Policy Brief: Ranked Choice Voting

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Insights for What’s Ahead:

Ranked choice voting (RCV) is a process for elections that allows voters to rank candidates for a particular office in order of preference.

- **Several states and dozens of jurisdictions have adopted RCV:** Maine and Alaska use it for all statewide elections; other states permit it for some elections. It has been used in municipal elections in Cambridge, Massachusetts since 1941 and in New York City since 2021.

- **Proponents point to the reduction of negative campaign tactics:** RCV proponents argue that the system reduces negative campaign tactics, as candidates do not only need the first-choice votes of their supporters, but also the secondary votes from those who prefer other candidates.

- **Some states are banning use of RCV:** Four states (Florida, Tennessee, South Dakota, and Idaho) have banned use of RCV in the last two years; other states are considering doing so.

How does RCV work?

For example, in a race utilizing RCV where four candidates are running for a single seat, voters rank the candidates 1-4, with the candidate ranked as “1” being the voter’s first preference for the seat. If a candidate is the first choice of more than half of voters, that candidate wins the election. However, if no single candidate receives the majority of first-choice votes, the race is decided by an “instant runoff” based on voters' expressed preferences. The candidate with the fewest first-choice votes is eliminated, and the second-choice votes for the eliminated candidate are redistributed to the remaining candidates. This process continues until a candidate crosses the 50 percent threshold for election. Voters who choose to rank only their first-choice candidate do not suffer penalty, but if that candidate becomes eliminated during the first round, their ballots become exhausted and will not count in later rounds. In multi-winner elections (for instance, some city council races using RCV), the process is largely the same, but the threshold percentage of votes needed to win a seat is less than 50 percent as more seats are up for election; those with the highest number of votes once the requisite numbers of seats have been filled are elected.

Which states and localities have adopted RCV?

As of April 2023, 63 American jurisdictions have adopted RCV, reaching approximately 13 million voters. This includes two states, two counties, and 59 cities. Military and overseas voters have the opportunity to cast RCV ballots in federal runoff elections in six states.

*Maine and Alaska are the only two states that have implemented RCV for statewide elections, while Nevada voters approved RCV in the first of two elections necessary for it to be adopted:*

- **Maine** in 2016 adopted RCV for state and federal primary elections and all general congressional elections; it was first used in 2018. RCV was expanded for use in presidential elections beginning in 2020 for presidential general elections and 2024 for presidential primaries.
Alaska adopted RCV in 2020, and it was first used in 2022. RCV is used for all state and federal general elections.

Nevada voters last year approved a ballot measure establishing RCV for general elections for US Senate, US House, and state elections. Under state law, voters will need to approve the measure again in 2024 for it to take effect in 2026 as a citizen-initiated constitutional amendment.

Virginia permits (since 2020) RCV for elections to a county board of supervisors or city council but not for Federal elections. Arlington, Virginia, will use RCV for its primary election for county council in June 2023. (Both parties in Virginia have also used RCV for party conventions and primaries.)

Several major US cities practice RCV for local elections; some have used the system for decades

Cambridge, Massachusetts has used proportional RCV to elect its city council and school committee since 1941. Unlike RCV which elects a single winner, proportional RCV is a process that elects multiple winners, each of whom must meet a threshold based on the total number of seats to be filled.

Minneapolis adopted RCV in 2006 and has used the process since 2009 in elections for city offices, including mayor and city council in single-winner elections, and park board and board of taxation seats in proportional RCV elections.

New York City first adopted RCV in 2019 for city primary and special elections for mayor, public advocate, comptroller, borough presidents, and city council. The process was first used in 2021.

San Francisco adopted RCV in 2002 and has used the process since 2004 to elect its mayor, city attorney, board of supervisors, and other citywide offices.

Proponents believe RCV reduces negative campaign tactics

Proponents of the system argue that RCV elections are more inclusive in that they give voters an easy and more meaningful way of expressing preferences for candidates. In addition to possibly increasing voter turnout and eliminating costly runoff elections, those in favor of RCV argue that the system reduces negative campaign tactics, as candidates do not only need the first-choice votes of their supporters, but also the secondary votes from those who prefer other candidates. “It’s a real challenge, since you’re really running two elections simultaneously,” said Jim Stearns, consultant for Leland Yee’s 2011 run for mayor of San Francisco. “Normally, in a primary you have to identify your base, organize and get them out to vote. But in a ranked-choice election, you have to get beyond your base and identify other potential supporters.”

RCV elections allow more votes to “count” but do not necessarily increase turnout

RCV allows more votes to “count” in a way that meaningfully impacts the results of an election compared to that of a first-past-the-post system where votes can be “wasted.” Proponents therefore argue that RCV may not only encourage greater voter participation but also encourage more candidates to run, thus giving voters greater options and reason to turn out.

Some research finds that RCV increases voter turnout, while other research finds it has little to no effect in local US elections. At the very least, RCV does not appear to decrease voter turnout. According to a 2021 study by researchers at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Iowa, youth turnout in RCV
cities was higher than youth turnout in non-RCV cities. The researchers assert that although RCV elections may not increase overall voting, they tend to increase youth voting, which they attribute to greater campaign civility and mobilization and increased contact in RCV elections.

**Opponents call RCV a violation of “one person, one vote”**

Opponents of RCV call the process complicated and opaque, as “voters are forced to choose ‘backup’ choices they don’t like, or risk being disenfranchised,” according to an op-ed published in The Wall Street Journal. Many RCV opponents point to the outcome of Alaska’s midterm election, when Democrat Mary Peltola won reelection to the state’s at-large seat in the US House of Representatives following three rounds of RCV tabulation and after nearly 15,000 ballots were exhausted. (However, Peltola led in the first two rounds of RCV voting and won on transfer preferences, so it is reasonable to assume she would have won a separate runoff election as well.)

Last year, two states, Florida and Tennessee passed legislation banning RCV, with South Dakota becoming the first state this year to ban the process, followed soon thereafter by Idaho. Similar Republican-sponsored bills have passed at least one legislative chamber in several states in 2023 - - Arizona, Montana, North Dakota, and Texas.

North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum on April 6 vetoed a bill banning RCV and approval voting, noting that “House Bill 1273 undermines local control of local political subdivisions exercising their granted powers under home rule charter, specifically prohibiting using an approval voting method or ranked choice voting method in local elections.” The bill passed both the House and Senate with vote margins clearing the two-thirds majority threshold that lawmakers would need to override the Governor’s veto. The House is set to vote on an override in the coming days, and if successful, the bill would go to the Senate for an override vote.

**Considerations for policymakers**

A survey for election officials conducted by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) found that the average cost of switching to RCV was $154,759 among responding jurisdictions, with a median cost of $17,000. Cost-per-voter averaged 94 cents with the median cost-per-voter at 43 cents. NCSL’s survey focused on the one-time costs associated with switching to RCV rather than recurring costs related to the repeated use of the process. The survey asked questions to estimate the costs of equipment changes or software expenses, if any, costs associated with educating voters on casting a ballot using RCV, the cost of single-use items such as ballots, and labor needed for implement the changes.

Following an election, nearly all states require auditing validation efforts largely involving the checking of paper ballots or records against the results produced by the voting system to ensure accuracy. A recent report by the Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center explains how risk-limiting audits (RLAs) can be used in some types of RCV elections. RLAs randomly select a small selection of ballots and hand count a specific race on those ballots until a level of statistical certainty about the accuracy of the results is reached. “RLAs are reliable and efficient, but they are uncommon in the United States, and have almost never been used in ranked choice voting (RCV) elections. With RCV gaining popularity, implementing RLAs in ranked choice races will help ensure quality RCV elections,” states the September 2022 report.

CED will continue to follow state and local implementation of RCV, as well as bans, and track outcomes and studies pointing to the costs and benefits of the adoption of the process.
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