

Case Study: St. Louis Before & After Approval Voting








St. Louis, MO and The Delmar Divide

Through the heart of St. Louis, MO runs a road called Delmar Boulevard that politically and economically splits the city in two. Locals call it the Delmar Divide. The north side is predominantly black, the south side predominantly white. Decades of politics had favored the white south side, leaving the black north side to struggle. In a city where the population for both white and black voters were equal, all city politics revolved around this question, “which side would win, and which side would be shut out?”

St. Louis had an issue that made things worse. Races for offices like mayor and alderman were drawing upwards of seven candidates, leaving candidates to split votes between them and denying a majority winner. From 2015-2019, there were eight city elections in St. Louis where the winner earned less than 37% of the vote. Of those eight elections, five had winners who earned less than 20% of the vote. For decades there was suspicion that this was done purposefully by white politicians who would find extra black candidates to run to split the black vote to help white politicians win.

Purposeful or not, the vote splitting issue in St. Louis was out of control, and more often the communities of color were penalized for having multiple candidates from their community run in the same election. This was especially true in the 2017 race for mayor, where five major candidates ran for the seat.

March 2017 STL Mayor Results

Candidate	Percent of Vote
 Lyda Krewson Alderswoman	32%
 Tishaura Jones City Treasurer, Former State Rep.	30%
 Lewis Reed President, Board of Aldermen	18%
 Antonio French Alderman	16%
 Jeffrey Boyd Alderman	3%

South St. Louis had one major candidate, Krewson, while north St. Louis had four. Despite 68% of voters choosing black candidates, Krewson won.

St. Louis voters rightfully asked - “How is this right?”

A coalition emerged to reform St. Louis elections. They started a ballot initiative campaign, called Prop D (for Democracy), and an organization to advocate for it, St. Louis Approves. They wanted to end vote splitting by bringing **approval voting** to all city elections. In 2019 The Center for Election Science joined the effort. St. Louis Approves was able to build a large coalition from across the city that went to community events, town halls and door-to-door to grow support for this effort. In November 2020 St. Louisans overwhelmingly voted in favor of the measure, **passing it with 68% support.**



ST. LOUIS IS AT A CROSSROADS AND NEEDS POSITIVE CHANGE.

THESE ORGANIZATIONS & LEADERS ENDORSE VOTING “YES” ON PROPOSITION D FOR DEMOCRACY.

ON NOVEMBER 3, VOTE WITH A DIVERSE COALITION OF LEADERS WHO BELIEVE THAT VOTERS SHOULD HOLD ALL OF THE POWER.

VOTE YES ON PROP D.



St. Louis Young Democrats



League of Women Voters of Metro STL



The St. Louis Post-Dispatch



St. Louis American Newspaper



Cori Bush, Democrat for Congress



Treasurer Tishaura Jones (D-St. Louis)



Rep. Rasheen Aldridge (D-St. Louis)



Rep. Steve Butz (D-St. Louis)



Recorder Michael Butler (D-St. Louis)



Alderswoman Megan Green (D-15)



Service Employees International Union



Action St. Louis Power Project

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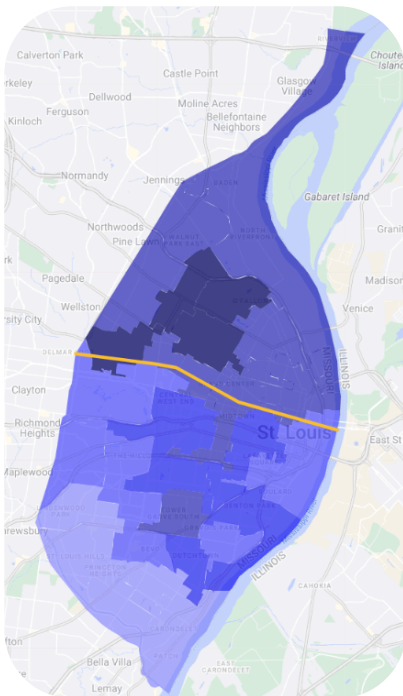


Smashing the Divide

March of 2021 would be the first election in St. Louis history to use approval voting. Four major candidates ran, excluding Mayor Krewson who chose not to run for re-election. They included Tishaura Jones and Lewis Reed from 2017, as well as Alderwoman Cara Spencer and businessman Andrew Jones. Approval voting radically changed the election. Candidates pushed for broader support on both sides of the Delmar Divide

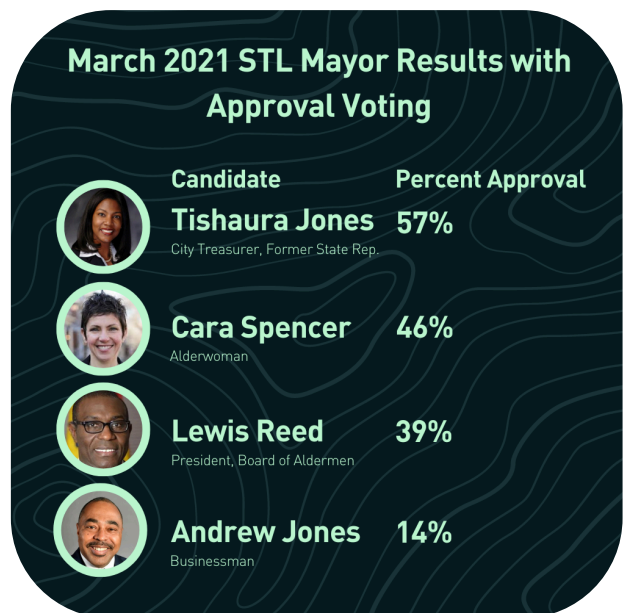
Voters could support multiple candidates who were similar, whether it be along ideological, racial or geographical lines. There was a clear consensus winner Tishaura Jones, hindered by vote splitting in the past, was the far-and-away winner of the first approval voting election with **57% approval**.

The real power of approval voting came into focus when plotting Jones' support on a map. The darker the blue, the higher approval support for her. Outlined in yellow is Delmar Boulevard.



While other candidates still drew most of their support from one side of the divide, Jones' support transcended the old borders.

Because of approval voting Jones had smashed through the Delmar Divide by appealing to the whole city, and she would go on to make history as the first black female mayor of St. Louis.



Aftermath

A poll conducted by Change Research in March of 2021 captured the broad feelings of support for approval voting.

- 81% of voters appreciated approval voting's simplicity.
- 67% of voters appreciated being able to express their preferences easily, without worrying about electability.
- 60% of voters want to use approval voting to elect other officials.

Voters supported 1.6 candidates on average. The City of St. Louis officials stated that no additional funding was used to make the change - The solution was simple, just allow for voters to fill in more bubbles on their ballots. In 2022, the St. Louis Board of Aldermen threatened to repeal Prop D, as some felt it threatened their power. The coalition regrouped, even larger this time, to enshrine approval voting into their charter forever. Bucking the desires of the Aldermen, St. Louis voters chose to keep Prop D's reforms in a measure called Prop R (for "Reform") - voting 69% in favor. St. Louis continues to use approval voting in city elections to this day.