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Testimony from:

Robert Melvin, Senior Manager, State Government Affairs for the Northeast Region, R Street Institute

In SUPPORT of HB 1751, "Elections; Ranked Choice Voting for Local Governing Bodies, School Boards & Primaries for Any Office."

January 25, 2023

House Privileges and Elections Committee, Subcommittee #2

Chairman O'Quinn and Members of the Committee,

My name is Robert Melvin, and I am the senior manager of State Government Affairs for the Northeast region for the R Street Institute. The R Street Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy research organization. Our mission is to engage in policy research and outreach to promote free markets and limited, effective government in many areas, including election and voting reform. This is why HB 1751 is of special interest to us.

The R Street Institute is a strong proponent of improving the experience of eligible voters while preserving trust in our elections. House Bill 1751 would do just that by allowing localities to use ranked-choice voting (RCV) for town council and school board elections.

RCV provides the opportunity for voters to rank candidates in order of preference and, in so doing, gives voters a stronger voice in their representation. Voters can show support for more than one candidate and can be confident that even if their favorite candidates lose, they did not throw away their votes. Further, because the winner must obtain a majority of support, more voters will feel that they contributed to the eventual victor.<sup>1</sup>

In 2020, the Virginia General Assembly passed HB 1103, which permits counties and cities to adopt RCV.<sup>2</sup> This law was limited to county and city elections and unfortunately omitted some key local races, including town council and school board elections. The proposed measure is a technical amendment to state law, and it continues to ensure that the ability to adopt RCV is permissive rather than mandatory. Most importantly, this proposal would simply expand the RCV pilot program that has a sunset provision for 2031, thereby providing greater opportunity for voters to test out this important voting tool on a larger number of elections during the trial period.

While some individuals worry that a new voting system could inject confusion into the process for voters, the R Street Institute has conducted research on RCV and found that, ultimately, voters are not



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befuddled. Instead, our researchers have found that voters are likely to take advantage of the power to rank candidates, specifically in the context of partisan primaries.<sup>3</sup> Look no further than the successful use of RCV by Virginia Republicans when they nominated Gov. Glenn Youngkin in 2021.<sup>4</sup> Of note, voters who do not wish to rank candidates also retain the ability to simply select only one contender.

The proposal is not implementing something new in the Commonwealth—rather, it is simply making technical changes to state law by permitting RCV to be allowed for town council and local school board elections. It is therefore only logical to expand the law during its pilot phase to provide voters with the ability to truly learn the system and determine whether it is something they would like to continue on a permanent basis. For these reasons, I encourage you to support HB 1751.

Thank you,

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Germer, “Restoring Losers’ Consent: A Necessary Step To Stabilizing Our Democracy,” *R Street Policy Study* No. 240, September 2021. <https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Final-No.-240.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Code of Virginia, “§ 24.2-673.1. (Expires July 1, 2031) Ranked choice voting,” Virginia Law, last accessed Jan. 24, 2023. <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/24.2-673.1>.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Germer, “An Analysis of Ranked Choice Voting in Maine,” *R Street Shorts* No. 106, September 2021. <https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Final-Short-106.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Trip Gabriel, “Glenn Youngkin Wins G.O.P. Nomination for Virginia Governor,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/10/us/politics/glenn-youngkin-virginia-governor-republicans.html>.