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Understanding Ranked Choice Voting

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What is Ranked Choice Voting?

Ranked choice voting (RCV), also referred to as instant runoff voting, is a voting method in which voters may rank the candidates on the ballot in their order of preference. RCV differs from the process currently used in most of the United States, referred to as *first-past-the-post*, in which voters choose a single candidate that, in most states, can be elected with a plurality—that is, less than 50 percent—of votes.

Under an RCV system, if no candidate receives a majority of first choice votes the first time the votes are tallied, the candidate with the lowest number of first choice votes is eliminated. Voters who selected an eliminated candidate as their first choice then have their votes re-allocated to their second choice. This process continues for as many rounds as necessary for one candidate to receive the majority of votes. Currently, jurisdictions in 18 states use some form of ranked choice voting. Alaska and Maine are the only two to use it statewide.

Below is an example of an RCV ballot for the 2018 Maine gubernatorial Democratic primary (left) and the process by which those votes were then tabulated (right).

State of Maine Sample Ballot
Democratic Primary Election, June 12, 2018
for

Instructions to Voters

To vote, fill in the oval like this

To rank your candidate choices, fill in the oval:

- In the 1st column for your 1st choice candidate.
- In the 2nd column for your 2nd choice candidate, and so on.

Continue until you have ranked as many or as few candidates as you like.

Fill in no more than one oval for each candidate or column.

To rank a write-in candidate, write the person's name in the write-in space and fill in the oval for the ranking of your choice.

Governor	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice	6th Choice	7th Choice	8th Choice
Cote, Adam Roland Belfast	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dion, Donna J. Biddeford	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dion, Mark N. Portland	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Eves, Mark W. North Berwick	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mills, Janet T. Farmington	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Russell, Diane Marie Portland	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sweet, Elizabeth A. Hallowell	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Write-in	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

SOURCE: Maine Secretary of State Office

Democratic Gubernatorial Primary Results				
Candidate	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4
Janet Mills	33.3% 41,735 votes	35.5% 44,042 votes	40.8% 49,945 votes	54.1% 63,384 votes
Adam Cote	28.3% 35,478 votes	30.3% 37,543 votes	34.8% 42,623 votes	45.9% 53,866 votes
Betsy Sweet	16.6% 20,767 votes	18.5% 22,987 votes	24.4% 29,944 votes	Defeated
Mark Eves	14.3% 17,887 votes	15.7% 19,521 votes	Defeated	
Mark Dion	4.1% 5,200 votes	Defeated		
Diane Russell	2.2% 2,728 votes	Defeated		
Donna Dion	1.3% 1,596 votes	Defeated		

In this example, Mark Dion, Diane Russell, and Donna Dion were all eliminated on the first ballot. Some forms of RCV, like Maine's, use a batch elimination system to remove multiple candidates in a single round if they do not have a chance of winning in the next round. Votes for eliminated candidates were then reallocated to each voter's second choice. Janet Mills received 2,307 transfer votes, Adam Cote received 2,065 transfer votes, and so on. This process continued until a fourth round, when Janet Mills received a 54.1 percent majority of the vote.

While this example is from a primary, ranked choice voting is used in general elections as well.

Benefits of Ranked Choice Voting

Under most current voting systems, many elections with more than two candidates have a winner that received only a plurality—less than a majority—of the votes. This means that most voters in such a race chose someone other than the eventual winner. Arguably, the winner of such an election does not truly represent the majority of their constituents' [choice](#).

A report from [FairVote](#) describes numerous examples of this phenomenon. For instance, Dr. Mehmet Oz won Pennsylvania's Republican Senate primary with only 31 percent of the vote in a field of seven candidates. Similarly, in the most recent Oregon Republican gubernatorial primary, former House Minority Leader Christine Drazan won with only 23 percent of the vote in a field of 19 candidates. [Polling shows](#) that she might also win the general election with less than a majority of voters' support due to an independent candidate on the ballot.

Ranked choice voting ensures that the winner of a given election receives a majority of voters' support. In addition, unlike a first-past-the-post system, even if a voter's first-choice candidate does not win, under ranked choice, voters can still have a say in who the eventual winner is. Systems like RCV could help mitigate voters' trepidation about "throwing away their vote" by supporting candidates who align with their interests but are not viewed as likely to win an [election](#).

Ranked choice voting could also help deter negative campaigning—a salient concern in light of [increasingly violent rhetoric on the right](#) and [growing support for political violence](#). According to Lee Drutman and Maresa Strano of [New America](#):

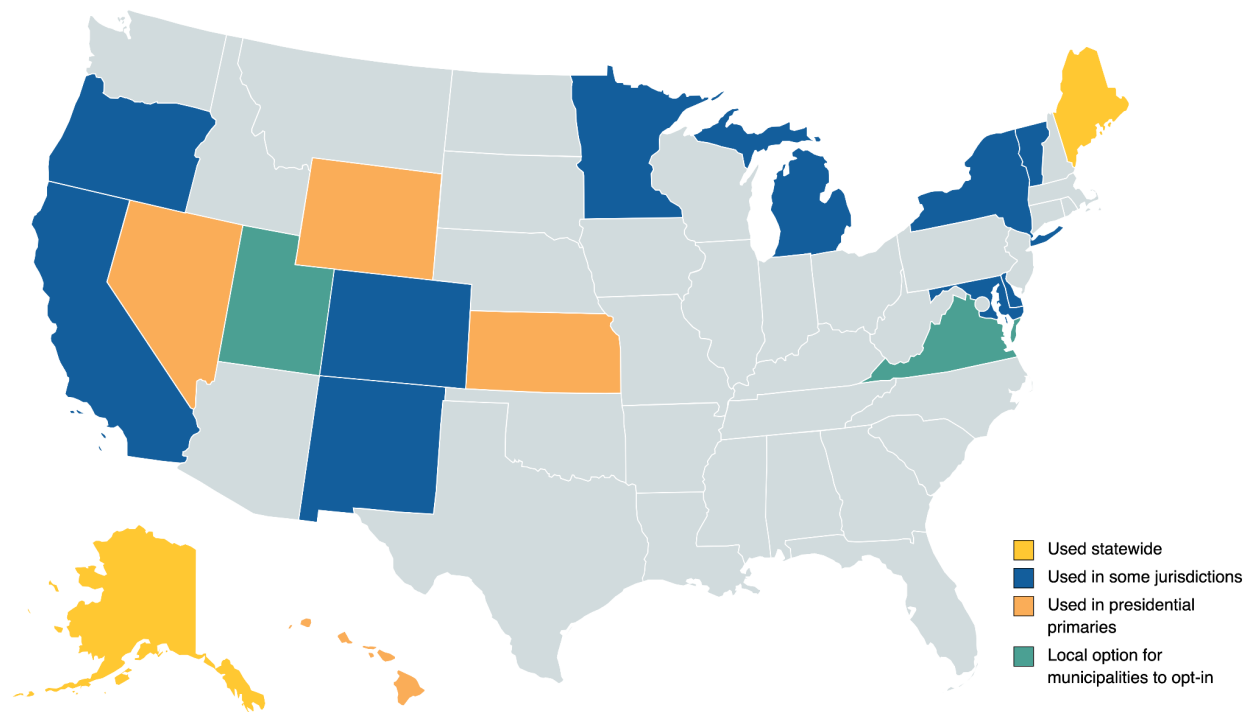
It alters incentives and campaign dynamics in ways that appear to decrease negative campaigning and increase campaign civility...candidates are encouraged to appeal more broadly—including reaching out to those they might have ignored under plurality rules, and to even cooperate with competitors.

In a ranked choice system, candidates are discouraged from attacking each other because voters who disagree with those attacks might choose *not* to list them as a second choice.

In [discussions of Alaska's recent special election](#), the first to use the state's new top-four primary system wherein the top four vote-getters move on to a second round that uses ranked choice voting, observers saw that the campaign had a more cordial atmosphere compared to past cycles.

The two prominent Republicans in the race, Nick Begich and former Governor Sarah Palin, ran attack ads against one another. At the same time, the Democrat running against them, now-Congresswoman Mary Peltola, worked on building an amicable relationship with her opponents and encouraging their supporters to rank her second. As a result, Congresswoman Peltola received roughly a quarter of Begich's supporters after he was eliminated, enough for her to defeat Governor Palin.

Where Ranked Choice Voting is Currently Used



Currently, RCV is used for all elections statewide in Alaska (since 2022) and for all federal elections in Maine (since 2018). Specific jurisdictions use it for certain primary and general elections in an additional 16 states. In 2020, it was used in the presidential primaries in Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas, Nevada (only for absentees), and Wyoming.

Some major cities, including San Francisco and Oakland in California and Minneapolis and Saint Paul in Minnesota, use RCV for local elections. New York City is the largest jurisdiction in the United States to use RCV. It was used for the first time in the 2021 primaries for city offices.

According to a [2021 study](#) from Pew and FairVote, RCV proposals are being considered in 29 states. **Adoption of RCV will be on the ballot in 10 jurisdictions in 2022, including Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon; and the state of Nevada.** In Nevada, voters will consider adopting a first-of-its-kind top-five method. Under this system, the top five candidates in a primary, regardless of party affiliation, would advance to a ranked choice voting general election.

In future election cycles, more states will have the opportunity to adopt this practice through ballot initiatives or in the state legislature.

Federal Proposals for Ranked Choice Voting

As ranked choice voting gains momentum on the state and local levels, there have been calls for federal adoption. The [Fair Representation Act \(H.R. 3863\)](#), introduced by Rep. Don Beyer (D-VA), would establish the use of RCV for the election of all senators and representatives. The bill would additionally adopt multi-member congressional districts and independent commissions for redistricting.

Moreover, Members of Congress have introduced legislation to include money for state and local governments to transition to ranked choice voting systems. For example, the House passed [Protecting Our Democracy Act \(H.R. 5314\)](#), which included an amendment from Rep. Dean Phillips (D-MN) and Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD), derived from Rep. Phillips' [Voter Choice Act \(H.R. 5500\)](#), authorizing \$40 million for grants supporting state and local governments' transitions to ranked choice voting systems. Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO) introduced companion legislation ([S. 2939](#)) in the Senate, where it has not been considered.

Conclusion

Ranked choice voting's use is growing across the country. Its adoption could help afford voters a greater voice in their leaders' selection and, at the same time, discourage candidate sparring. In addition, policymakers might consider ranked choice systems and their benefits as they develop solutions for the considerable challenges facing American democracy. As voters in more jurisdictions become familiar with RCV, additional states might move to adopt it, bringing statewide voting practices in line with those in some major cities. Greater adoption across the country could result in greater support for ranked choice voting at the federal level.

The author thanks FairVote for their comments and insights.