

HB 1297 – **Do Not Pass**

Senate Judiciary Committee

March 27, 2025

I'm speaking today in my personal capacity, and my views do not represent those of my employer or any affiliated organizations. I respectfully urge you to oppose this bill, as it would unnecessarily restrict local autonomy, limit voter choice, and stifle innovation in our electoral processes. While I appreciate the sponsor's intent to maintain a familiar voting system, I believe that banning approval voting and ranked-choice voting would be a step backward for democracy in North Dakota.

First and foremost, this bill undermines local autonomy. In 2018, Fargo voters approved the adoption of approval voting for their municipal elections. This was a clear expression of local will, with citizens choosing an alternative voting method to address perceived shortcomings in plurality voting. By banning approval voting statewide, HB 1297 would override Fargo's decision and strip other communities of their right to explore electoral systems that best meet their needs. Local governments ***should retain the ability*** to innovate and tailor their election systems to reflect the values and preferences of their constituents.

Second, alternative voting methods like approval voting and ranked-choice voting improve representation and ***voter satisfaction***. Under plurality voting, candidates can win elections with minimal support in crowded fields—a situation Fargo experienced firsthand in 2018, when winning candidates received only 18% and 16% of the vote. In contrast, approval voting has resulted in candidates being elected with much broader support. For example, in Fargo's 2024 commission race, winning candidates received 44% and 45% of votes—clear evidence that approval voting leads to more representative outcomes.

Third, these alternative systems empower voters by allowing them to express their preferences more fully. Approval voting enables voters to select all candidates they support, while ranked-choice voting allows them to rank candidates in order of preference. Both systems ***reduce the "spoiler effect,"*** where votes for third-party or less popular candidates inadvertently help elect a voter's least-preferred candidate. This ensures that voters can support their preferred candidates without fear of wasting their votes or unintentionally aiding opponents.

Contrary to the sponsor's concerns about vote dilution, these systems do not diminish the value of a vote—they enhance it by capturing more nuanced voter preferences. Moreover, claims that alternative methods discourage honest campaigning are ***unfounded***. In fact, ranked-choice and approval voting incentivize candidates to appeal to a broader base of voters rather than focusing solely on their core supporters. This often leads to more civil campaigns and greater focus on substantive issues rather than divisive rhetoric.

Another key advantage is ***cost-effectiveness***. Ranked-choice voting can eliminate the need for costly runoff elections while still ensuring majority support for winning candidates. This is particularly valuable in tight budgetary climates where every dollar spent on elections matters. Additionally, studies have shown that ranked-choice voting can increase voter turnout by up to 10%, further strengthening civic engagement and participation.

While plurality voting is indeed familiar and widely used, it is not without its flaws. It often results in winners who lack majority support in competitive races and discourages voters from supporting third-party or independent candidates due to fears of vote splitting. Alternative systems like approval and ranked-choice voting address these issues while preserving the ***fundamental democratic principle of one person, one vote***.

In conclusion, HB 1297 is a solution in search of a problem. There is no evidence that approval or ranked-choice voting has caused confusion or harm in Fargo or elsewhere; on the contrary, these systems have delivered more representative outcomes and empowered voters with greater choice. Rather than restricting local governments' ability to innovate and respond to their communities' needs, we should celebrate Fargo's leadership in exploring new ways to strengthen democracy.

I urge you to reject HB 1297 and allow North Dakota's communities the freedom to choose electoral systems that best serve their citizens' needs.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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