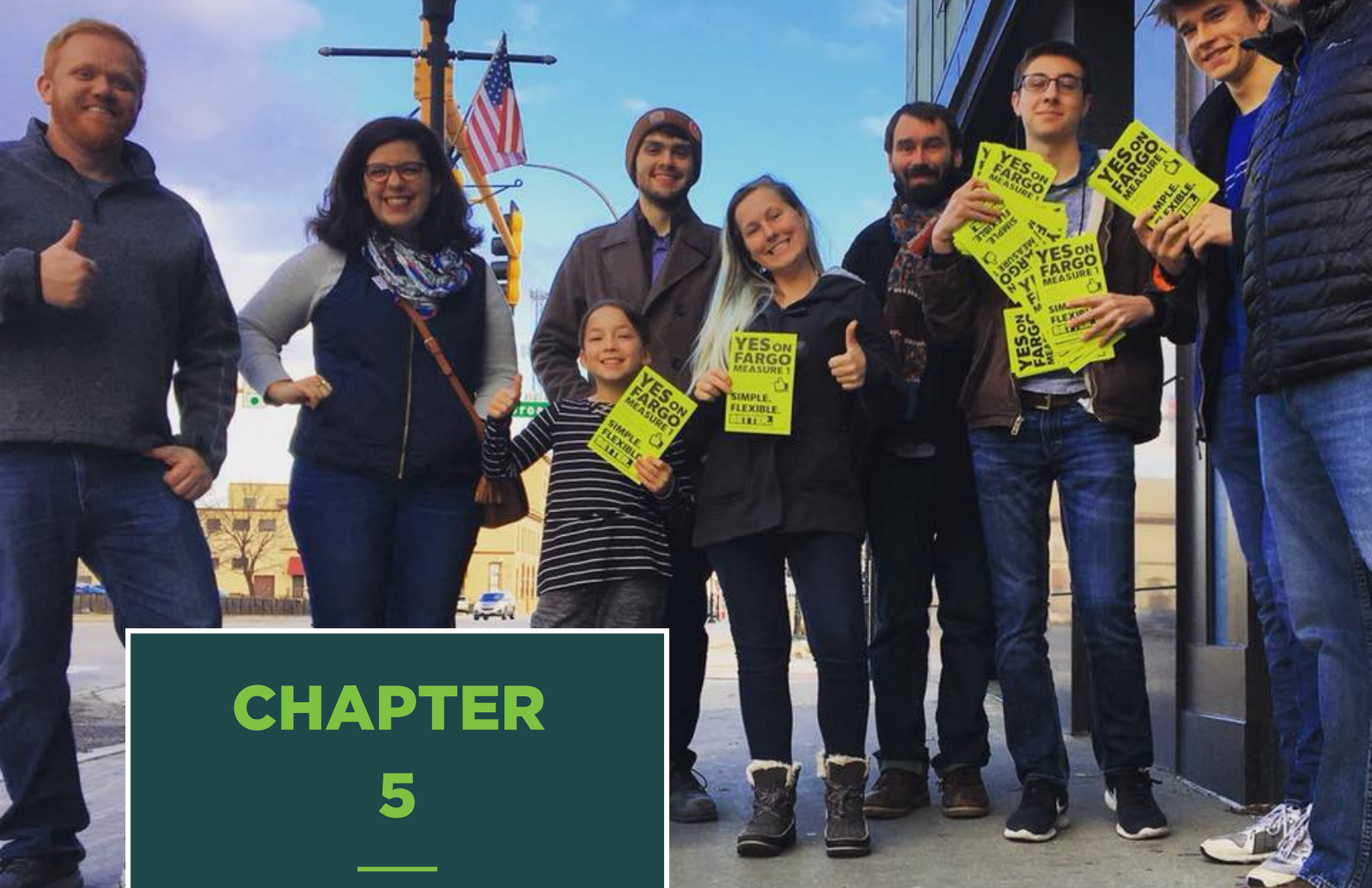
In 2018, we worked with passionate grassroots advocates in Fargo, ND to run the first campaign to bring approval voting to a city in the United States. And they won with over 63 percent of the vote.

What we found in Fargo is that once voters learn about approval voting and have the opportunity to vote for it, they do. The only problem is that most people haven't heard about it. Most people don't even realize that changing the way we vote could get at the root cause of most of their political problems.

But we're working hard to make sure more people are empowered with approval voting. We're currently supporting a ballot initiative campaign to bring approval voting to voters in St. Louis. And through our chapter program, we're empowering grassroots advocates in cities across the country to launch approval voting campaigns in their communities. Seeing approval voting used in more cities will build the momentum we need to tackle statewide elections, allowing us to see how approval voting stacks up on a bigger scale. All along the way, we'll be polling voters to make sure that approval voting gives them the results they wanted.

In the final chapter, we'll share more about how we succeeded in Fargo in 2018, and how you can get involved in our work to bring approval voting to a town near you.





CHAPTER 5

**YOU CAN FIX
YOUR BROKEN
ELECTIONS.
YOU JUST HAVE
TO KNOW HOW.**

Two years ago, I was sitting in my office when I received the news that we'd all been hoping for. [Grassroots activists in Fargo, North Dakota had secured enough signatures](#) to allow voters to decide whether Fargo would become the first city in the United States to adopt approval voting.

There was just one problem. We had no idea if voters would go for it.



As we continued to talk with voters about the initiative, we decided to conduct a poll to see how we were doing. Those who had heard of the initiative were in favor of it 2:1! But, 36% weren't sure what they thought, largely because they didn't have enough information.

So how did we ultimately convince more than 63% of Fargo residents to adopt approval voting?

It turns out we didn't need some fancy software or strategy. We just needed to talk to voters.

We formed an Approval Voting Army of local supporters who set up tables at community events, who hosted forums where voters could ask questions about the initiative. They knocked on doors, made phone calls, and texted voters. In fact, we spent about 60% of our time just out in the community, talking to people and answering their questions.

And once they heard about how approval voting could end the saga of elected officials winning their races with less than 25% of the vote, they said “yes” to approval voting.

And Fargo won.



Still recovering from the many weeks where we all worked more and slept less than we should, media outlets began to cover this [“long-shot” campaign](#) that had won in such a landslide. And before long, we were on the phone with more [grassroots activists](#)—this time in St. Louis, Missouri.

In just the last four years, [eight elections in the city of St. Louis have resulted in winners who received less than 37% of the vote](#). This includes [the most recent Democratic mayoral primary](#) in March of 2017 where the winner received only 32% of the vote. The candidate in second place received 30%.

Sick of their broken elections, St. Louisans reached out to us for help. And in May of 2019, [we launched a campaign](#) to bring fairer, more representative elections to the city of St. Louis.



SO, HOW CAN YOU MAKE YOUR CITY THE NEXT FARGO OR ST. LOUIS?

Organize.

Our goal is that we'll have helped at least five cities adopt approval voting by 2022. But we can't do that unless local residents are organized. Consider either [starting or joining a chapter in your local area](#). We'll provide you with guidance about how to launch a campaign, connect you with approval voting supporters near you, provide you with research and logistical support, and—if you put together a compelling campaign plan—[grant you with funds to launch an initiative](#).

Launching a campaign might sound daunting. And I won't sugarcoat it—running a successful campaign isn't easy. But we'll be here to support you. And there are lots of resources out there to help you learn the fundamentals. Check out the Resources section at the end of this eBook for some starter materials.

I know many of you probably feel like [your voice isn't being heard](#) or like you [can't trust your government](#). But there is hope. We can change the way we vote, and that will go a long way towards electing leaders who will do a better job of representing the will of each one of us.

RESOURCES

[Ballot Initiative Strategy Center](#)

A nonpartisan nonprofit with lots of resources for running a ballot initiative campaign

[Ballotpedia](#)

A quick resource for checking into your state laws around elections and ballot initiatives

[CES Chapter Program](#)

Learn how you can join or start an approval voting chapter to advocate for better elections in your community

[CES Request for Proposals](#)

How you can get a grant from us for an approval voting campaign

[So You Want to Run a Campaign](#)

A compilation of foundational resources

