

RANKED CHOICE VOTING

A FairVote Primer

▶ RANKED CHOICE VOTING IS SIMPLE

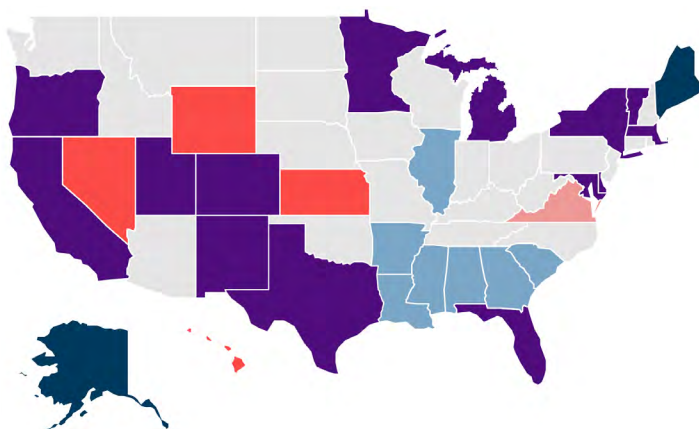
Ranked choice voting (RCV) is a way to ensure elections are fair for all voters. Voters pick a first-choice candidate and have the option to rank backup candidates in order of preference: second, third, and so on.

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.

	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th 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

▶ 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.



(As of March 1st, 2022)

- RCV for statewide/ presidential elections
- RCV used for 2020 presidential primaries
- RCV used in local elections
- RCV used in party elections
- Ranked ballots for military & overseas voting

▶ RANKED CHOICE VOTING IS POPULAR IN PRACTICE

Ranked choice voting is used for state and federal elections in Maine and Alaska. In 2020, Maine became the first state to use RCV for the presidential general election.

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 ten cities approved RCV ballot measures in 2020-2021 and will begin using RCV over the next two years. When the Utah state legislature created a RCV municipal pilot program, 23 cities opted in to use RCV in 2021.

RCV was used for Democratic presidential primaries and caucuses in five states in 2020. It was also used by three state Republican parties to elect officers and party nominees, including the winning Republican slate of candidates for Virginia statewide office in 2021. It has also been adopted by more than 40 local jurisdictions across 14 states to elect mayors, city councilors, and other local offices. Six 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.

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. RCV only needs voters to show up to vote one time, while still promoting majority rule.

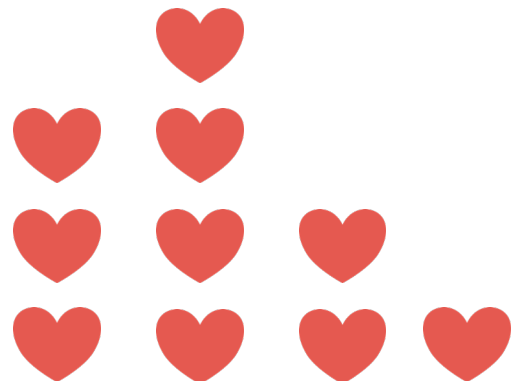
Ballot error rate is comparable or lower than in non-RCV races

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 recent municipal elections and 2020 presidential primaries.

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

34 cities and one state have begun using RCV in the last 10 years, adding to four cities starting earlier. As evidenced by exit polling, voters like RCV and voters understand RCV. With consistently high voter satisfaction, there have been zero efforts to repeal RCV during this time period.

- **77% of New York City voters** want to keep using RCV after their first use in 2021.
- **63% of Utah voters** liked using RCV for the first time in 2021.
- **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.



High Voter Turnout in RCV Races

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

- Turnout in New York City in 2021 **increased by 36%** over the previous open-seat mayoral race, and a higher share of voters who participated in the mayoral election also voted in down-ballot races.
- 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.
- 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 ten 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 promotes civil campaigning, improves representation, and that voters of all backgrounds use the ranked ballot effectively. 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 as 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.](#)

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 ELECTIONS BENEFIT CANDIDATES AND VOTERS OF COLOR

FairVote.

This report examines the causes behind the well-documented increase in representation for candidates of color under RCV. Findings include that voters of color tend to use more rankings than White voters; candidates of color benefit from round-by-round counting; and candidates pay no penalty when they compete against another candidate of the same racial or ethnic background. [Link to report.](#)