

# Ranked Choice Voting

A primer by FairVote, February 2021

## Ranked Choice Voting is Simple

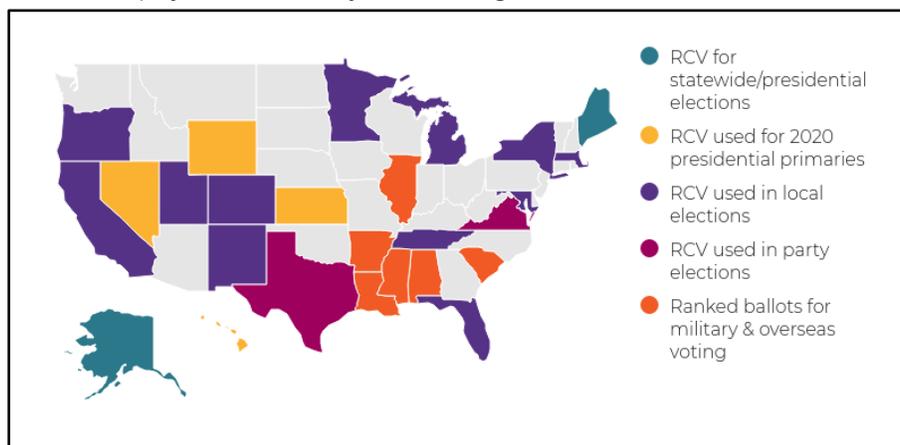
Ranked choice voting (RCV) is a way to ensure elections are fair for all voters. Voters pick a first-choice candidate and have the option to rank backup candidates in order of preference: second, third, and so on.

|             | 1 <sup>ST</sup> CHOICE | 2 <sup>ND</sup> CHOICE | 3 <sup>RD</sup> CHOICE | 4 <sup>TH</sup> CHOICE |
|-------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Candidate A | 1                      | 2                      | 3                      | 4                      |
| Candidate B | 1                      | 2                      | 3                      | 4                      |
| Candidate C | 1                      | 2                      | 3                      | 4                      |
| Candidate D | 1                      | 2                      | 3                      | 4                      |

If a candidate receives more than half of the first choices, that candidate wins, just like in any other election. However, if there is no majority winner after counting first choices, the race is decided by an "instant runoff." The candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and voters who picked that candidate as 'number 1' will have their votes count for their next choice. This process continues until two candidates remain, and the majority candidate wins.

## Ranked Choice Voting Solves Problems

RCV promotes majority rule without the need for a second runoff election. Voters can honestly rank the candidate they like most, without fear that doing so will help the candidate they like least. With greater choice, voters have more power. Candidates have incentives to engage with all voters to earn both first choices and later choices, meaning voters will have a greater chance of being heard and campaigns will reduce personal attacks. Because RCV only requires one election, it can save taxpayers' dollars by eliminating the cost of a second runoff election.



## Ranked Choice Voting is Popular in Practice

Ranked choice voting is used statewide in Maine for state and federal primary elections and for federal general elections, and will be used in Alaska for all its general state and federal elections beginning in 2022. Maine's 2018 and 2020 primary and general elections all had high turnout and low ballot error rates, and support for the reform remains high. In 2020, Maine became the first state to use RCV for the presidential general election.

RCV was used by the Democratic Party for presidential primaries and caucuses in five states in 2020, and used by three state Republican parties to elect officers and nominate candidates. It has also been adopted by more than 20 local jurisdictions across 11 states to elect mayors, city councilors, and other local offices. Five states use RCV ballots for military and overseas voters, so that they can participate in congressional runoff elections without the need to receive and return a second ballot.

RCV use has been expanding: New York City began using RCV in 2021 for city primary and special elections after 74% of voters approved its use. Voters in six new jurisdictions approved RCV ballot measures in 2020 and will begin using RCV over the next two years.

Ranked choice voting is widely used overseas, including in governmental and party elections for Australia's House of Representatives, presidents of Ireland and Sri Lanka, the mayor of London, party leaders of all of Canada's five national parties. Recommended by Robert's Rules of Order as an option, it is used by some of the world's largest private associations along with student government elections in more than 75 American colleges and universities.

## Ranked Choice Voting by the Numbers

### Voters use the opportunity to rank candidates

When given the opportunity, most voters choose to rank candidates rather than choosing just one. **67%** of RCV ballots rank at least two candidates. Additionally, **50%** of ballots use the maximum number of rankings allowed. For big elections like mayor, 9 in 10 voters will rank.

### Winners enjoy strong consensus from voters

Winners of RCV races tend to be ranked highly on many ballots, even beyond the majority needed to be elected. For RCV races in the US, **67%** of ballots ranked the winning candidate in their top three choices, demonstrating broad support for winners selected with this method.

## RCV outperforms two-round runoffs to determine majority winners

Ranked choice voting includes the benefits of runoff elections, but without the precipitous decline in turnout. Federal primary runoff elections over the last 20 years have experienced a median turnout decline of **37%** between the first and final rounds. In addition, half of runoff winners during this time period received fewer votes in the runoff than they did in the first election. Participation in RCV races declined by only 4% between the first and final rounds. Additionally, RCV winners never receive fewer votes in the final round than in the first round.

## Ballot error rate is comparable or lower than in non-RCV races

Ballot errors occur under any voting method. Research has shown that errors do not increase under RCV. In some cases, RCV even has a lower overvote rate than other methods, such as when compared to top-two voting in California. With modern ballot design, **99.8%** of voters regularly cast valid RCV ballots, as in this year's four presidential primaries with RCV.

## No “Buyer’s Remorse” in RCV Elections for Years

14 cities and one state have begun using RCV in the last 10 years, adding to four cities starting earlier. No jurisdictions have stopped using RCV during that time period. Consistently high voter satisfaction, as evidenced by exit polling, has led to zero efforts to repeal RCV.

- **94% of Santa Fe, NM voters** were satisfied with their first RCV experience in 2018
- **84% of respondents in Payson, UT and Vineyard, UT** reported they were satisfied with their voting experience after their first use of RCV in 2019.
- **61% of Maine respondents** said they want to see RCV maintained or expanded after their first use in 2018. Maine’s legislature then expanded RCV to include presidential primary and general elections and its biggest city passed RCV for all offices with 81%.
- **66% of Minneapolis, MN respondents and 72% of St. Paul, MN respondents** said in 2017 that they wish to continue using RCV in 2017; the City of Minneapolis survey found that the ratio of voters wanting to keep using RCV increased from more than two to one in 2013 to more than four to one in 2017.

## High Voter Turnout in RCV Races

RCV elections in the last several years have had higher-than-expected turnout.

- In San Francisco’s 2018 mayoral election, **more voters participated** in the RCV contest for mayor than in the non-RCV races at the top of the ballot for Governor and U.S. Senator.
- Santa Fe’s first use of RCV in 2018 **set a record for turnout** in mayoral elections.
- Las Cruces, NM and Eastpointe, MI both had their **highest turnout in at least a decade** for their first RCV elections in 2019.
- Payson, UT implemented RCV in 2019 and **turnout increased 13%** compared to the prior city council election.
- In cities in California’s Bay Area, more voters participate in RCV elections with more candidates, indicating that voters are not intimidated by a ranked ballot with many choices but rather, are inclined to participate in the more competitive races.

## Academic Endorsements for RCV

Ranked choice voting has drawn widespread support as a sensible solution to problems with our elections, including support from leading newspapers, political leaders, electoral reform commissions, and organizations. In 2020, [more than 50 leading scholars](#) supported expanded use of RCV by endorsing this statement: “I support greater use of ranked choice voting for federal, state, and local elections in the United States.” Those in support include seven Nobel Prize laureates and nine winners of the Johan Skytte Prize (“the Nobel for political science”).

## Research on the Effectiveness of Ranked Choice Voting

Research suggests that RCV helps promote inclusive and civil campaigning and that voters of all demographics use the ranked ballot effectively. Here are examples of scholarly research on RCV.

### VOTING ERROR ACROSS MULTIPLE BALLOT TYPES: RESULTS FROM SUPER TUESDAY (2020) EXPERIMENTS IN FOUR AMERICAN STATES

*Jason Maloy (University of Louisiana at Lafayette).*

This 2020 paper finds ranked ballots produce fewer void votes (more valid votes) than traditional single-mark ballots. Additionally, ranked ballots were associated with smaller racial and gender discrepancies in error-proneness than single-mark ballots. [Link to study.](#)

### RATING RANKINGS: EFFECT OF INSTANT RUN-OFF VOTING ON PARTICIPATION AND CIVILITY

*Eamon McGinn (University of Technology Sydney).*

This analysis of elections in the Minneapolis-St. Paul Metro Area indicates that the introduction of RCV caused a 9.6-percentage-point increase in turnout for mayoral elections, and that RCV has improved the civility of debates. [Link to study.](#)

### SELF-REPORTED UNDERSTANDING OF RANKED CHOICE VOTING

*Todd Donovan (Western Washington University), Caroline Tolbert (University of Iowa), and Kellen Gracey (University of Iowa).*

This study examines voter understanding of ballot instructions and finds no significant racial or ethnic differences in understanding of voting instructions or electoral systems. [Link to study.](#)

### CAMPAIGN CIVILITY UNDER PREFERENTIAL AND PLURALITY VOTING

*Todd Donovan (Western Washington University), Caroline Tolbert (University of Iowa), and Kellen Gracey (University of Iowa).*

This study finds that voters in RCV cities were more satisfied with conduct of local campaigns, more likely to have in-person contact with candidates for office, and less likely to view campaigns and negative compared to voters in non-RCV cities. [Link to study.](#)

### VOTER PARTICIPATION WITH RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN THE UNITED STATES

*David C. Kimball (University of Missouri-St. Louis) and Joseph Anthony.*

This study finds that RCV helps increase voter participation compared to two-round elections, and does not reduce turnout compared to other single-round election methods. In a case study on Minneapolis, RCV does not exacerbate socioeconomic and racial disparities in voter participation. [Link to study.](#)

### **RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN 2018: A MID-YEAR REPORT**

*FairVote.*

A collection of statistics from the RCV elections that took place in Santa Fe, San Francisco, and Maine in early 2018. Key findings include: voter turnout surpassed expectations, RCV implementation was smooth and inexpensive, voters used the ballot well and made few errors, and winners earned strong support both in first choice and later choice rankings. [Link to report.](#)

### **STRUCTURAL ELECTORAL REFORM: IMPACT, METHODS, AND OPPORTUNITIES**

*FairVote.*

FairVote worked with 14 scholars of voting and elections to assess the impact of 37 different structural reforms across 16 criteria concerning legislative functionality, electoral accountability, voter engagement, and openness of process. In the scholars' assessment, the most impactful reform would be multi-winner RCV applied to five-winner elections, with single-winner RCV being rated more highly than various alternative approaches. [Link to report.](#)

### **RANKED CHOICE VOTING AND RACIAL MINORITY RIGHTS**

*FairVote.*

This report examines the election rates of people of color in the California Bay Area before and after the adoption of RCV, finding that people of color hold office at a higher rate under RCV and people of color win more elections under RCV in districts that are plurality-minority, white-plurality, and white-majority. [Link to report](#)