



**Legislative Council Staff**  
*Nonpartisan Services for Colorado's Legislature*

# Memorandum

October 10, 2024

**TO:** Interested Persons  
**FROM:** Kristine McLaughlin, Fiscal Analyst, 303-866-4776  
**SUBJECT:** Ranked Choice Voting

## Summary

This memorandum provides an overview of ranked choice voting in Colorado and other states. Ranked choice voting is a method of voting where voters rank candidates by preference. Ranked choice voting is currently used in nonpartisan elections in several Colorado municipalities, with at least one additional municipality planning to use it in future elections. At the November 2024 general election, Colorado voters will consider [Proposition 131](#), which would enact ranked choice voting for most state and federal elections in Colorado if approved.

## Overview of Ranked Choice Voting

The most common type of ranked choice voting is instant runoff voting, currently used for ranked choice voting elections in Colorado. In an instant runoff election, voters rank candidates by preference, and ballots are immediately tallied across multiple rounds of vote counting until one candidate receives over 50 percent of the vote. Votes are initially counted based on the first place rankings. If no candidate wins 50 percent of first choice votes, the candidate with the fewest first choice votes is eliminated and the ballots with the eliminated candidate as the first choice will have their second choice counted. This process is repeated, proceeding to third and fourth choices if higher ranked candidates are eliminated, until one candidate has 50 percent of the vote.

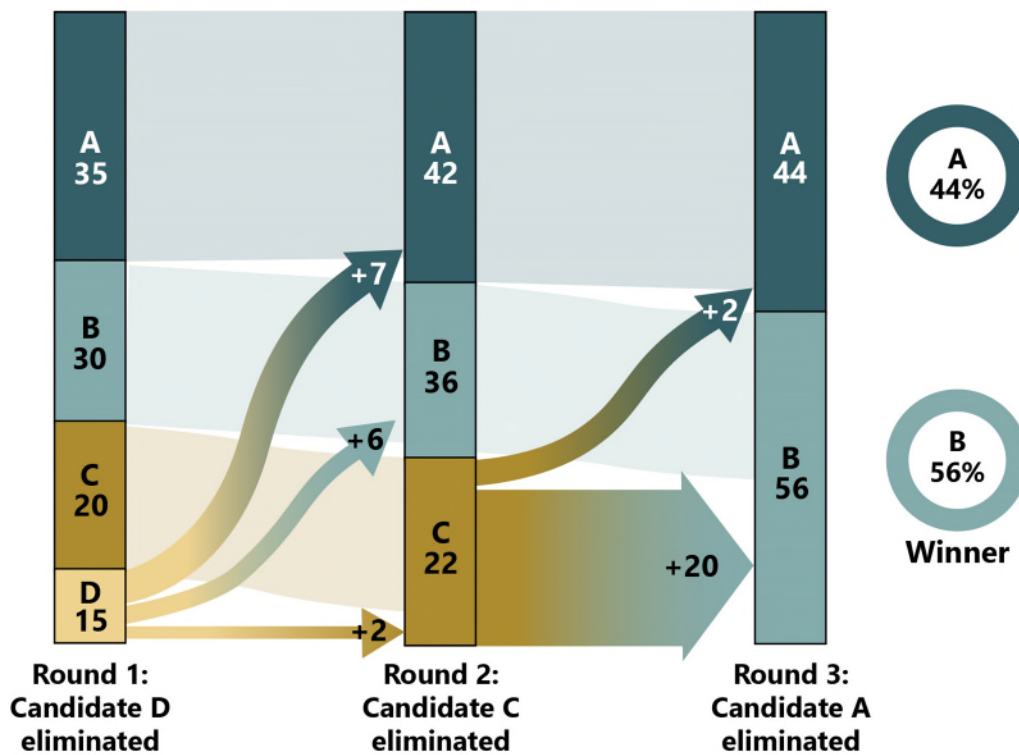
Figure 1 illustrates a sample ballot using ranked choice voting in a local, nonpartisan election. Figure 2 shows how ballots are counted across multiple rounds until a winner is determined.



**Figure 1**  
**Example of Voted Ballot Using Ranked Choice Voting**

(rank candidates)	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<b>CANDIDATE A</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>CANDIDATE B</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>CANDIDATE C</b>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>CANDIDATE D</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Figure 2**  
**Example Election Results Using Ranked Choice Voting**





## Local Use of Ranked Choice Voting in Colorado

Use of ranked choice voting by Colorado municipalities has been affected by the number of elections with more than two candidates and by statewide limitations on its use. Use and limitations of ranked choice voting in local Colorado elections are described below.

### Historical and Current Use

Currently ranked choice voting is actively used in three Colorado municipalities for local elections (Boulder, Basalt, and Broomfield). An additional municipality, Fort Collins, is planning to use ranked choice voting starting in 2026. Carbondale and Basalt adopted ranked choice voting for mayoral elections with more than two candidates in 2002, with ranked choice voting being used in Basalt but not Carbondale since the enactment of ranked choice voting. Two municipalities, Aspen and Telluride, passed laws to enact ranked choice voting but no longer use it. Aspen voted to repeal the measure and the Telluride law expired after three elections when the town council did not vote to extend it. Detail on use of ranked choice voting in these local governments is provided in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**  
**Use of Ranked Choice Voting in Local Elections in Colorado**

Municipality	Current Status	Law Enacted	Covered Office(s)	Use of Ranked Choice Voting Since Enactment
<b>Basalt</b>	Active Use (given 3+ candidates)	2002	Mayor	Used in elections for covered offices in 2020. Other elections did not have the minimum of two candidates.
<b>Boulder</b>	Active Use	2020	Mayor	Used in elections for covered offices starting in 2023.
<b>Broomfield</b>	Active Use	2021	Mayor and City Council	Used in elections for covered offices starting in 2023.
<b>Carbondale</b>	Inactive	2003	Mayor	Never used.
<b>Fort Collins</b>	Future Use	2022	All City Officials	Scheduled to start in 2025.
<b>Aspen</b>	Repealed	2007	Mayor and City Council	Repealed in 2010 after having been used in four elections.
<b>Telluride</b>	Expired	2008	Mayor	Expired in 2023 after having been used in three elections.

Source: [Wikipedia entry](#) simplified and verified by Legislative Council Staff.



## Historical Limitations

Prior to passage of [House Bill 21-1071](#), municipalities in Colorado could only use ranked choice voting in elections conducted directly by the municipality itself, and not in coordinated elections with other jurisdictions (as occurs in November elections when various federal, state, and local elections are conducted together). Some of these restrictions were lifted in 2023 and they will be completely lifted in 2026.

## Local Use of Ranked Choice Voting in Other States

Local governments in many states have enacted ranked choice voting for local elections. These local elections are typically for nonpartisan offices and a primary election is not conducted. Information on the number of local jurisdictions using ranked choice voting in other states is outlined in Table 3 below.

There are a couple reasons why ranked choice voting is relatively more common at the local level than at the state level. First, local elections for nonpartisan offices usually do not use primary elections to narrow the field of candidates, and it is not uncommon for three or more candidates to seek an office in these races. In addition, many local jurisdictions have historically required a runoff election between the top two candidates if no candidate receives at least 50 percent of the vote. Thus, at the local level, instant runoff voting is often used as an alternative to holding a separate runoff election. Some states have prohibited local governments from using ranked choice voting, including Michigan, which is why ranked choice voting is not yet in use in that state, despite being approved by several jurisdictions.



**Table 3**  
**Use of Ranked Choice Voting in Local Elections in Other State**

State	Number of Local Jurisdictions Using Ranked Choice Voting
Alaska	Multiple
California	Multiple
Colorado	Multiple
Illinois <sup>1</sup>	One
Maine	Multiple
Maryland	One
Massachusetts	Multiple
Minnesota	Multiple
Michigan <sup>2</sup>	Multiple
New Mexico	Multiple
New York	One
Oregon	Multiple
Vermont <sup>1</sup>	One
Virginia	One
Washington <sup>1</sup>	One
Utah <sup>3</sup>	Multiple

Source: [Wikipedia entry](#) simplified and verified by Legislative Council Staff.

- <sup>1</sup> Ranked choice voting approved but not yet in use.
- <sup>2</sup> While approved at the local level in several jurisdictions, state law in Michigan currently prohibits the use of ranked choice voting in local elections.
- <sup>3</sup> Ranked choice voting was enacted as a pilot program that has since expired.



## **Ranked Choice Voting at the State and Federal Level**

Ranked choice voting is used in several other states at the state and federal level for primary and general elections. More detail about ranked choice voting and the election methods used in other states is provided below.

### **Ranked Choice Voting in General Elections**

Two states, Alaska and Maine, use ranked choice voting for general elections. Alaska uses it for all offices, while Maine only uses ranked choice voting in elections for the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. In addition, Hawaii uses ranked choice voting but only for special elections for U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

Nevada voters have given initial approval of ranked choice voting, but initiated constitutional amendments in Nevada must be approved by voters in two consecutive general elections before becoming law. If Question 3 is approved again at the 2024 general election, the state will begin using ranked choice voting for all state and federal offices, except U.S. President, in 2026.

Table 2 lists the states using ranked choice voting in general elections. It also provides information on the type of primary election used to select candidates appearing at the ranked choice general election. Information about how primary elections effect the implementation of ranked choice voting in general elections is provided after Table 2.

### **Ranked Choice Voting in Primary Elections**

In addition to general elections, Maine also uses ranked choice voting in partisan primary elections for U.S. Senate, U.S. House of Representatives, Governor, and the state legislature. The Republican Party in Virginia has chosen to use ranked choice voting for primary elections in select districts. Use of ranked choice voting in primary elections is also covered in Table 2 below.



**Table 2**  
**Other States Using Ranked Choice Voting**  
**in Primary or General Elections**

State	Type of Primary Election	Offices Elected Using Ranked Choice at General Elections
<b>Alaska</b>	All-candidate primary election with top four candidates advancing to ranked choice general election.	All offices
<b>Hawaii</b>	No primary held before special elections.	Special elections for U.S Senate and U.S House only
<b>Maine</b>	Ranked choice partisan primary elections for U.S Senate, U.S House, Governor and State Legislature.	U.S Senate and U.S House
<b>Virginia</b>	Ranked choice used in select Republican primary elections only.	None
<b>Nevada</b>	All-candidate primary election with top five candidates advancing to ranked choice general election	All offices except U.S. President, if and when constitutional amendment is ratified

Source: [Wikipedia entry](#) simplified and verified by Legislative Council Staff.

### **Types of Primary Elections Used with Ranked Choice Voting**

In addition to using ranked choice voting in general elections, Alaska and potentially Nevada (pending ratification) also use an all-candidate primary election in which a select number of candidates can advance to the general election regardless of political affiliation (the top four and top five candidates, respectively). This model is similar to the system proposed by Proposition 131 in Colorado.

Active use of ranked choice voting may depend on the type of primary. In traditional partisan primary elections only one candidate per party advances, often resulting in two candidates, one from each major party, at the general election (or in some cases, one unopposed candidate if one major party has a clear advantage). In these cases, ranking is irrelevant. The type of primary may also determine whether or not voters are asked to rank candidates from the same party, which may affect campaign and voting strategies.

Some states use alternate types of primary elections without using ranked choice voting at the general election. For example, California and Washington advance the top two candidates, regardless of party affiliation, from an all-candidate primary to a general election conducted using single-choice voting.



## **Other Uses of Ranked Choice Voting**

In addition to instances of ranked choice voting discussed in the above text and tables, some jurisdictions allow military and overseas voters to use ranked choice voting so that they will not need to cast a separate ballot in the event of a runoff election. And some political parties use ranked choice voting at caucuses and conventions.