The Elections Reform Task Force Report

Recommendations Regarding the Election Process
Final Report | December 31, 2018

To:
The Stakeholders of the Student Senate
Election Processes and Procedures

From:
The Elections Reform Task Force
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The Elections Reform Task Force (ERTF) was created with the purpose of reviewing elections policies, including the Grand Marshal Week 2018 Elections Handbook, to identify and recommend solutions to any issues—be they technical or procedural— with the elections process.

The Rensselaer Union Voting System

One of the things that the ERTF debated frequently throughout this whole process was whether to change the current voting system, or to improve it. The ERTF obtained the source code for the current system, the Rensselaer Union Voting System (RUVS), very recently and has been examining it in detail. At the time that we did not have the code, we explored our various options towards writing a new open source voting system. Here are our findings of these two investigations. RUVS is a robust tool, which has dutifully performed its job to the best of its ability. Its main shortcomings are in security and access to the database, which are both things easily solved now that we know about them. In addition the system simply tallies the results of votes, and does not do very many self-checks at all. Its strengths lie in the fact that it is a system that is familiar, and has worked well in the past. Any changes we would need to make to it would be slight improvements, and not a total re-work. On the other side, an open-source system would allow us to fully customize and re-work every aspect of voting, from the ballot to security. The major downfalls of this path include an uncertain, but relatively longer development path to a working product compared to RUVS. In addition, creating an entirely new program could introduce countless bugs and performance issues that we would not know about until a full scale test of the

system could be performed, or at the next Grand Marshal Week Election. Based on this information, the ERTF recommends that the Elections Commission (EC) continue to utilize RUVS for this upcoming election, and work closely with any associated groups that are able to better secure and strengthen the existing code, and extensively test RUVS for any previously unfound errors. If it occurs that RUVS is not suitable for this upcoming election for a substantial reason, then it is our recommendation that the EC utilize paper ballot polling instead.

Our current balloting system reflects that of the United States' elections, both local and federal. In this system, all candidates are listed equally on the ballot, and the candidate with the greater number of votes will win. In our course of discussion, we had also discussed changing the balloting system. The two systems that we had discussed are ranked choice voting (instant runoff), and approval voting. In ranked choice voting, a voter would rank the candidates they prefer in order, with candidates they would not wish to see in office unvoted for. If any candidate does not win (i.e. a tie, or in the case of the Grand Marshal or President of the Union, that the candidate does not get 40% of the vote), then the candidate with the fewest number of votes will be eliminated, and those that had voted for that candidate as their number one option will then have their votes tallied for their number two option. This trend continues until one candidate wins. This method allows for the removal of primary elections, as well as the majority of runoff elections. Approval voting works in a similar way. Instead of ranking candidates in order, a voter simply selects all candidates which they would want to win the election. In most cases, approval voting precludes primary or runoff elections. Both these new systems have problems that would need to be addressed, and have differing technological dependencies than that of the current system. The ERTF would recommend that the EC looks into the possibility of changing over the voting system to one of these methods.

One of major security updates the ERTF would like to see is greater accountability within the voting system. In order to prevent possible issues whereby an individual tampers with the vote totals or results, the ERTF recommends that multiple groups and databases receive the results of voting. They would all perform an independent tally and ensure that the data at the end of elections matches the tally that has been built over the course of the day. In addition, the ERTF would propose multiple settings for an election, similar to a "pause" button. With this, an election would have four levels: no active election, active and secured election, paused and secured election, and paused and unsecured election. A paused and secured election would halt voting at some or all polling locations, and prevent any new votes from being tallied. This is an important feature for if a polling location temporarily needs to close, or if an issue with the ballot is brought to EC's attention. A paused and unsecured election would allow changing the ballot to add or remove information, candidates, or referenda. The ERTF proposes this new "pause" system under the stipulation that any pause or unsecured election would require clearly defined triggers.

The Elections Handbook

As mentioned in the audit report, many of the issues related to the past election were due to members of the EC not following guidelines set forth in the Elections Handbook. The ERTF has decided to focus more on the elections process itself rather than an in depth analysis of the handbook, but we have still provided recommendations to the EC for them to incorporate into the next Grand Marshal Week Handbook.

In past elections, candidate assistants have been a major source of contention. Many issues have arisen, with members of the community claiming they are prone to conflicts of interest, intentional campaign sabotage, and willful misinterpretation of the elections rules. The ERTF would like to recommend the removal of candidate assistants in their entirety, and instead support the existing idea of incorporating campaign managers. This would still allow candidates to run with one other person by declaring each other as campaign managers, and also give more freedom to candidates and those that support them. The EC has already made progress towards removing pre campaigning stigma, as well as redefining passive campaigning both within and outside of the elections season. Seeing this, the ERTF would highly recommend that the EC continually examine the effects of these policies and their changes, and would strive towards addressing any new issues that arise.

The ERTF would also like to propose that the handbook lay out a strict timeline of when tasks need to be completed for the election to occur on time. In this way, the EC will be held accountable for ensuring that all checklist items are completed in a timely manner. For example, previous handbooks only mentioned that the ballot will be sent out for a final review 24 hours before the election, but did not include a recourse should this not occur. In the case that the ballot is not made available on time, the election should be pushed back accordingly. This would have prevented issues that occured with the election last year, as many races had complications due to candidates being on the ballot despite their lack valid nominations and duplicate entries for the same candidate. The pre-elections checklist should be reviewed and approved by a majority of the EC so that it is confidently known that no errors were made in the pre-voting, voting, or post-voting time periods.

The ERTF also proposes that the EC develop a method for evaluating and recording less tangible purchases made throughout elections, especially as online campaign methods become more and more popular. These methods include but are not limited to: instagram ads, facebook ads, and snapchat filters. In addition, a better method for handling expense forms should be developed to maintain the integrity of the campaign process.

The Bylaws of the Rensselaer Union Student Senate

Through investigation of the inner workings of the EC, the ERTF has recognized some potential issues in current legislation. As per the Bylaws of the Rensselaer Union Student Senate, the EC is rendered inoperative if a voting member of the Student Senate is not serving on the Commission. As stated in Article IX: Committees, Item 7, Section a, Subsection iv, "The Elections Commission shall not meet unless a Senator is appointed to the committee." This could pose a clear issue for the EC on many fronts; the Senator appointed to the EC resigns because they plan to run again in the next election, neglect by the Grand Marshal to appoint a Senator, the removal of the Senator from the EC due to any dishonest or wrongful doing, etc. It is recommended that this subsection is reworded in a way that does not disable the EC in any form, and reduces the unparalleled reliance on the appointment of a Senator to the EC.

The ERTF not only looked for flaws in current verbiage, but also sought other ways to strengthen governing documentation. We recommend that verbiage is added to governing documents that enables a grace period between the termination and start of an elected officials term. As per the Union Constitution, Article VIII: Elections, Section 7 states "All elected offices, unless otherwise specified in this Constitution, shall be for a term beginning upon the date of their election and ending with the conclusion of the next general election for their respective positions." In addition, Section 12, Item a states "The installation of all newly elected persons shall be within one week of following the conclusion of general elections." It would be highly beneficial for incoming elected officials to have a week or so where they are able to learn from their predecessor. Rather than trying to instill their own idea of their roles and responsibilities during or out of meetings, new officials would get the opportunity to see how their predecessors acted in the role. Furthermore, this idea of a grace period could also be put in place between the nullification of past appointments and the appointment of new, incoming committee chairs. Similarly to elected officials, this would allow the new committee chairs to learn from their predecessor and see how the committee was run and what its current objectives are. This would allow the new chair better opportunity to build off of the progress that was made in the past term, rather than trying to build something back up from the ground.

Voter Experience

One of the largest issues every year with elections is how the excessive wait time to vote deters voters from participating in the elections process. The ERTF believes that the easiest way to combat this is to add more computers to each polling location, and to create an additional polling location within the core of academic campus, with Folsom Library being the most highly suggested

new location. In addition, the ERTF would like to highlight other changes to polling procedures. A complaint that was risen last year indicated that candidates who poll-sit in order to fulfill community service requirements were being asked questions in which they may have had a method to passively influence the vote. In order to combat this, we would like to recommend that each member of the EC should wear an identifying article, be it a shirt, nametag, or something else. Any questions or concerns raised at the polling location would then more easily be addressed to those in charge of impartially handling the elections. The ERTF would also like to propose the strengthening of the absentee ballot system for all upcoming elections. Not only is this an important system for those that already know they are going away from campus the day of elections, but for the half of the Junior class each year that will be in their Arch away semester during the spring.

Elections Commission Impartiality

A question that has been raised every year in recent history is that of the EC's impartiality; this regards the ability of members of the commission to run for positions they are in charge of holding elections for. In the past, this was handled by not allowing a member of EC to count votes or decide sanctions for a race in which they are a candidate. However, with members of the campus community expressing discomfort with the current system, the ERTF finds that it would be beneficial to not allow members of EC to run for a position in an election which they are in charge of administering. This new path raises two new issues that must be dealt with: the inability to keep a full commission during election season, and a wording conflict with the Senate Bylaws.

Our proposed solution to the first problem, keeping a full commission, would be to have each respective body that appoints a member to EC appoint two instead, as a member and an alternate. One member appointed would serve as a full EC member, but in the case where that person must drop for any reason, the second appointee would fill the position as a backup. A proposition to solve the bylaw conflict was already proposed earlier in this document.

The audit report provided to the ERTF specifically mentions having sanctions against members of the EC that violate predefined elections procedures. After long discussion on this topic, the ERTF has decided that the only effective sanction against a member of the commission would be removal from their position, and that this specific action should only taken upon significant negligence of their duties of office; these would include situations such as intentional failure to notify, intentionally disrupting elections, and endorsing candidates. The audit report also recommends to provide a list of common irregularities in the elections process, as well as a clearly defined process to follow should one of these situations arise. The ERTF concurs with this finding,

and suggests that a list of all planned processes to handle irregularities should be made public to the campus community and candidates by the start of the elections season.

There have been issues in the past with the EC's ability to send information out to students unhindered and impartially, especially in this past election where a candidate was needed to forward elections information to the student body. To avoid this issue in the future, the ERTF recommends that the EC have its own email list attached to the elections website that they can use to disseminate election information. This email should have no names attached to the sender, but simply be from the "Elections Commission". The ERTF also recommends that the EC collaborates more regularly with the Student Government Communications Committee (SGCC) to disperse election information to the campus. As the EC is a senate committee, it makes sense to utilize the student government resources to bring information to the student body so that all relevant information to students can be found in one place.

Secured System

This past election, there was an issue with the results being leaked to the public before they were finalized and announced at the Grand Marshal Week Finale the following night. To prevent this, the ERTF recommends that the EC more heavily regulate who has access to the results so that there is no question as to how information could be leaked. Better information security needs to be enforced so that this incident does not happen again in future elections.

The ERTF would also like to examine some general procedures that candidates should know. A major problem that we have identified is the current state of the candidate nomination form. It is a major breach of privacy and security to ask students to provide their name and Rensselaer Identification Number (RIN) to any, or multiple candidates. Therefore, the ERTF would like to endorse a new nomination system, and would like to provide two of many possible options. The first option is to ask nominators for their name, RCS ID (the first part of one's Rensselaer email address), and the last few numbers of their RIN.

This removes the danger of releasing one's full RIN, but still allows for identification and validation of identity. The second option is to have nominations handled online, where candidates would, with their own electronic device, have nominators sign in through the Central Authentication Service (CAS) for verification of identity. In addition to nominations, the ERTF highly suggests that a preferred name system be developed and enacted. This is both in response to the events of this last Grand Marshal Week Election, as well as for those students who have not yet gone through Rensselaer's preferred name change process.