
To: Senate Committee on Government Operations
From: Justin Marsh, Political Outreach Director, Vermont Conservation Voters
Re: Testimony in support of S.32 to promote a healthy democracy
Date: February 1, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in **strong support of S.32, a bill that will help promote a healthy democracy by giving voters more choice and more of a voice.**

For the record, my name is Justin Marsh, I use they/them pronouns, and I'm the political outreach director of Vermont Conservation Voters, or VCV. This is my first time testifying, so I appreciate you bearing with me through this.

For those of you not familiar with VCV, we are a non-partisan, non-profit organization whose vision for a bright future for Vermont includes working to advance and defend policies that protect the environment and promote health, while advancing social, economic, and racial justice, and strengthening our democracy.

VCV produces an annual [Vermont Environmental Common Agenda](#) to highlight the environmental community's top legislative priorities each year. S.32 was identified as one of our top priorities for this year. We prioritized this legislation because we strongly believe that a healthy environment depends on a healthy democracy.

Our current political system - exacerbated by federal action like the Citizens United Supreme Court decision - allows money and special interests to have undue influence on our elections. The current system allows candidates to win with *less* than a majority of support, and it can shut out independent voices. By passing S.32, we can give voters more choices and ensure we elect candidates supported by a majority of voters.

VCV works to recruit and train candidates who share our vision and values. We often hear people wrestle with whether they should run, and often feel dissuaded from bringing a new choice onto the ballot. Ranked choice voting will allow more diverse candidates to run without the fear they'll pull support from a candidate with similar views. By allowing voters to rank their candidates in order of preference, people can support the candidates they prefer without feeling compelled to do "strategic" voting, worrying about which candidate they think is most likely to win.

In 2012, my home district of Lamoille-3 had a vacancy for State Representative. I was active and interested in the local races and was encouraged to run. However, because I ran as an independent with two other candidates, none of us received a majority of the votes on Election Day. Bernie Juskiewicz won with 37% of the vote, while the Democrat and myself "split" the more progressive votes, as we had a lot of the same supporters. Our combined votes equaled 63%. I often heard on the campaign trail, "I wish I could vote for all of you." While circumstantial,

in the next contested race in my district in 2018, the Democrat won with 59%. In 2022, the Democrat won with 70%. No other independent or third party candidate has sought the candidacy since 2012. Had ranked choice voting occurred, the end results may have differed, and more voters could have felt heard and represented.

In our candidate trainings and recruitment, we also hear candidates who feel discouraged from running due to how negative campaigns can get. This can be particularly true for women and candidates of color. Ranked choice voting helps to discourage highly negative campaigning since candidates need to appeal to voters as their possible second choice. With politics getting more and more polarized, we think this would be a step in the right direction.

We also believe a healthy democracy engages as many voters as possible. We are strong supporters of many of the reforms implemented in recent years, including same-day and automatic voter registration, and universal vote-by-mail for general elections. Adopting ranked choice voting in presidential primaries will be another step in a positive direction by ensuring all voters' voices will count – which can become an issue when a candidate has pulled out of the race.

VCV has put in a lot of time and effort - in partnership with the Secretary of State's office and more than a dozen diverse organizations, including Disability Rights Vermont, the Vermont Racial Justice Alliance, the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, ACLU-VT, Vermont Interfaith Action, and many others - to educate voters on vote-by-mail, and we stand ready to collaborate with partners to educate Vermonter voters on how to successfully participate in ranked choice voting for the Presidential primaries in 2024. We can learn the lessons from the other states and communities who have already successfully implemented RCV.

In conclusion, at a time when democracy is under attack in so many states, we're excited that Vermont is taking up S.32, which will help ensure *more* voters' voices are heard, encourage more diverse candidates to run, and foster more positive elections. We hope the committee moves this policy forward, and we look forward to continuing to work together. Thank you, and I'd be happy to answer any questions.