

# FairVote

## Ranked Choice Voting in Utah

*Factsheet: December 2019*

### Overview

In March 2018, the Utah legislature passed, and its governor signed, a new bipartisan law allowing the state's municipalities to try ranked choice voting (RCV). For the 2019 elections, two towns in Utah decided to opt in: Payson and Vineyard.

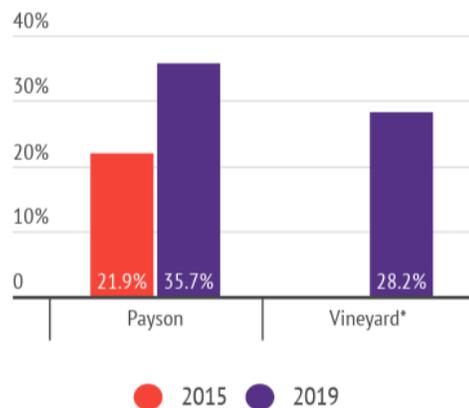
Both towns are small, with populations of just under 20,000 (Payson) and just over 10,000 (Vineyard). Vineyard is the fastest growing city in the United States, having grown by 63% in 2018.

Both are conservative towns (Hillary Clinton won only 14% of the vote in Utah County in 2016). Both towns elect officers in nonpartisan elections, with all councilmembers elected citywide in staggered elections. Prior to using RCV, they held primaries in August to winnow the general election field down to twice the number of seats to be elected. RCV allowed them to eliminate these primaries and include all candidates on the general election ballot.

Before 2019, the councilmembers were elected using bloc voting - meaning voters could vote for up to two or three councilmembers (however many seats were being elected). In 2019, Payson elected three councilmembers at-large, and Vineyard elected two. Both towns used a form of RCV intended to elect each councilmember with a majority vote, as if they had each been elected in separate, consecutive single-winner RCV elections, though each voter cast only one ranked ballot for all offices.

### Relatively High voter turnout

Payson and Vineyard both alternate between council-only election years and mayoral election years. The last council-only election year was in 2015. That year, Payson's turnout was 21.9% of registered voters. In 2019, turnout was up dramatically, to 35.7%. Vineyard did not report turnout numbers in 2017 (it had only 416 registered voters that year), but its 2019 turnout was 28.2%, higher than Payson's 2015 turnout.

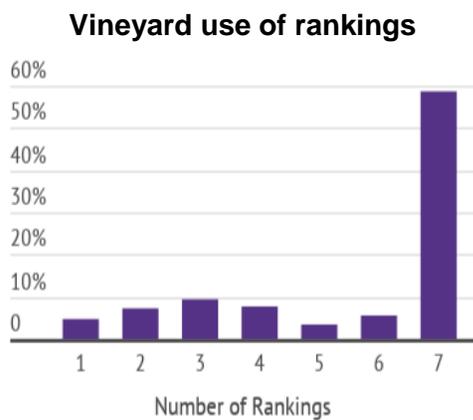
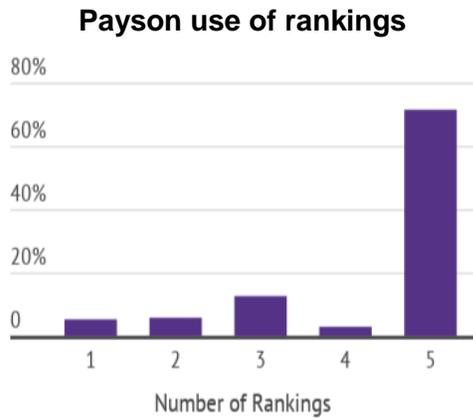


### Effective use of the ranked ballot

When given the opportunity to rank candidates in order of choice, voters do. Both Utah towns demonstrate that very well.

A strong majority of voters in both towns ranked every candidate on the ballot. In Payson, five candidates sought the three seats, while in Vineyard, seven candidates competed for two seats. In Payson, 92.0% of voters ranked more than one candidate, and 71.2% ranked all five. In Vineyard, 91.8% of voters ranked more than one candidate, and 58.6% ranked all seven.

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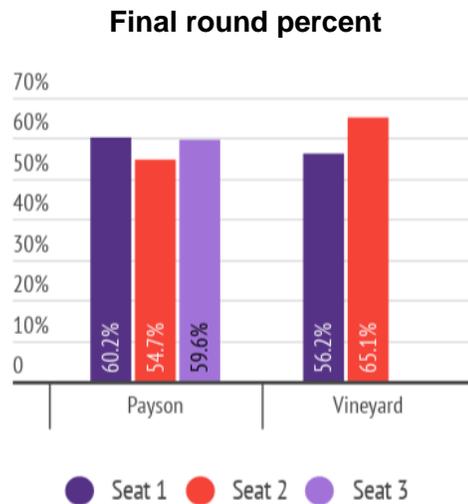
In terms of ballot errors, both jurisdictions conducted elections entirely by mail, which tends to increase ballot errors: When voting in-person, the tabulator will alert a voter to an error and ask them to correct it, whereas a mailed ballot will be simply invalidated. Additionally, both jurisdictions were switching to RCV from bloc voting. Because bloc voting asks voters to vote for more than one candidate, that transition may result in a high number of overvotes, with voters attempting to rank more than one candidate as their first choice.

In general, we see higher ballot error rates in contests with large numbers of candidates. For instance, in California's last gubernatorial primary, 27 candidates appeared on the ballot. In San Francisco, 2.0% of ballots were invalidated due to overvotes in that contest.

Nonetheless, Vineyard had a low ballot error rate for an election with seven candidates - only six ballots (0.5%) were invalidated due to error in the initial count. Payson had a higher error rate despite fewer candidates, with 47 ballots (1.7%) invalidated due to error. The difference may be due to Vineyard's fast growth - most of its voters were voting in Vineyard for the first time, whereas most Payson voters had lived and voted in Payson during prior elections, in which they had been instructed to vote for up to two or three each election. This suggests that the error rate should decline as voters become more accustomed to the new system.

## Strong mandates

The effective use of rankings by voters led to a clear outcome for all seats elected.



As shown above, each winning candidate earned a majority vote in the final round. Under RCV, it is possible for a candidate to earn a majority in the final round, but not a majority of all ballots cast, if some voters choose not to rank each candidate or if the ballot limits rankings. This was not an issue in either Payson or Vineyard, with each

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candidate earning at least 51.4% of the votes cast in the contest.

Over the course of the count, some ballots become inactive, because the voter only ranked candidates who have been eliminated. Although voters have the right to abstain, a large number of inactive ballots may suggest a lack of a strong mandate for the winner. This was also not an issue in either Payson or Vineyard. In Payson, 94.2% of ballots remained active through every round of all three seats. In Vineyard, 92.1% did as well.

## Candidate experience

Following the election, candidates were surveyed on their experience running in their towns' first RCV elections. The results were very positive. Here is a sample of some response:

- "I loved it! It's easy and makes a lot of sense."
- "I think it's easier. I like it."
- "I really like the approach and think it should be adopted by more cities."

To the question "What are your impressions of ranked choice voting," 87.5% of respondents reported a positive impression, with no candidates reporting a negative impression. Three-quarters of candidates reported asking voters for second choices.

When asked "Do you think your city should continue to use ranked choice voting in your municipal elections?" 75% said yes, while the other 25% expressed no opinion - no candidate expressed a preference for returning to the city's former way of conducting elections.

## Voter experience

Immediately following the election, 238 voters participated in an online survey about the election, including 128 from Payson and 110 from Vineyard. Altogether, 86.0% of those surveyed said they found RCV "very much" or "somewhat" easy to use. Only 4.2% found it "not at all" easy to use. Of those surveyed, 82.5% said RCV should be used in future elections, including 79.0% in Payson and 86.5% in Vineyard.

