

Letter to Congress on Ending Single Member Congressional Districts and Adopting Proportional Representation



[Scholars for Redistricting Reform](#)

Sep 19, 2022

AN OPEN LETTER TO CONGRESS:

As the 2020 redistricting process comes to a close, it is clear that our winner-take-all system — where each U.S. House district is represented by a single person — is fundamentally broken. We call on

Congress to adopt inclusive, multi-member districts with competitive and responsive proportional representation.

According to a recent analysis of the newly-redistricted House map, more than 90% of districts are effectively a lock for one of the parties this November. This means that many millions of voters have no meaningful say in general elections, with the overwhelming majority of Congress effectively chosen by low-turnout primaries. In other words, winner-take-all increasingly means we already know the outcome of almost any given race.

This collapse in competitive elections helps explain why Congress today is so polarized and held hostage by obstructionist politics, especially on the right. Because 90% of House members don't have to worry about general elections and are beholden only to their district's small number of primary voters, extreme elements are overrepresented to the point where one party in our two party system has been fully taken over by members that reject democracy itself.

Contrary to popular belief, geography — not gerrymandering — is the primary cause of this districting crisis. As the country has sorted geographically, with Democrats concentrating in cities and Republicans in rural areas, it is often impossible to draw competitive single-member districts that offer any semblance of geographic continuity and that keep communities of interest together. In fact, maps drawn by nonpartisan commissions in this redistricting cycle had just as few highly-competitive districts as those drawn by politicians.

At the same time, our political divisions are far less dire than our electoral system implies. At the level of narrow, winner-take-all districts, only the majority opinion gets represented and we appear divided between fully Democratic and fully Republican districts. But on the scale of our communities, regions, and states, the United States remains a diverse and complex political tapestry. In 2020, there were more Trump voters in California than any other state and more Biden voters in Texas than in New York or Illinois. The vast — even

overwhelming — majority of Americans don't fit precisely into the ideology of their single-member congressional representation.

Congress has the ability to embrace this political richness by joining nearly every other advanced democracy in moving to more inclusive, multi-member districts made competitive and responsive by proportional representation.

The effects would be far-reaching and salutary. Proportional representation would render gerrymandering obsolete and help ensure that a political party's share of votes in an election actually determines how many seats it holds in the House. Larger, multi-member districts would mean almost every voter could cast a meaningful vote, regardless of where they live. And as the Supreme Court further weakens the Voting Rights Act, proportional representation allows communities of color to have their voices reflected — and their candidates elected — at the ballot box.

This fix would require only an act of Congress. Proportional, multi-member districts are not only constitutional, they are broadly consistent with American history and political norms. In fact, multi-member House districts were common across the country for over 150 years — albeit without proportional representation, which proved a fatal flaw, as at-large districts were used to effectively disenfranchise minority groups and grossly over-represent narrow majorities. Congress must now improve upon, not ignore, this history.

This redistricting cycle is a wake-up call for voters and our elected representatives. Our arcane, single-member districting process divides, polarizes, and isolates us from each other. It has effectively extinguished competitive elections for most Americans, and produced a deeply divided political system that is incapable of responding to changing demands and emerging challenges with necessary legitimacy.

Accordingly, we urge Congress to ensure that this is the last redistricting cycle under a failed single-winner system and to adopt inclusive, multi-member districts with proportional representation.

Sincerely,

Daron Acemoglu, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
William Aceves, California Western School of Law
Peter Christian Aigner, CUNY Graduate Center
John Aldrich, Duke University
Tyler Anbinder, George Washington University
Anne-Marie Angelo, University of Sussex
Elisabeth Anker, George Washington University
Bettina Aptheker, University of California, Santa Cruz
Deborah Avant, University of Denver
Robert Axelrod, University of Michigan
David Barker, American University
Naazneen Barma, University of Denver
John Barry, Tulane University
David Bateman, Cornell University
Rachel Beatty Riedl, Cornell University
Ruth Ben-Ghiat, New York University
Paul Bender, Arizona State University
Sheri Berman, Barnard College
John Bieter, Boise State University
Robert Blair, Brown University
Jon Bond, Texas A&M University
Adam Bonica, Stanford University
Nikolas Bowie, Harvard Law School
John Brooke, The Ohio State University
Nadia Brown, Georgetown university
John Carey, Dartmouth College
Simone Caron, Wake Forest University
Alton Carroll, Northern Virginia Community College
Dan Carter, University of South Carolina
Alessandra Casella, Columbia University
Katherine Charron, North Carolina State University
Erica Chenoweth, Harvard University

Beverly Cigler, Pennsylvania State University
Joshua Cohen, University of California, Berkeley
Lizabeth Cohen, Harvard University
Josep M. Colomer, Georgetown University
Mark Copelovitch, University of Wisconsin – Madison
Michael Coppedge, University of Notre Dame
Robert Cottrell
Gary Cox, Stanford University
Melody Crowder-Meyer, Davidson College
Matt Dallek, George Washington University
Christian Davenport, University of Michigan
Hannah Demeritt, Duke University School of Law
Matthew Dennis, University of Oregon
Lee Drutman, New America
Thomas Dublin, State University of New York at Binghamton
Chris Edelson, American University
Mark Edwards, Spring Arbor University
Nate Ela, University of Cincinnati
Kevin Esterling, University of California, Riverside
Matthew Evangelista, Cornell University
Sara M. Evans, University of Minnesota
Christina Ewig, University of Minnesota
David Faris, Roosevelt University
Christopher Federico, University of Minnesota
Ronald Feinman, Florida Atlantic University
Steven Fish, University of California, Berkeley
Dana R. Fisher, University of Maryland
Jill Frank, Cornell University
William Franko, West Virginia University
Caroline Fredrickson, Georgetown Law
Amy Fried, University of Maine
Scott Frisch, California State University, Channel Islands
Francis Fukuyama, Stanford University
Daniel Galvin, Northwestern University
Marshall Ganz, Harvard Kennedy School of Government
Martin Gilens, University of California, Los Angeles
Simon Gilhooley, Bard College
Annalise Glauz-Todrank, Wake Forest University
Benjamin Goldfrank, Seton Hall University
Sara Goodman, University of California, Irvine
Jake Grumbach, University of Washington
Hannah Gurman, New York University
Nancy Hagedorn, State University of New York at Fredonia
Hahrie Han, Johns Hopkins University

Gretchen Helmke, University of Rochester
Charlotte Hill, University of California, Berkeley
Jennifer Hochschild, Harvard University
Wesley Hogan, Duke University
Aziz Huq, University of Chicago
Jeffrey Isaac, Indiana University, Bloomington
Karl Jacoby, Columbia University
Dolores E. Janiewski, Victoria University of Wellington – Te Herenga Waka
Joel Johnson, Colorado State University – Pueblo
Nathan Kalmoe, Louisiana State University
Nancy Kassop, State University of New York at New Paltz
Richard Katz, Johns Hopkins University
Peter Katzenstein, Cornell University
Thomas Keck, Syracuse University
Nathan Kelly, University of Tennessee
Robert Keohane,
Alex Keyssar, Harvard University
Helen Kinsella, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Rachel Kleinfeld, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
James Kloppenberg, Harvard University
Louise W. Knight, Northwestern University
Richard Kohn, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Ronald Krebs, University of Minnesota
Daniel Kreiss, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Aleksander Ksiazkiewicz, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Tim Lacy, Loyola University Chicago
David D. Laitin, Stanford University
Derek Larson, The College of St. Benedict/St. John's University
Bruce Larson, Gettysburg College
Jeffrey Lerner, Wake Forest University
Margaret Levi, Stanford University
Peter Levine, Tufts University
Steven Levitsky, Harvard University
Robert Lieberman, Johns Hopkins University
Robert Lifset, University of Oklahoma
Arend Lijphart, University of California, San Diego
Kriste Lindenmeyer, Rutgers University
Nancy MacLean, Duke University
Scott Mainwaring, University of Notre Dame
Thomas Mann, Brookings Institution
Jane Manners, Temple University
John Martin, Duke University
Seth Masket, University of Denver
Fritz Mayer, University of Denver

Eleanor McConnell, Frostburg State University
Jennifer McCoy, Georgia State University
Jason McDaniel, San Francisco State University
Bonnie M. Meguid, University of Rochester
Walter Mignolo, Duke University
Terry Moe, Stanford University
Ralph Morelli
Daniel Myers, University of Minnesota
Carol Nechemias, Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg
David Niven, University of Cincinnati
William Nomikos, Washington University in St. Louis
Brendan Nyhan, Dartmouth College
Stan Oklobdzija, University of California, Riverside
Peter Onuf, University of Virginia
Annelise Orleck, Dartmouth College
Benjamin I. Page, Northwestern University
Richard Parker, Harvard University
Josh Pasek, University of Michigan
Thomas Pepinsky, Cornell University
Isabel Perera, Cornell University
Rick Perlstein
Benjamin Peterson, Alma College
David Peterson, Iowa State University
Minh-Thu Pham, Princeton University
Dirk Philipsen, Duke University
Brian Pollins, The Ohio State University
Ethan Porter, George Washington University
Charles Postel, San Francisco State University
Lawrence N. Powell
John Quist, Shippensburg University
Ben Railton, Fitchburg State University
Miles Rapoport, Harvard Kennedy School of Government
Daniel Richter, University of Pennsylvania
Kenneth Roberts, Cornell University
Bert A. Rockman, Purdue University
Joel Rogers, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Deondra Rose, Duke University
Anne Sarah Rubin, University of Maryland, Baltimore County
Vicki Ruiz, University of California, Irvine
Larry Sabato, University of Virginia
Anoop Sarbahi, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
Martha Saxton, Amherst College
Ethan Scheiner, University of California, Davis
Stephen Schlesinger

Vivien Schmidt, Boston University
Philippe Schmitter, European University Institute
Sanford Schram, Hunter College and the Graduate Center CUNY
Robert Shapiro, Columbia University
Matthew Shugart, University of California, Davis
Peter Siavelis, Wake Forest University
Dan Slater, University of Michigan
Jason Scott Smith, University of New Mexico
Steven Smith, Washington University
Rogers Smith, University of Pennsylvania
Shannon Smith, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University
Joe Soss, University of Minnesota
Thomas Spragens, Duke University
Leonard Steinhorn, American University
Susan Stokes, University of Chicago
Jennie Sweet-Cushman, Chatham University
Rein Taagepera, University of California, Irvine
Paul Taillon, University of Auckland
Bob Pepperman Taylor, University of Vermont
Steven Taylor, Troy University
Alexander Theodoridis, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Susan Thorne, Duke University
Chloe Thurston, Northwestern University
James Traub, New York University
Chuck Tryon, Fayetteville State University
Mustafa Tuna, Duke University
Antonio Ugues Jr., St. Mary's College of Maryland
Jennifer Victor, George Mason University
Penny Von Eschen, University of Virginia
Barbara F Walter, University of California, San Diego
Elizabeth Wemlinger, Salem College
Tisa Wenger, Yale University
Robb Willer, Stanford University
Garry Wills, Northwestern University
Amanda Wintersieck, Virginia Commonwealth University
Daniel Wirls, University of California, Santa Cruz
Christopher Witko, The Pennsylvania State University
Alex Zakaras, University of Vermont
Michael Zuckerman, University of Pennsylvania

<https://boulderreportinglab.org/2026/02/08/nicole-speer-and-celeste-landry-we-can-do-better-than-just-adding-more-boulder-county-commissioners/>

OPINION

Nicole Speer and Celeste Landry: We can do better than just adding more Boulder County commissioners

Expanding the Board of County Commissioners without changing how county elections work risks reinforcing the same representation gaps voters want to solve. That's why we're proposing a companion measure on proportional representation.

by **Opinion** February 8, 2026

Commentaries are opinion pieces contributed by readers and newsmakers. Boulder Reporting Lab's Opinion section is a forum for informed perspectives and civil debate on issues shaping life in Boulder and Boulder County. These pieces reflect the voices of our community — not the views of BRL. Want to share your perspective? [Here's how to submit.](#)

This commentary is by Nicole Speer, a member of the Boulder City Council writing in her individual capacity, and Celeste Landry, who has advocated for proportional representation at the city, county, state and federal levels.

Boulder County voters may soon be asked to expand the Board of County Commissioners from three to five members and choose between two possible structures: three district seats plus two at-large seats (3+2), or five district seats elected only by district voters. Supporters say this expansion will increase representation. We appreciate that intention. But we worry that these proposals, while well-meaning, won't deliver the broader representation people hope for.

Under both proposals, every seat would still be elected the same way we elect them now: one seat at a time, one winner at a time.

At-large seats consistently advantage the largest and wealthiest population centers. Under the proposed 3+2 model, it would be entirely possible for residents of the City of Boulder to hold three out of five seats despite having about one-third of the county's population. That's not more representative; it's less.

The five-district model avoids that problem, but it also means most county voters only get to vote for one commissioner. And simply adding more districts doesn't change who wins or whose voices carry weight. Established politicians can move to and run from another district

(e.g., Lauren Boebert), districts can be drawn to split and dilute voting blocs, and some groups of voters are spread across the county in a way no district can capture, so they never get a chance to elect someone who reflects their priorities (e.g., rural residents). The geographic boundaries and number of seats determine who can run, not who can win.

We've seen this pattern play out in Boulder County for years. When voters can choose only one candidate per seat in a county that leans heavily toward one party, the primary becomes the deciding election. Only a fraction of voters participate in primaries, and those who do tend to be the ones most connected to political networks. As a result, the outcome reflects turnout patterns and insider networks more than the full community. Winner-take-all elections convert existing inequalities into predictable results.

Changing the number of seats doesn't fix that. Changing the electoral system does.

Going to five commissioners is a structural change in terms of county administration and the county budget, but it is not a change in terms of better representation. For better representation, we must incorporate changes that are proven to improve representation, such as moving from winner-take-all elections to proportional elections.

In practice, a proportional election would mean that a group of political candidates that earns about a third of the votes would earn about a third of the seats. That way, no single group can sweep every seat unless almost all the voters vote the same way. The five-district and 3+2 models don't do this because each seat is still elected one at a time, so a single political majority can still win every seat.

That's because simply expanding the number of commissioner districts doesn't address turnout, barriers to candidacy or the structural forces that shape who gets elected. County commissioners serve as the county's administrative leadership and carry out state-mandated duties. Adding more elected officials to that structure doesn't necessarily improve representation.

There are several reforms that could improve representation on the Board of County Commissioners, from public campaign financing to universal voting, but most require time and statewide coordination. Proportional voting is the one reform that can realistically be paired now with this ballot measure, given the election timeline.

A community-led coalition, including organizations like the League of Women Voters of Boulder County, could quickly bring forward a proportional representation recommendation for a companion measure for the commissioners to consider for this year's ballot. Since the proponents of this measure seem committed to improving representation, we'd like to see diverse community members, including those historically excluded from local political networks and those with expertise in increasing representation, brought into the conversation.

Why are we proposing a companion measure on proportional representation? Right now, Colorado county clerks can't run a proportional voting county election. A companion measure could ask voters to adopt a proportional voting system as soon as county clerks are ready and have support from the state legislature and executive branch, whether voters choose to stay with three commissioners or move to five.

Whether the commission expansion measure passes or fails, voters probably won't want to revisit the issue soon afterward to adopt a new system, even a better proportional system. A companion measure now avoids a follow-up measure later. It's a win-win-win. If both measures pass, those who want more commissioners and those who want to increase representation can both win. And even if one or both fail, voters still benefit by having participated in a more accurate conversation about representation.

Most voters are only familiar with our traditional choose-one voting, and the petitioners' message is compelling. But neither the five-district model nor the 3+2 model will increase the likelihood that more people of color, low- and middle-income residents, rural communities or renters will win seats.

Continuing to do the same thing and expecting a different result isn't realistic. If we want local governments that reflect the diversity and expertise of the people who live in Boulder County, we must choose reforms that do more than increase the number of people who serve.



Ranked Choice Voting for Colorado
1536 Wynkoop Street #908
Denver, CO 80202

Ranked Choice Voting Empowered Voters in Boulder 86% of voters say RCV is easy

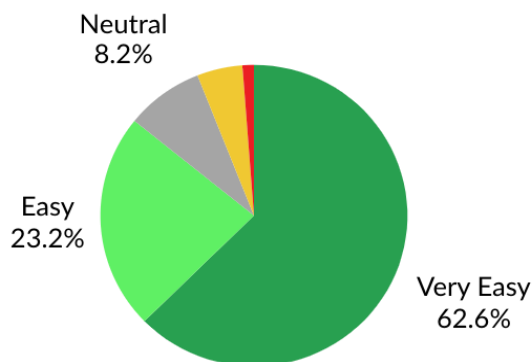
Boulder, Colorado used [Ranked Choice Voting](#) (RCV) to elect their mayor for the first time on November 7, 2023. They join the Broomfield, Telluride, [Basalt](#), and Carbondale in being protected from split-majorities in elections where there are more than two-candidates in a race.

This race was the first time that Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) was used in a county-coordinated election. Both [County](#) and [City](#) offices offered voter information about ranked ballots; candidates supplemented by including sample rankings on their campaign materials.

Voter Experience Poll

An independent voter experience poll of 600 City of Boulder voters was conducted by [Citizen Data](#) on behalf of the RCV for Colorado Education Fund to determine if RCV lived up to expectations. [It did.](#)

RCV is Easy: 86%



The most important metric is whether voters are able to use their ballots. A very strong majority of voters, 86%, say that RCV ballots are easy.

Similar ballot studies for pick-one plurality shows that fewer voters, 80%, find those ballots easy to use.

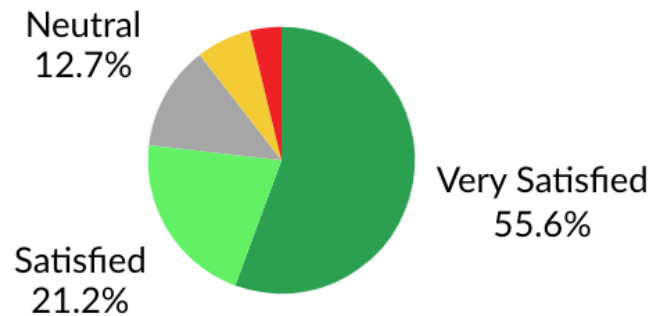
For voters, RCV is an improvement in usability.

RCV is satisfying: 77%

A strong majority, 77%, of Boulder voters were satisfied with their RCV voting experience.

As a point of comparison, a Pew study this year found that only 27% of Americans are satisfied with pick-one plurality.

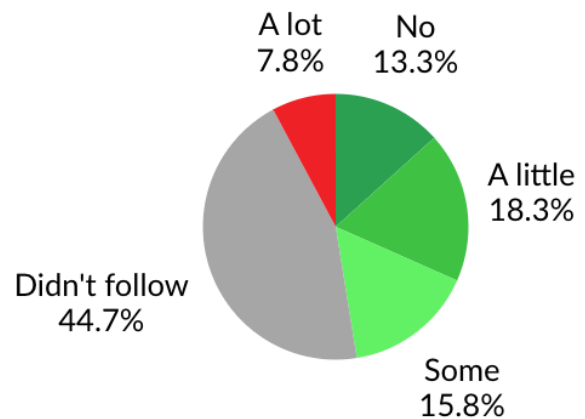
For voters, RCV is an improvement in satisfaction.



RCV is Issue-Focused: 92%

Only 8% of voters said there was “a lot” of negative campaigning, also known as mud-slinging.

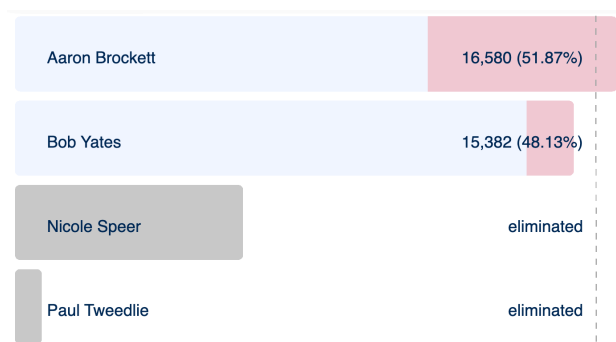
This metric is of interest because around the nation, negative politics have affected friendships, family relationships, and civic cohesion.



RCV incentivizes campaigns to connect with the voters on the issues, because even if they are not a voter’s first choice, second-choice rankings could help them build a consensus win. Ultimately, greater focus on the issues delivers more power for the voters. They know more about what they are voting upon.

Tight Race with Robust Competition

All of the candidates had a fair chance to win. The first round of tally determined that no candidate had an outright. An instant runoff was tabulated with each update of results. Neither Speer nor Tweedlie had enough support to surpass the other candidates. They were both eliminated, but their supporters were not. Those ballots were counted for the voters’ second active choice.



Although Yates picked up support from both Tweedlie and Speer's first-choice voters, he did not pass the majority threshold in the final round. The [unofficial tally](#) as of November 10 showed Aaron Brockett winning with a 3.74 point spread.

Proven Success

The Boulder Count Audit Board successfully completed the Risk-limiting Audit (RLA) as is best practices so that the public may have full confidence in the accuracy of the tally.

Eye to the Future

There is a possibility of expanding RCV to Boulder council elections. Fort Collins will begin using RCV for both mayor and council in 2025.

House State, Civic, Military, & Veterans Affairs

03/02/2026 01:30 PM

HB26-1203 Modification of County Commissioner Elections

Typed Text of Testimony Submitted

Name, Position, Representing	Typed Text of Testimony
Linda Templin For RCV Colorado	<p>My name is Linda Templin, Executive Director of RCV Colorado. I have a Master of Public Administration. I have been reviewing scholarly research and conducting studies on Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) and RCV used for proportional representation (pRCV) to determine its reliability and fairness to all concerned. For clarity, pRCV is also known as Single Transferable Vote (STV) within the state "Ranked Voting Method" rules.</p> <p>Ranked ballots are proven easy for all voters to use, easy for clerks to administer, and reliably audited. The same applies to pRCV, with the minor difference being conventional audits rather than risk-limiting audits. In fact pRCV has been used in the US since 1915.</p> <p>PRCV ensures that every voter gets their fair share of the say. If counties exercise the option to use pRCV to elect their five county commissioners in one cycle, the win threshold will ensure that at a bare minimum 83% of the voters will have their viewpoint represented. In reality, pRCV in Portland, Oregon, gave representation values to 98% of voters.</p> <p>PRCV respects the voters and their values. Building this fairness into the elections is part of forming a more perfect union. Other places that used our same pick-one plurality system have updated to pRCV: Australia, Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.</p>

	<p>Including the pRCV option will ensure that county commissions can weigh issues from a variety of local perspectives - if they opt to use it. I urge you to support this bipartisan legislation.</p>
<p>Cynthia Prien For themselves</p>	<p>It is imperative that HB26-1203 pass to ensure fair and equal representation for ALL Douglas County citizens. The County is ruled by three overlords who fail to listen to constituents by actively suppressing our collective voice. They operate with impunity behind close doors with little to no transparency. Douglas County has approximately 400,000 residents and a county of this size would be better served with 5 commissioners who should represent diverse viewpoints. A 5 member Board will dilute the concentration of power and will lead to more robust debate, improve oversight and transparency. Thank you.</p>
<p>Kristin Dallison Amend themselves</p>	<p>Chair and Members of the Committee,</p> <p>I am writing in support of amending HB26-1203.</p> <p>I do not support a mandate requiring counties to move to five commissioners. While additional representation may benefit some counties, forcing all counties into a five-commissioner structure creates significant and ongoing fiscal impacts. In La Plata County, each commissioner earns approximately \$100,000 annually, not including benefits and administrative support costs. Expanding from three to five commissioners would require hundreds of thousands of additional taxpayer dollars every year. Counties should retain local control to determine whether expansion is fiscally responsible for their communities.</p> <p>However, I strongly support eliminating at-large voting for county commissioners and allowing commissioners to be elected strictly by district.</p> <p>In La Plata County, voting patterns consistently show a divide between Durango and rural communities such as Bayfield and Ignacio. When commissioners are elected at-large, the population center in Durango determines the outcome of every seat. As a result,</p>

	<p>rural voters, despite clearly supporting different candidates, are effectively disenfranchised. This structure produces a board that reflects only the majority population center rather than the geographic and economic diversity of the county.</p> <p>District-based voting would ensure that rural communities have meaningful representation. Counties are not homogeneous. Agricultural, rural, and small-town residents face different priorities and challenges than urban centers. Representation should reflect that reality.</p> <p>Board diversity, geographic, ideological, and experiential, strengthens governance. It ensures debate, balance, and accountability. It prevents consolidation of power in a single population hub. Most importantly, it restores trust among residents who feel unheard under an at-large system.</p> <p>I respectfully urge the committee to amend HB26-1203 to:</p> <p>Allow counties to determine for themselves whether to expand to five commissioners, and</p> <p>Require or enable commissioners to be elected by district rather than at-large.</p> <p>Local control and fair representation should guide this legislation.</p> <p>Thank you for your consideration.</p> <p>Kristin Dallison Bayfield Colorado</p>
<p>Donna Sam</p>	<p>I want to ensure that people in each county have fair representation. By giving counties with more than 70000 residents a larger say by</p>

For themselves	increasing the number of commissioners for that county delivers that representation. The bill also ensures that these commissioners either reside in the district they represent or are elected through a ranked choice voting method, thus encouraging candidates to appeal to all county residents, rather than by simply to majority interests.
T.J. Sullivan For Parker Chamber of Commerce	The Parker Chamber of Commerce supports this measure. There are three commissioners in Douglas County. The commissioner who represents Parker also represents the Lone Tree area, and the concerns of that area are significantly different than Parker's. Parker is not receiving adequate representation at the county level. Five commissioners in Douglas County would dramatically improve the quality of representation for our town and business interests. We also believe it would reduce corruption and nonsensical behavior that we have witnessed from the current commissioners.
L Doppler For themselves	I am a resident of Douglas County and cannot fathom why we have only 3 commissioners for such a large county. I do not feel at all represented. Having 5 commissioners, elected at large, makes sense to me.
Robert Dziubla For themselves	<p>Dear Ladies & Gentlemen: I heartily support HB26-1203 which requires that counties over 70,000 persons must have 5 county commissioners. I live in Douglas County, which has about 394,000 residents. But we have only 3 commissioners. That means that each County Commissioner represents 131,000 residents. That is gross under-representation of our residents, and the 3 reigning commissioners wield enormous power. More power than we can entrust to them. We truly must and should have a more representative County Commission that adequately represents us, the people. We the voters deserve better.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>Robert Dziubla Castle Rock, CO</p>
Michael Burmeister	Passage of HB26-1203 will help prevent two members of current three-person county commissions from freezing out the third

For themselves	commissioner based on personal or other improper basis. It's easy for two people to improperly collude against a third. This is much harder when you require three persons out of five to collude. Excluding one-third of the elected officials in a small body disenfranchises a major portion of the electorate and is never acceptable, yet it happens with petty, low-level politicians (e.g., Douglas County).
Jill Smith For themselves	I'm writing in support of this bill concerning the need for Douglas County to increase the number of county commissioners to five (5). Last year when Home Rule was pushed through by the commissioners with so little input and review, it really demonstrated the need for more voices for this large and growing county.
Stephanie Ohnigian For themselves	I live in Douglas County. I think we need 5 commissioners due to our growth. The three commissioners we have now seem overwhelmed and unable to get to meetings on time and do not have time for public comment. They could divide up the work better and respond better with more people. We could possibly get a more balanced approach to governance and get better answers and solutions to concerns about how Douglas County is growing and changing. I think this would be good for transparency and communication.
Beth Turner-Graziano For themselves	County government is where the work gets done. As hard as all of you work, based on our government structure, less so at the state level, and the federal level...well? Douglas County is 370,000 people. We have 3 commissioners, or 123K people/commissioner. Loudoun County VA, by comparison, has 440,000 people and they have 9 county supervisors or 55K people per supervisor, and not counting the 9th - Chair at Large. Abe Laydon, DC Commissioner, as an example, in addition to his fundamental responsibilities as a County Commissioner, "also serves as a representative of Douglas County, by way of Board appointment, to the following area organizations: Arapahoe County Public Airport Authority Board, Arapahoe/Douglas Workforce Investment Board, Centennial Airport Community Noise Roundtable, Denver South Economic Development Partnership Board of Directors and Denver South I-25 Urban Corridor Transportation Management Authority, Community Services Block Grant Tripartite Board, Douglas County Youth Initiative Advisory Board, and the Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation. He previously served on Developmental Pathways Board of Directors, and the Colorado Office of Behavioral Health 988 Implementation Planning Committee." - See

	<p>DC Commissioners website. Let's be honest. How much time can he possible spend on or devote to all these committees? And what time is left for core duties? These folks are simply spread too thin. Adding 2 more people only makes sense.</p>
<p>Constance Ingram For themselves</p>	<p>As a 22-year resident and taxpayer in Highlands Ranch, I am strongly in favor of electing commissioners based on our location, rather than at-large. Douglas County is a large county with a multifaceted population; each area, such as Highlands Ranch/Lone Tree, has specific concerns for which we need representation. This is a matter of good governance for our county. Please vote in favor of HB26-1203.</p>
<p>Janet Berger For themselves</p>	<p>To all our representatives, I have lived in Douglas County for over 30 years. The population has gone from 175,766 in 2000, to 393,995 in 2024. In that time I watched many different BOCC members. The idea that 3 commissioners who run county-wide can adequately represent this growing population was proven ridiculous by the vote last year against their proposal for Home Rule here. Please support the mandatory increase in size for Boards of County Commissioners, (for counties whose population exceeds 75,000 with the provision that each of 4 districts must have commissioner who is elected by plurality of citizens in their district, plus 1 commissioner to be elected-at-large. This would resolve problems for many counties that are growing very quickly. Please vote yes for this bill and if possible, add the language regarding the qualifications of the electorate for each commissioner. Thank you,</p>
<p>Bennett Rutledge Against themselves</p>	<p>HB26-1205 is totally unnecessary micromanagement of the election of County Commissioners, especially since it offends Home Rule Charter counties, and does not address the most repugnant non-compliances with Section 5 of Colorado's own Bill of Rights: the creation, by those in power, of lists of "certified candidates" and summarily eliminating any votes which do not conform with the current government's list.</p> <p>Even if it were necessary to rein in, in some wise, counties adopting policies defying Section 5, HB26-1205 is outrageously restrictive. The number of districts, for example, could be however many districts would provide between three and nineteen districts, each with a population within 20% of each other and meeting demographic uniformity standards. Also the choices of election protocols should</p>

	<p>not be restricted to only two. Please either vote AGAINST HB26-1205, or amend it by scraping it clean and starting over. Thank you for your kind attention to this.</p>
<p>Kristen Nelson For themselves</p>	<p>A commission of three members who are very similar to one another can be a cause of groupthink. Groupthink is a psychological phenomenon leading to poor decision-making due to the desire for harmony and conformity within a group (Janis, 1971, 1982.) A three-member commission is more likely to fail to consider alternative perspectives because 1) there is a powerful leader who demands conformity, 2) members may feel stressed to quickly reach consensus, and 3) members may be motivated to maintain their self-esteem, so they will not speak up and offer alternative solutions. A narrowly focused three-member commission is prone to inefficient problem solving, lack of creativity, and self-censorship which can result in poor decision making.</p> <p>Research on high-performance teams emphasizes the importance of optimal team size to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. Studies indicate that teams ranging from 5 to 9 members are more effective because they maintain better communication, foster strong relationships, and ensure that member contributions are recognized and valued. A 5-member commission composed of members with different backgrounds, experiences and thinking is crucial to successful performance, innovation and decision making.</p> <p>References</p> <p>https://www.simplypsychology.org/groupthink.html</p> <p>https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/balancing-team-size-optimal-efficiency-erwin-peter-9s8ye</p> <p>https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/characteristics-of-an-effective-team</p>
<p>Robin Mendelson</p>	<p>Hi, I've lived in Douglas County for almost 29 years. It's grown from the small towns of Parker and Castle Rock to the large suburban areas</p>

<p>For themselves</p>	<p>of Highlands Ranch and Lone Tree that are fully integrated with the economy of Denver. The light rail system reaches into our county and decisions and policy made here aligns with the integration of our local, county, and state commercial ecosystems. You know what doesn't align? The number of commissioners - we have only 3! Madison County in Alabama has a similar population as Douglas but they have 7 commissioners...it's time for BETTER representation!!!</p>
<p>Celeste Landry For themselves</p>	<p>Supporting the original bill which included proportional ranked voting. Please see the attached article entitled, "What Is RCV Anyway?" that I referenced in my spoken testimony https://thefulcrum.us/electoral-reforms/what-is-ranked-choice-voting-2106755</p>
<p>Jessica Capsel For themselves</p>	<p>My name is Jessica Capsel, and I am a resident of Elbert County. In rural counties like ours, representation isn't an abstract political idea - it determines whether the people who live in a community actually have a meaningful say in the decisions that affect their roads, land use, emergency services, property taxes, and local schools. Currently, Elbert County is divided into three commissioner districts, but all voters across the entire county vote for every commissioner - regardless of where they live. This means a person can be elected to represent a specific district without earning the support of the people who live in that district. Instead, they can be elected by voters from entirely different parts of the county who may have very different needs, priorities, and growth pressures. In Elbert County, we are already navigating tensions between rapidly developing areas and long-established agricultural communities. Those communities deserve commissioners who are directly accountable to them - not commissioners who can effectively bypass district voters by appealing to population centers elsewhere in the county. HB26-1203 helps restore something simple but essential: if a commissioner is supposed to represent a district, the people who live in that district should be the ones who choose them. This bill strengthens geographic representation and ensures that rural voices - especially those in less densely populated parts of counties</p>

	<p>like Elbert “ are not diluted or overridden by voters who may never set foot in their communities but still influence who governs them.</p> <p>For counties facing growth, land use conflicts, infrastructure strain, and school governance challenges, this kind of accountability matters. It ensures that local decision-makers are truly responsive to the residents they represent “ not just the countywide electorate that may have entirely different priorities.</p> <p>HB26-1203 supports fair representation, local accountability, and the principle that rural communities deserve a direct voice in their own governance.</p> <p>I respectfully urge you to support this bill.</p>
<p>Elizabeth Marsis Amend themselves</p>	<p>The best way to represent voter preference is with proportional representation in multi member districts. Bob Marshall’s bill, as originally submitted, did this. It allows for pockets of rural and urbanized areas within each county to be a united voice, unlike the District formst. Democracy needs all the help it can get right now. Do the right thing.</p>

TO: Colorado General Assembly
RE: HB26-1203 - Modification of County Commissioner Elections

I am a Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the University of Colorado Boulder, testifying in my individual capacity. My area of expertise includes redistricting and elections, with a focus on electoral systems that facilitate proportional representation. In 2021, I consulted with the Colorado Independent Legislative Redistricting Commission regarding district competitiveness. I have served as an expert witness for litigation regarding redistricting in Wisconsin and New York, and just last month I gave expert testimony in the case of Southwest Voter Registration Education Project v. City of Huntington Beach, CA. This case is being brought on behalf of Latino voters in Huntington Beach under the California Voting Rights Act, which is similar in spirit to the recently passed Colorado Voting Rights Act. My testimony was specifically about the potential of a switch from at-large plurality voting to proportional ranked choice voting (also known as "single transferable vote") to provide Latino voters in Huntington Beach with the opportunity to elect candidates of choice to the Huntington Beach city council. My analysis showed that while the current at-large plurality system has never allowed Latino voters to elect candidates of choice, a switch to proportional ranked choice voting would almost certainly give Latino voters the potential to elect a preferred candidate. Importantly, single-winner districts would be unlikely to succeed in this goal there, because the Latino population is distributed in such a way that it would not be possible to draw a district in which Latino voters comprised anywhere close to a majority.

Based on my expertise in both redistricting and proportional representation, I am asking in the strongest possible terms for the General Assembly to **pass HB26-1203 in its original form**, and to **reject the amendment that removes the proportional option for counties**. Single-winner elections by district are unlikely to improve representation for any minority group—racial, political, or otherwise—in counties where one group dominates the electorate. Multi-winner elections using proportional representation, on the other hand, provide opportunities for groups that represent smaller proportions of the electorate to achieve representation, thereby creating a more representative county commission.

An important consideration here should be the potential liability for vote dilution claims under the Colorado Voting Rights act. In any county where a protected class—such as Latino voters—comprises a substantial minority, votes cohesively, and cannot successfully elect candidates of choice under the current system, the Colorado Voting Rights act permits a vote dilution claim **even if** the protected class is not sufficiently concentrated to comprise the majority in any single-winner district. If a protected class were to prevail in such a claim, proportional ranked choice voting is one possible remedy that might be imposed by the court. It would be far better to have such an option already available in statute in order to potentially avoid prolonged and expensive litigation.

Dr. Jeanne Clelland
Professor Emeritus of Mathematics
University of Colorado Boulder
jnclelland@gmail.com



Bipartisan Policy Center

Reform Meets Reality: How Ranked Choice Voting Impacts Election Administration

Lily Kincannon, Theo Menon, and Michael Thorning





TABLE OF CONTENTS

4 INTRODUCTION

4 Figure 1: Jurisdictions Consulted in Research

6 WHAT IS RCV?

6 Figure 2: Ranked Choice Voting in the U.S.

7 BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS AND FINANCIAL COSTS

9 Figure 3: Varying RCV Implementation Costs

10 TIMING AND COMPLEXITY OF IMPLEMENTATION

12 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT, EDUCATION, AND CONFIDENCE

15 IMPACTS ON ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

19 ADVICE FOR ELECTION OFFICIALS FROM ELECTION OFFICIALS

19 CONCLUSION

Introduction

Debates about electoral reforms—in particular, ranked choice voting (RCV)—have grown more common in recent years. These debates focus heavily on important issues like the potential effects on voter turnout,¹ the tone and civility of political campaigns,² partisan polarization,³ and representation.⁴ Too often overlooked, however, are reforms’ implications for election administration, which will determine whether any preferred changes can succeed in practice.

This report gives policymakers, reform advocates, and voters practical insights from election administrators that should be weighed alongside other considerations when deciding whether to change an electoral system.

Dozens of states in 2024 considered adopting electoral reforms like RCV through either their state legislative process⁵ or by putting the question directly to voters on the ballot.⁶ As with any other political question, state lawmakers and voters are usually inundated with a variety of arguments for why these reforms should or should not be adopted.

The Bipartisan Policy Center believes the perspectives of those who run elections—election officials—deserve significant weight. They have firsthand knowledge of how elections actually operate and how voters interact with the electoral system.⁷ Too often, their views and insights are undervalued, and the effects of reforms on election administration are treated as afterthoughts. That approach is misguided, and it increases the risk of unnecessary burdens on election officials, operational failures, and diminished public confidence.

Jurisdictions Consulted in Research

BPC staff consulted with current and former election officials from 25 jurisdictions across the country.

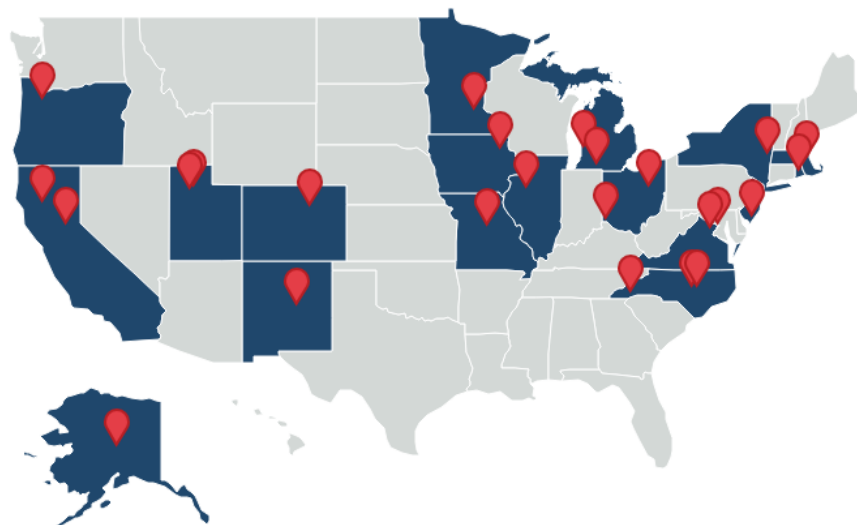


Figure 1: Jurisdictions Consulted in Research

The report's findings report draw on interviews and survey responses from a diverse set of election administrators, including those who have and have not implemented ranked choice voting. Election administrators expressed genuine concerns about the challenges of transitioning to RCV. Yet, those who have already done so approached the task with the doggedness, resourcefulness, and a sense of duty that is common in the profession.

Four overarching topics emerged as particularly crucial and are analyzed in detail below:

1. Budget considerations and financial costs;
2. Timing and complexity of implementation;
3. Public engagement, education, and confidence;
4. Impacts on administration.

The report concludes with advice for facilitating a successful transition to ranked choice voting based on information provided by election officials who have implemented RCV.

The scope and findings of this report are limited to electoral system reforms that would allow voters to rank or select multiple candidates for the same office on a single ballot, typically referred to as RCV or instant runoff voting (IRV). The report, however, should also serve as an illustration of why election administrators' views must be included when policymakers consider electoral reforms generally. As this report details, reforms to the electoral system often come with unintended or unanticipated consequences. Other common proposals—such as proportional voting, cumulative voting, or fusion voting—likely have their own election administration implications, which should be examined during public debate about their efficacy.

Finally, BPC neither endorses nor opposes ranked choice voting. Past BPC research has shown that reforms like RCV can increase voter turnout, typically at higher rates than other open primary reforms. Still, RCV is a relatively recent phenomenon in statewide elections, and only a few states and localities across the country use it. Such nascency makes sweeping, national characterizations dubious. Rather, states should continue to experiment with reform options, and public debates regarding reforms should involve a fulsome airing of considerations.

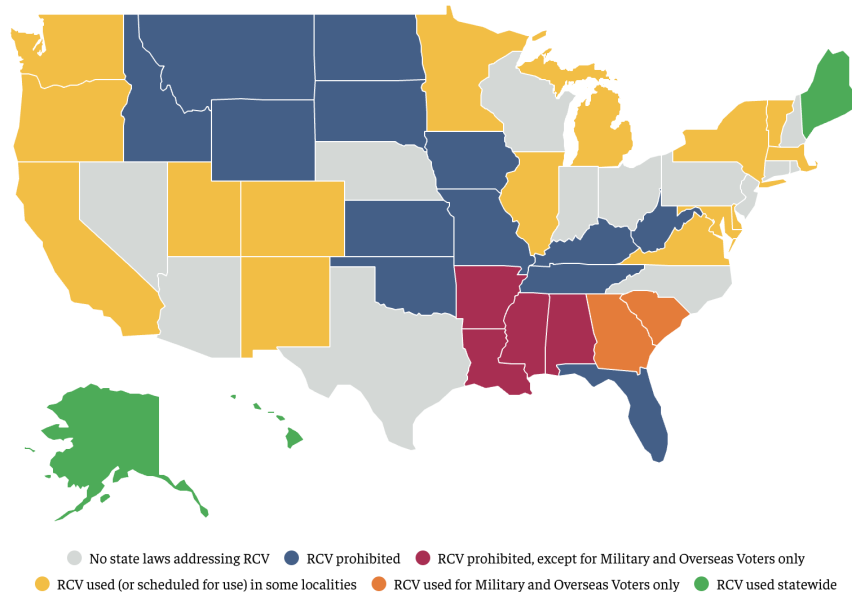
What Is RCV?

Ranked choice voting is a general term that applies to instant runoff elections and single transferable vote elections. Most voters in the United States are familiar with first-past-the-post (FPTP) elections, where voters select one candidate per office and the candidate with a plurality of votes is the winner. Some elections require a winner to receive a majority of votes and may involve a subsequent runoff between the top two candidates.

In an RCV system, voters rank multiple candidates for the same office in order of preference. If no candidate receives a majority of votes in the first round, the last-place candidate will be eliminated. Voters who cast their first preference vote for the eliminated candidate will have their vote transferred to their second choice. This process is repeated in multiple rounds until a candidate receives a majority of votes.

Some jurisdictions use RCV only for the general election, with candidates being selected through FPTP party primaries. Others use RCV in combination with an all-candidate primary, which initially winnows the field to a certain number of candidates. An RCV general election then follows.

Ranked Choice Voting in the U.S.



Source: Ballotpedia. Last Accessed 9/16/2025. Retrieved from Ranked-choice voting (RCV) - Ballotpedia.

Figure 2: Ranked Choice Voting in the U.S.

Budget Considerations and Financial Costs

- Implementing a new electoral system inevitably adds new costs, which can vary widely by state and jurisdiction.
- RCV brings two categories of costs: one-time transition expenses and ongoing annual operational costs.
- Policymakers and voters must carefully weigh the trade-offs of adopting a new electoral system, especially given that most election offices already face tight budgets.
- Policymakers should strengthen financial support for election administration when legislating any changes to the voting process.
- Over time, transitioning to RCV may produce cost savings for some jurisdictions, especially if it replaces costly runoff elections.

For election officials, both at the center of transitioning to RCV and for those anticipating the oncoming changes, funding is often the first and most daunting obstacle.

Cost considerations extend across every phase of the process, including planning and timing, public outreach, staff training, technology upgrades, election administration, and postelection reporting and auditing.

Many advocates champion RCV for its potential to reduce the costs of running elections. However, this argument generally applies to a long-term reduction in costs resulting from the elimination of runoff elections.⁸ Election administrators, on the other hand, are concerned that transitioning to RCV initially boosts expenses at a time when election office budgets are already constrained and when other aspects of the election system need investment and modernization.

In those jurisdictions that have adopted RCV, experience shows that the upfront costs can be substantial, particularly for voter education, equipment upgrades, and external support from consultants, temporary staff, or other election administration vendors. Before making any decisions on ranked choice voting, policymakers should assess the broad context and the financial implications of adopting RCV, including on existing infrastructure, jurisdiction size, rollout strategy, and election laws.

Policymakers and voters should be cognizant of two types of costs involved with transitioning to a new electoral system like RCV. First, jurisdictions will face one-time startup costs to adapt the existing system. This expense might

include new voting equipment and software, the hiring of temporary staff or consultants to help navigate the transition, training for election officials and workers, and public education campaigns. Second, the new system will incur recurring annual expenses. These may include additional ballot paper and printing costs due to longer ballots, the need for supplemental training for election workers, hiring permanent staff to manage unique aspects of the new system, and ongoing public education and engagement that continues beyond the first election cycle. Because few comprehensive, up-to-date cost studies of RCV exist, decision-makers should benchmark against similarly situated jurisdictions.

The cost of implementation varies widely. A 2022 National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) survey⁹ found that average one-time costs of implementing RCV were \$155,000. However, when the highest and lowest outliers from its survey were removed, the average cost dropped to roughly \$40,000. For some jurisdictions, one-time expenses were considerably higher.

LOCALITIES

When Minneapolis implemented RCV in 2009, it budgeted \$365,000. This included \$122,000 in one-time startup costs, \$109,500 for voter education and outreach, and \$131,000 for hand counting ballots.¹⁰

Ahead of New York City's 2018 RCV adoption, the Fiscal Policy Institute estimated one-time costs to range from "\$100,000 to \$500,000 in computer programming and other minor changes."¹¹ The city also announced a \$15 million public education campaign, which included \$2 million dedicated to translating educational materials into more than 18 languages.¹²

In 2024, Multnomah County, OR, home to much of the city of Portland, spent \$353,910 on one-time RCV transition expenses, including voting software, educational material design, results formatting, and research.¹³

STATES

For Maine's 2018 RCV implementation, the total costs for the primary and general election that year were \$440,000, including \$268,000 to print an additional ballot page.¹⁴

Alaska budgeted roughly \$3.5 million ahead of its 2022 RCV rollout, with most of the spending tied to one-time costs. The budget included the purchase of over 100 new ballot tabulators, translating the ballots and instructions into 11 languages, and investing heavily in voter education campaigns. It also included costs for an unexpected special election.

Varying RCV Implementation Costs

A visual summary of one-time RCV implementation costs.

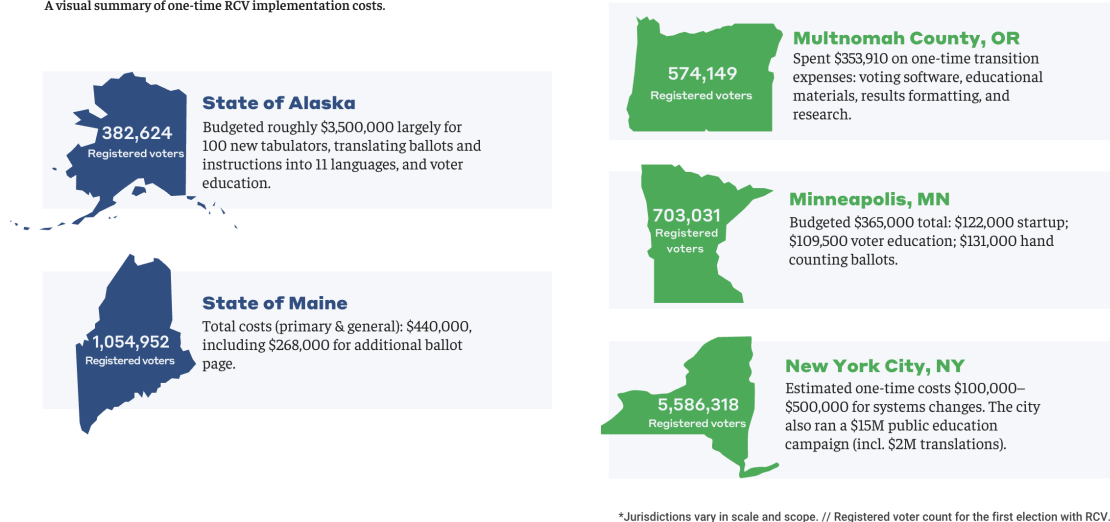


Figure 3: Varying RCV Implementation Costs

One-time expenses are highly variable depending on local conditions. For instance, officials in North Carolina successfully conducted a special judicial election using RCV in 2010 even though no additional funds were made available. Certain categories of expenses can vary as well. Officials in Arlington, VA, for example, did not incur costs for voting equipment, as their existing technology supported RCV tabulation, and the state picked up the cost of developing tabulation software that met state standards.

RCV adoption also often results in new or increased recurring expenses, especially for voter education, additional ballot paper, and training for temporary staff and poll workers.

On voter education, election officials often host informational coffee hours, place educational mailer inserts into utility bills, and host mock elections so that voters can practice using the new system. They also use traditional advertising to reach their constituents.

The cost of ballot paper commonly increases because of the longer ballots and instructions related to RCV. Multnomah County reported spending \$313,950 on extra ballot paper in 2024 to accommodate the length of an RCV ballot with 30 candidates and instructions.

Another common recurring expense involves providing supplemental RCV training for staff and poll workers. These employees are on the frontline of explaining to voters how RCV voting and tabulation works. Jurisdictions can accomplish this training through a variety of means, including by hiring temporary staff and consultants with expertise in the new voting system.

These expenses can also vary between election and non-election years. Multnomah County, for example, anticipates \$174,920 in ongoing expenses in non-election years and \$598,826 in election years.

While RCV can be costly upfront, NCSL suggests that it may be more cost-effective over time, especially when it eliminates expensive, low-turnout runoff contests. However, such a benefit means that long-term savings may be limited for jurisdictions that do not hold runoffs.

Timing and Complexity of Implementation

- Election officials repeatedly emphasized the need for ample lead time before the first election administered using RCV.
- Adequate lead time depends on local conditions, particularly jurisdiction size, staffing, and existing infrastructure.
- Policymakers and voters should expect problems when election administrators have to expedite reforms on short timelines.
- Nonpresidential or off-year elections are better opportunities for RCV roll-out because ballots are simpler and political pressures are lower.
- Election officials who have transitioned to RCV report that it takes about two election cycles for full implementation.

TIMING OF IMPLEMENTATION

Policymakers, voters, and advocates must pay careful attention to the implementation timeline for electoral reforms. Transitioning to a system like RCV is a significant undertaking involving a variety of activities that generally cannot be completed in a matter of months. For example, jurisdictions may need to procure new voting equipment or ballot tabulators, as older models may not have the ability to rank candidate selections. Administrators will have to update standard operating procedures for pre-election, Election Day, and postelection activities, especially with respect to ballot reconciliation. The typical ballot designs and absentee voting materials need to be updated to reflect the new system requirements, and staff and volunteers may need special training—which itself needs to be developed—and public education campaigns need to be planned and executed.

BPC generally recommends a one-year lead time for the implementation of new election administration policies and procedures, and cautions that longer lead times may be needed for major changes like adopting same-day registration or rolling out all-new voting equipment.¹⁵ Transitioning to ranked choice voting will likely involve at least as much, if not more, time.

The lead time for any one jurisdiction will vary depending on the ease of adapting current systems to the new one. Some jurisdictions already own equipment capable of administering a ranked choice election while others do not. Arlington officials only had about four to five months to implement RCV. The main obstacle they faced was procuring RCV software for their existing tabulation equipment that met Virginia’s tabulation guidelines. The state ultimately funded the development of RCV software that fit within the regulations, and the county was able to avoid incurring this additional cost; not every jurisdiction will be so fortunate. Conveniently, the first election to use RCV was a county board primary—a typically lower pressure experience for election officials—and Arlington election administrators successfully conducted their first RCV election despite the short implementation timeline.

COMPLEXITIES OF IMPLEMENTATION

Jurisdictions with larger staff and budgets may be better able to manage the transition to RCV. First, they can delegate discrete aspects of it to a wider swath of staff, versus concentrating the work on individuals who do not have as much flexible capacity. The city of Portland, OR, for example, uniquely sprawls across three counties. During the implementation process, a cohort of election officials worked together to ensure a smooth transition to the new voting system. However, even with their staff capacity and impressive coordination, Portland’s election officials considered their two-year implementation timeline challenging due to the technology and software updates needed and the timing of several other structural government changes mandated in tandem with the RCV rollout. Second, jurisdictions with larger budgets may be able to delegate some of the increased burden to outside vendors for marketing and training. These experts can assist with public education campaigns or the creation of new poll worker training modules.

Like Portland, New York City election officials had two years to implement RCV. During the Democratic mayoral primary in 2021, the first use of RCV in the city, election officials accidentally included 135,000 sample ballots—used to test tabulation software before the election—in the official results. The correction of this error delayed the release of certified election results and decreased voter trust in ranked choice voting.¹⁶

As with routine issues during any election, it is important that officials rectify these problems quickly, which requires familiarity and preparation. But policymakers and voters should expect that some administrative errors will occur during even well-managed transitions to RCV, as election administrators must gain experience on a new system.

The selection of the first election cycle under a new electoral system is important. The best time to roll out a new electoral system is during state or local-only elections, followed by midterm elections. Nonpresidential and off-year elections are ideal for the rollout of any election administration changes, especially large ones like RCV. Presidential elections almost invariably involve a high level of political tension and scrutiny. Policymakers must consider how additional pressure on election officials from managing a transition to RCV will affect their performance. Further, these high-stakes elections may be more prone to skepticism and conspiracy theories if the public is experiencing a new form of voting at the same time. This will likely be worsened by instances of confusion or mistake due to new procedures, equipment, and results reporting.

For election administrators, it may take two to three election cycles for the new system to reach a state of normalcy. Officials will learn lessons, adapt, and redesign their operations after the initial RCV election. Staff and volunteers will also need to experience more than one election with the new system before they feel comfortable. Other stakeholders—including candidates, news media, and the general public—may similarly need to experience more than one election before the new system reaches a similar sense of routineness.

Public Engagement, Education, and Confidence

- Successful RCV implementation depends on robust public education to ensure that voters, the media, and candidates all understand the new system.
- Jurisdictions use a variety of approaches for public education campaigns, and some have achieved effective outreach at relatively low cost.
- Voter education efforts are likely to continue beyond the first RCV election.
- Even with extensive public outreach, some voters may remain skeptical of the new system.

Public engagement is a crucial part of election administration, and it includes educating voters, candidates, and the media on elections processes. Introducing a new electoral system like RCV isn't just a technical challenge; it is also a civic effort. Success depends as much on community engagement and public trust as it does on the hardware and software of the voting systems.

Overhauling an election system to implement RCV can spur a host of questions from voters, and the impact on election administrators' responsibilities to educate the public must be considered. When policymakers legislate changes to voting systems, it often falls to election officials to make sure voters know

how those changes will affect their voting experience and the tabulation of their votes. Candidates, the media, and other third parties will also fill some of the education gaps, providing voters with information on the voting changes they may experience.

In anticipation of the confusion voters may face with a new ballot and tabulation and reporting processes, most election officials who have implemented RCV systems put immense effort and, in some cases, substantial funding into voter education campaigns. Former Maine Secretary of State Matt Dunlap attributes much of the state's successful transition to RCV to voter trust, which was earned through the state's commitment to transparency during the transition and first tabulation of an RCV election.¹⁷ Election officials can face unique challenges with voter education based on their jurisdiction's demographic makeup, available resources, and controlling state and local election laws. Their strategies cover a broad spectrum of outreach efforts to maximize the number of voters reached.

COSTS INVOLVED IN VOTER EDUCATION

How to cover the costs of voter education varies. Some jurisdictions can budget for major public voter education campaigns; others rely on ingenuity, creativity, and longstanding local relationships to reach their constituents on minimal budgets.

When two North Carolina municipalities, Cary and Hendersonville, opted to participate in a statewide RCV pilot program in 2007, both operated on an extremely limited budget. With no dedicated outreach budget, officials in the two towns ran small-scale but highly creative campaigns using free media, in-house design work, and community events to engage voters.

In contrast, some jurisdictions have large budgets dedicated to voter outreach campaigns. Minneapolis spent about 30% of its \$365,000 RCV budget on outreach. This funding covered the production of printed materials, hosting community conferences, and conducting mock elections, which is an effective tactic for familiarizing voters with the RCV ballot. Santa Fe, NM, likewise invested heavily in voter education by designing bilingual and culturally tailored materials to reach its Hispanic and Indigenous populations. Officials visited high schools, hosted community sessions, and appeared on local radio and social media to explain the system and answer questions directly.

Officials across RCV jurisdictions stressed that voter and candidate education never ends; it is an annually recurring cost. Multnomah County spent \$83,000 on educational materials in 2024, its first year of RCV implementation. That budget significantly decreased in 2025 to \$3,000, and county officials anticipate this to be the approximate annual cost moving forward.

Many election offices already budget for ongoing education to address voter turnover, low information contests, and an irregular election schedule (such as special contests conducted using different systems). According to those who have already implemented RCV in their jurisdictions, educating voters on RCV eventually merges with ongoing engagement efforts instead of remaining a separate burden.

APPROACHES TO PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Election officials use multiple education channels during the transition to RCV, adapting strategies to suit the unique needs of their communities. In doing so, they demonstrate remarkable creativity and commitment when they are tasked with implementing a new system. Some notable examples include:

- Hendersonville election officials went to senior centers, local libraries, town halls, and recreational departments, bringing with them pamphlets and explainers, designed in-house, on their new equipment, ballot designs, and process of tabulation.
- Minneapolis and Hendersonville staged mock elections, encouraging their communities to vote on favorite ice cream flavors or candy bars. The election administrators found that voters felt more confident in the results when they could visualize the path of a ranked-choice voting tabulation.¹⁸
- New York City hosted over 600 online and in-person training sessions with volunteers and outside organizations willing to help educate communities on the transition to RCV. Election officials also designed and printed educational materials in 18 languages.
- Portland produced informational videos and other visual materials targeted for underrepresented communities.
- Santa Fe focused on in-person outreach in Hispanic-majority neighborhoods, using mailers, local radio stations, and office hours to communicate with the public.

Media outlets and political candidates are critical stakeholders in voter education. Election officials proactively engage both to ensure accuracy and prevent misinformation. Typically, this involves sharing basic information about how RCV ballots and tabulation work. Minneapolis, for instance, sent weekly emails with RCV information to candidates and distributed informational packets to both media outlets and candidates ahead of the start of voting. Officials also hosted webinars for the media, public, and candidates, and some election officials appeared in the media themselves to build trust and consistency of message.

VOTER CONFIDENCE AND TRUST IN RCV ELECTIONS

Some election officials worry that RCV's complexity can challenge voters' confidence in the elections process. At a time when trust is waning,¹⁹ sweeping reforms can exacerbate skepticism if they are poorly implemented. RCV's intricacies—ballot exhaustion, tabulation, and multiround counting—can lead to misunderstandings and distrust among voters.²⁰ Election administrators can counter these challenges through transparency, education, and open communication. In addition to educating voters about how to correctly fill out the new ballot format, election officials also teach voters how votes are counted and reported under RCV in an effort to build trust in the results. For example, on top of hosting mock elections and mailing detailed guides to all households, Minneapolis also circulated a postelection survey to better understand voters' experience with the new system and to identify opportunities for improvement in future elections.

Policymakers should provide election officials with adequate time to implement major changes and consider how public engagement and education is one of the most time intensive aspects of the transition process. With sufficient planning, election officials can prepare and carry out efforts targeted at bolstering voter confidence in the new system. Still, some skepticism and conspiracy theories persist, even after well-executed rollouts.

Impacts on Election Administration

- Adopting RCV requires additional training protocols for election workers.
- Most jurisdictions can retain their existing hardware but must plan for software updates and new ballot designs.
- Results reporting procedures must be redesigned to balance speed, clarity, and transparency.
- Election officials should plan for collaboration with outside experts and advocacy groups during the RCV transition.

Adopting RCV affects every core aspect of election administration, including training, voting technology, ballot design, and tabulation and results reporting.

Administrators may also rely on or need to manage third-party partners, depending on local capacity.

TRAINING

Virtually any change to election administration practices requires updates to staff and poll worker training. The scope and intensity of additional RCV training varies widely by jurisdiction. In Arlington, officials used in-person simulations to help staff grasp how the vote transfers under RCV work. Minneapolis created modular training tools and developed a unified message for both election office staff and candidates. Santa Fe and Portland hired dedicated staff and consultants to handle RCV-specific operations and voter inquiries. Election officials said that staff and poll workers adapted quickly and that RCV training did not significantly complicate existing processes. Still, ongoing training will be required so that new workers can administer an RCV election and explain it confidently to voters.

TECHNOLOGY AND BALLOTS

Implementing ranked choice voting requires technological and logistical changes involving voting equipment, ballot design, and tabulation and reporting procedures. Transitioning to RCV usually does not require new hardware, as many systems can already handle RCV ballots; however, software, ballot layout, and back-end processes often require adaptations. Policymakers must evaluate how existing election laws interact with RCV technology and administrative processes.

In Minneapolis, early adoption revealed a gap in software readiness. The absence of RCV software forced administrators to develop a spreadsheet-based tabulation system. Although intended as a stopgap fix, this onerous manual process has persisted for nearly 15 years due to policymakers' failure to adopt new state statutes that would allow for a more appropriate solution. Similarly, a Virginia law delayed the adoption of integrated tabulation software, leaving Arlington officials with tight deadlines and uncertainty before its first RCV election. In Portland, where RCV implementation was part of a broad set of governmental reforms, the use of separate ballots for first-past-the-post and RCV contests created logistical issues and additional costs. At the same time, using separate ballots offered operational advantages, such as streamlined processing and clearer reporting of results. Across these cases, election officials emphasized that while existing voting systems can often be used, ballot layout constraints—especially in multiseat contests—require careful planning.

RESULTS REPORTING

Election officials and lawmakers must consider how to report the results of RCV elections effectively and expediently. This issue, while far less complex than financial or technical considerations, is vitally important for transparency and public trust. Unlike traditional first-past-the-post elections, RCV races can take longer to finalize because votes are redistributed across multiple rounds until a majority winner emerges. The unorthodox nature of this to most of the American public cannot be overstated, nor can its potential to fuel distrust.

Attempting to report vote transfers between rounds during unofficial tallies can confuse the public and media. Consequently, Arlington and Minneapolis now release only first-choice results initially, and they do not publish full results until tabulation is complete. Portland has experimented with interim reporting and graphics to make the process more transparent. Santa Fe officials stressed that clear communication is crucial, particularly when results are close, to avoid reinforcing public suspicion about RCV.

Despite operational hurdles, jurisdictions report that RCV becomes more manageable over time. Santa Fe officials noted that once the tabulation algorithm is configured, the technical process is straightforward. Since adopting RCV in 2009, Minneapolis has reduced its tabulation time from two weeks to a single day.

THIRD-PARTY INVOLVEMENT

The complexity and resource-intensive nature of RCV transitions have led many jurisdictions to rely on third-party organizations for support with voter education, staff training, and technical infrastructure. Among them are RCV advocacy groups such as FairVote²¹ and the Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center (RCVRC),²² professional election consultants, and communications or media firms—each bringing distinct expertise to the table. When aligned with the needs of election officials, these organizations can meaningfully enhance a jurisdiction's capacity to implement RCV successfully.

Portland offers a model for productive collaboration between election officials and outside partners. City and county officials partnered with RCVRC to navigate procedural changes and to customize staff training, especially around tabulation software. Portland also engaged local artists to produce comics and videos explaining how RCV ballots work and how they are counted. Portland election officials even trained the local 3-1-1 service on answering frequently asked questions about RCV.

Not all jurisdictions, however, found third-party partners aligned with their operational needs. Some third parties lacked sufficient technical expertise, offering limited help on statutory compliance, statistical standards for elimination rounds, or tie-breaking protocols. When Arlington implemented RCV, election officials discovered that some partners did not understand the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA).¹ This legislation allows citizens, including military personnel, living outside of the country to register and vote absentee in elections. During the implementation process, it was unclear how applying ranked-choice voting would affect these voters. Arlington officials consulted with peers in Minneapolis, whose prior RCV implementation experience provided better guidance for serving UOCAVA voters.

Although third-party organizations can bring valuable support, their effectiveness depends heavily on how well they understand and adapt to the detailed, jurisdiction-specific challenges election officials face. The daily demands on election offices are expansive, covering everything from voter services and ballot processing to managing public inquiries and handling legal compliance issues. When implementing a new electoral system is added into this mix, election administrators find it most useful to have outside help from those who already understand the complexities of their role, including how each decision impacts workflows, staffing, timelines, and public perceptions. The Portland example highlights how successful third-party involvement stemmed from RCVRC's ability to engage with those realities. The center also provided resources that did not duplicate officials' efforts but instead extended internal capacity in a meaningful way.

As the use of ranked-choice voting expands, so does the opportunity for third-party groups to deepen their utility by investing in procedural knowledge, jurisdictional specificity, and sustained partnerships. With the right approach, these collaborations can evolve from helpful supplements into cornerstones of successful RCV administration.

¹ As of publication, six states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina) allow ranked ballots for military or overseas voters to reduce the burdens of administering and participating in multiple elections, in the case a runoff is needed. See Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center, *Why Adopt RCV?*, n.d. Available at: <https://www.rcvresources.org/why-adopt-rcv>.

ADVICE FOR ELECTION OFFICIALS FROM ELECTION OFFICIALS

Election officials offered a variety of practical advice for peers preparing to implement RCV. First, expect the initial election cycle to be resource-intensive, especially for public communication and staffing. Second, designate clear internal leadership for RCV implementation, whether through a dedicated staffer or through temporary consultants, to coordinate logistics and messaging. Third, treat voter education and outreach as a permanent investment rather than a one-time project. Last, leverage peer networks. Many jurisdictions found that advocacy groups pushing RCV, while well-intentioned, lacked answers to operational questions. Direct communication with other election officials proved far more valuable.

Ranked choice voting does not upend election administration processes, but it changes several key components. With appropriate planning, most jurisdictions find RCV soon becomes just another part of their election operation. Still the initial transition requires concerted coordinating, clear communication, and a deep understanding of both technology and community dynamics.

Conclusion

As voters and policymakers consider electoral reforms like RCV, they should consult election administrators early to understand their jurisdiction's unique challenges. Transitioning to RCV is achievable with appropriate time, planning, and resources. While alternative electoral systems may impact voter turnout, representation, or polarization, transitioning to RCV can also strain resources, increase the risk of errors, and temporarily weaken voter confidence until election administrators gain experience in the new process. These effects depend on unique local circumstances. Regardless, election officials remain confident, as always, in their ability to deliver accurate, secure, and trusted elections whatever the system.

NOTES

- 1 Joshua Ferrer, Michael Thorning, and J. D. Rackey, *The Effect of Open Primaries on Turnout and Representation*, Bipartisan Policy Center, October 2024. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/the-effect-of-open-primaries-on-turnout-and-representation/>.
- 2 Campaign Legal Center, "Issue Brief: The Civic Benefits of Ranked Choice Voting," August 17, 2018. Available at: <https://campaignlegal.org/document/issue-brief-civic-benefits-ranked-choice-voting>.
- 3 NPR, "Ranked Choice Voting Is Being Touted as a Cure-all for U.S. Deep Partisan Divides," December 3, 2023. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/03/1216868372/ranked-choice-voting-is-being-touted-as-a-cure-all-for-u-s-deep-partisan-divides>.
- 4 Unite America, "The Impact of Instant Runoff Voting on Representation for Women and People of Color," June 5, 2024. Available at: <https://www.uniteamerica.org/articles/the-impact-of-instant-runoff-voting-on-representation-for-women-and-people-of-color>.
- 5 FairVote, "Past Ranked Choice Voting Legislation," n.d. Available at: <https://fairvote.org/past-ranked-choice-voting-legislation/>.
- 6 Unite America, "Ballot Measures," n.d. Available at: <https://www.uniteamerica.org/ballot-measures>.
- 7 Bipartisan Policy Center, "Task Force on Elections," n.d. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/elections-task-force/>.
- 8 Third Way, "High Costs and Low Turnout for U.S. Runoff Elections," July 21, 2021. Available at: <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/high-costs-and-low-turnout-for-u-s-runoff-elections>.
- 9 National Conference of State Legislatures, "Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Implementation Considerations for Policymakers," September 28, 2022. Available at: <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting-in-practice-implementation-considerations-for-policymakers#cost>.
- 10 Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center, "What is the Cost of Conducting a Ranked Choice Voting Election?" n.d. Available at: https://albanyca.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=&clip_id=2195&meta_id=129782.
- 11 David Dyssegaard Kallick and Jonas Shaende, "Ranked Choice Voting: Saving Money While Improving Elections," Fiscal Policy Institute, June 28, 2018. Available at: <https://fiscalspolicy.org/brief-ranked-choice-voting-saving-money-while-improving-elections>.
- 12 City of New York, "New York City to Launch \$15 Million Ranked Choice Voting Education Campaign," April 28, 2021. Available at: <https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/315-21/new-york-city-launch-15-million-ranked-choice-voting-education-campaign>.
- 13 Multnomah County Elections Division, "Ranked Choice Voting Implementation Report," March 31, 2025. Available at: https://multco.us/file/2024_-_rcv_implementation_report.pdf/download.
- 14 Daniel Stid, Kelly Born, and Kathy Armstrong, "Historical assessment of the first state-wide passage of ranked choice voting in Maine," Hewlett Foundation, September 23, 2019. Available at: <https://hewlett.org/historical-assessment-of-the-first-state-wide-passage-of-ranked-choice-voting-in-maine/>.
- 15 Rachel Orey and Matt Weil, *Improving the Voting Experience After 2020*, Bipartisan Policy Center, April 6, 2021. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/voting-experience-2020/>.

- 16 Katie Glueck, "New York Mayor's Race in Chaos After Elections Board Counts 135,000 Test Ballots," The New York Times, June 29, 2021. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/29/nyregion/adams-garcia-wiley-mayor-ranked-choice.html>.
- 17 Maya King and Zach Montellaro, "New York's 'head-swirling' mistake puts harsh spotlight on ranked-choice voting." Politico, July 6, 2021. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/06/new-york-ranked-choice-voting-498221>.
- 18 New America, "What We Know About Ranked-Choice Voting," n.d.. Available at: <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/what-we-know-about-ranked-choice-voting/the-voting-experience/>.
- 19 Issue One, "Trust in Elections: What's at Stake & Americans' Attitudes Ahead of 2024," September 24, 2024. Available at: <https://issueone.org/articles/trust-in-elections-americans-attitudes-ahead-of-2024/>.
- 20 Lonna Rae Atkeson, Eli McKown-Dawson, et al., "The impact of voter confusion in ranked choice voting," Social Science Quarterly, 105: 1029- 1041, 2024. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13366>.
- 21 Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center, homepage. Available at: <https://www.rcvresources.org/>.
- 22 Ibid.



Bipartisan Policy Center

1225 Eye St. NW
Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
bipartisanpolicy.org
202 - 204 - 2400

Policy Areas

Economy

Energy

Human Capital

Health

Housing

Governance

The Bipartisan Policy Center and its advocacy affiliate, Bipartisan Policy Center Action (BPC Action), are unique in their approach to addressing the nation's most pressing issues. As the only organization working across the full political spectrum on domestic issues, BPC brings together diverse perspectives to craft data-driven, pragmatic policy solutions. BPC Action then works directly with legislators and other policymakers to turn those solutions into real change.

✕ @BPC_Bipartisan

f facebook.com/BipartisanPolicyCenter

📷 instagram.com/BPC_Bipartisan

in linkedin.com/company/bipartisan-policy-center



Bipartisan Policy Center
Ideas. Action. Results.

1225 Eye St. NW
Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
bipartisanpolicy.org



INDEPENDENCE
INSTITUTE.ORG



THE CONSERVATIVE CASE FOR RANKED CHOICE VOTING

by Barry Fagin
Senior Fellow, Technology Policy

IP-3-2021 • May 2021

INTRODUCTION

This paper evaluates the compatibility of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) with conservative principles.

Americans have become so accustomed to our voting system we forget how strange it is. Many countries admire our Constitution to the point of imitation, and have adopted our system of checks and balances by dividing government into executive, legislative and judicial branches. Yet absolutely none of them elect candidates to political office the way we do. That's because democracies want to avoid precisely those problems besetting America today: citizen apathy, low voter turnout, bitter partisanship, a lack of political competition, the lack of a political center, and the resulting division of the country into two warring factions that see each other as the enemy. To name a few.

The Framers were exceptionally well-read and intelligent men, perched at the right point in history to create an exceptional system of government for an exceptional nation. We are right to consider significant changes to their legacy institutions only with great reluctance and deliberation. Experiments should be tried at the local level first, then the states, and only then at the level of national government.

On the other hand, we should also note that our present conundrum is exactly what the Framers warned against over two hundred years ago. Their writings in this regard seem downright prophetic.

Consider this excerpt from George Washington's Farewell Address:

"[We must be wary of] the alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened

*by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities."*¹

Or this from his successor:

*"There is nothing I dread So much, as a Division of the Republick into two great Parties, each arranged under its Leader, and concerting Measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble Apprehension is to be dreaded as the greatest political Evil, under our Constitution."*²

James Madison's concerns about parties rooted in geography are eerily accurate today (bolding is mine).

*"Should a state of parties arise founded on geographical boundaries and other **physical and permanent distinctions** which happen to coincide with them, what is to control these great repulsive Masses from awful shocks against each other?"*³

This could have been written yesterday, about urban Democrats vs. rural Republicans.

If we're honest with ourselves, we must conclude that we are now in the very situation the Framers worked so hard to avoid. We need to look at how we got here, and experiment with other ideas that might help move us forward. Let us not forget that experimentation with alternative voting systems at the state level, as for example Maine and Alaska have done, is a great example of Federalism, and completely consistent with both conservatism and the Framers'

Many countries admire our Constitution to the point of imitation, and have adopted our system of checks and balances by dividing government into executive, legislative and judicial branches. Yet absolutely none of them elect candidates to political office the way we do.

vision of distinct states united into a democratic republic.

I assume the reader is familiar with Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). If not, I refer the reader to my companion paper “Comparing Approval Voting and Ranked Choice Voting,” as it provides useful background material. It compares and contrasts these two alternative

voting systems and provides a detailed description of RCV, complete with examples. Numerous online sources are available as well.

Making a conservative case for RCV does not mean showing how it makes conservatives more likely to win, that it favors Republicans over Democrats, and so forth.

WHAT DOES “THE CONSERVATIVE CASE” MEAN?

Good voting systems do not favor any one political party or perspective. That is what makes them good. Making a conservative case for RCV does not mean showing how it makes conservatives more likely to win, that it favors Republicans over Democrats, and so forth. If it did that, no one would trust it, no one would accept it, and it quite rightly wouldn't be adopted. For every election lost by a Republican who would've won under RCV, there will be one lost by a Democrat that RCV would have propelled to victory.

Making the conservative case, then, does not mean showing how RCV helps the right at the expense of the left. It does not do that, any more than it helps the left at the expense of the right. What this paper tries to do is (a) show how conservative principles are compatible with and supportive of RCV, (b) address specific concerns about RCV from conservative sources, and (c) appeal to conservatives' sense of a “moral order” to justify the use of RCV.

CONSERVATIVE PRINCIPLES AND RCV

I find no conservative principles that conflict with RCV, and many that harmonize with it.

Free markets and competition

Conservatives have, for most of their existence, been the party of capitalism, free markets, and competition. The Heritage Foundation, a leading conservative think tank, cites the following as one of their “True North” principles:

America's economy and the prosperity of individual citizens are best served by a system built

on free enterprise, economic freedom, private property rights and the rule of law. This system is best sustained by policies that promote general economic freedom and eliminate governmental preferences for special interests, including free trade, deregulation, and opposing government interventions in the economy that distort free markets and impair innovation.

Our present political system, however, is a duopoly with artificially high barriers to entry; barriers created by the duopolists themselves. This is generally

believed to be the likely end-state of any first-past-the-post (simple plurality) system, summed up in Duverger's Law.⁴ The endorsement of a duopoly with artificial barriers to competition is an inappropriate position for champions of the free market, entrepreneurship, and competition.⁵

RCV by itself is not a significant threat to political duopoly, but it does permit that duopoly to be better informed and more inclusive. Voters whose views are normally shut out of the political process have more options under RCV, and more ways to communicate their preferences to the major parties.

Incremental but necessary change

It is either a myth or a deliberate mischaracterization of conservatives that they are by their very nature opposed to political change. They are simply more skeptical of grand social engineering schemes than liberals, and rightly so. The great conservative philosopher and thought leader Russell Kirk has this to say about conservatives and change:

The thinking conservative understands that permanence and change must be recognized and reconciled in a vigorous society. The conservative is not opposed to social improvement...

The conservative knows that any healthy society is influenced by two forces... its Permanence and its Progression. The Permanence of a society is formed by those enduring interests and convictions that gives us stability and continuity; ... The Progression in a society is that spirit and that body of talents which urge us on to prudent reform and improvement; without that Progression, a people

stagnate ...The conservative, in short, favors reasoned and temperate progress...

*Change is essential to the body social, the conservative reasons, just as it is essential to the human body. A body that has ceased to renew itself has begun to die. But if that body is to be vigorous, the change must occur in a regular manner, harmonizing with the form and nature of that body...*⁶

I would argue that RCV is exactly the type of prudent reform and improvement mentioned above. It is not being imposed from above, but adopted from below, in cities and municipalities across the nation. Two states (Alaska and Maine) have now adopted it for state and federal elections. Continued state-by-state experimentation will be "change in a regular manner," conservative Federalism at its best. A better example of "reasoned and temperate progress" would be difficult to find.

Improved access for diverse conservative voices and candidates within the Republican Party

Conservatism is not a monolithic creed; the Republican Party should not be a monolithic entity. The American electorate holds views far more sophisticated and nuanced than the conservative/liberal two-party spectrum can adequately embrace. As the political scientist Lee Drutman points out, for a long while America used to have four *de facto* parties: Conservative Republicans, Conservative Democrats, Liberal Republicans, and Liberal Democrats.⁷ The second and third coalitions, typified by Strom Thurmond (before he switched parties) and Dwight Eisenhower (who never did), respectively, began to collapse

Voters whose views are normally shut out of the political process have more options under RCV, and more ways to communicate their preferences to the major parties.

in the later part of the 20th century and no longer wield significant influence within their respective parties. Hence the increasing importance of independent voters.

RCV provides a greater opportunity for other conservative and Republican voices to be heard, beyond those currently dominating the Republican party (and who have been less than successful at building a competitive Republican coalition, let alone a Republican majority). Given the clear objectives of the liberal left in establishing one-party rule in America (as they have done in California, New York, and the vast majority of America's largest cities), I would argue the Republican Party, at its peril, ignores alternatives to capture independent voters.

For example, neoconservatism is not the only conservative view of foreign policy. There is a large population of voters who favor a strong defense but are skeptical of nation building abroad, democracy promotion in the Middle East, and engaging in alliances with corrupt regimes openly hostile to Western values. Senator Robert Taft was a dedicated Republican and conservative

who exemplified this view, as did the conservative firebrand Pat Buchanan much later. Voters with this perspective are out there, waiting to support a GOP that turns in this direction. The Log Cabin Republicans have proved themselves loyal to Republican and conservative causes despite outright hostility from within the party to LGBT conservatives, and could easily provide more outreach, votes, and influence under RCV. Finally, fiscal conservatism, limited government, and free trade seem to have completely disappeared from Republicans' and conservatives' radar screens over the past few decades, particularly in recent years. RCV can give voters concerned about getting America's fiscal house in order and embracing freer markets a stronger voice in the Republican Party than they currently enjoy. I would argue this development in particular ought to be welcomed by modern conservatives.

RCV can give voters concerned about getting America's fiscal house in order and embracing freer markets a stronger voice in the Republican Party than they currently enjoy.

CONSERVATIVE CRITICISMS OF RCV

Conservative criticism of RCV, as articulated by von Spakovsky and Adams,⁸ comes in three parts:

- It disconnects elections from issues and allows candidates with marginal support from voters to win.
- It obscures true debates and issue-driven dialogs among candidates and eliminates genuine binary choices between two top tier candidates.

- It disenfranchises voters, because ballots that do not include the two ultimate finalists are cast aside to manufacture a faux majority for the winner.

These all overlap, but I will endeavor to take each one in turn.

RCV and issues

Spakovsky and Adams' raise two concerns about RCV and issues. The first appears

to arise from a misconception about RCV and political parties:

When we have Republicans versus Democrats versus Greens and Libertarians, we know who is running against whom and what the actual distinctions are between the candidates on issues.

While RCV has been used primarily to rank preferences for candidates in non-partisan elections as opposed to parties, there is no reason why it cannot do so. Candidates can run in an RCV election with their party affiliation, giving exactly the same attention to issues as any system with political parties, including our own. Ireland, in fact, uses an RCV system where voters can rank both parties and individual candidates. I thus find this particular objection lacking.

The next sentence is equally problematic:

Second- or third-choice votes should not matter in America; they do not provide the mandate that ensures that the representatives in a republic have the confidence and support of a majority of the public in the legitimacy of their decisions.

This mistakenly equates “support” with “exclusive support.” It is gross intellectual error, what Hayek calls a “fatal conceit,” to presume knowledge of how to translate a voter’s subjective ranked preferences into objective levels of support. Voters who do not support candidates will either not rank them at all or rank them very low. But I find no reason to assume that a second- or even third-choice candidate of a voter is not supported by that voter, particularly if they are chosen from several alternatives.

In fact, it is equally wrong to assume *prima facie* in a two-party system that

a vote for one of two candidates equals “support.” That may be true, but it also may be the case, particularly for independent and nonaligned voters, that the voter is simply voting for the candidate they dislike the least, the “lesser of two evils.” The conclusion of support would be considerably strengthened if that candidate were chosen from multiple alternatives, as RCV provides.

The second objection concerning RCV and issues mistakenly equates two-candidate contests with issue-driven contests. The report notes correctly that ballots without mention of the top two candidates will eventually be discarded (assuming a majority winner has not been found on the first round), giving that voter no say in the final contest. By contrast, “had that election been between just those two candidates in the first place, that same voter would have heard debates, listened to the issues discussed, and made an informed choice between those two.” This last statement has a number of problems.

First, it assumes all debates must be between two people. Anyone who has watched the candidate debates for the party out of power in a presidential election knows that statement to be false. Second, it assumes that debates between two candidates (presumably a Republican and a Democrat) have a sufficiently wide range of difference on the issues to satisfy most voters, and a debate between them will cover those differences satisfactorily. The existence of a large number of independent and/or nonaligned voters suggests this is also false. Third, debates between top two candidates can also include debates between the top three, four, or five candidates, complete with party labels if they so desire. Finally, and most importantly, the statement “between just those two candidates in the first place” assumes *we always know*

Candidates can run in an RCV election with their party affiliation, giving exactly the same attention to issues as any system with political parties, including our own.

in advance who those two candidates are. The whole point of elections, especially nonpartisan ones, is that we can't predict candidate performance in advance. Voting is how we determine that; it is a form of Hayekian knowledge discovery. At the very least, if conservatives believe that always having a Republican and a Democrat as the top two candidates is descriptive, predictive, and normative, then they should say so *a priori*. Since virtually every other democracy in the world has more than two parties, most voters on the planet would disagree.

RCV and the elimination of “genuine binary choices”

Von Spakovsky and Adams appear to *define* a genuine binary choice as one provided in a two-candidate election, whereas the last two candidates standing in an RCV instant runoff offer a “faux” or “artificial” binary choice. There is no reason, however, why a reader should accept their definitions.

First, if the top two candidates in a two-way election under the present system would still be the top two contenders in a multi-candidate race, RCV will find them and produce the same result. Yet von Spakovsky and Adams would somehow have us believe the first choice is genuine while the second is somehow not. The RCV election would also have provided more information about the electorate's preferences, due to its more nuanced voting options, information the top contenders and/or parties can use in future elections to better align their stances on issues with those of the constituents they represent.

I find nothing “faux” about a majority produced from voters whose first and second choices were not as popular as their third and fourth choices, particularly in a crowded field of candidates. In fact,

much of von Spakovsky and Adams' objection goes away if voters are not required to rank all candidates. In that case, the ranking of a candidate indicates as least some degree of support, a degree that is deserving of counting toward a majority winner. In fact, rather than regarding a two-candidate election as a “genuine” binary choice, we might just as well call it a *forced* binary choice, because it artificially restricts the options of voters to a mere two.

RCV and voter disenfranchisement

Von Spakovsky and Adams regard the discarding of ballots that do not contain the top two choices as a form of disenfranchisement. Although never stated, their implied solution to this problem is to only have two-candidate elections. How this somehow empowers voters more, particularly those who are independent or non-aligned, is never explained.

In fact, using their logic, it is just as true to say discarding ballots in a two-candidate race that do not contain the winner's name is a form of disenfranchisement. Their implicit assumption seems to be that participating in a two-ray race is using the franchise, but participating in three-, four-, or five-way races is not. I find no reason to make this distinction.

Other problems with the report

I use this section to highlight some specific statements from the report. I'll start with an analogy of their own making, that of a supermarket purchase:

In reality, you are choosing one elected official to represent you, just like you might choose one type of steak sauce to buy when you are splurging for steaks. At the supermarket you ponder whether

Von Spakovsky and Adams regard the discarding of ballots that do not contain the top two choices as a form of disenfranchisement.

to buy AI, Heinz 57, HP, or the really cheap generic brand you have never tried. In the real world, you compare price, taste, mood, and maybe even the size of the bottle and then decide on your steak sauce. You know nothing about the generic brand, so you rank it last among your choices, while AI is ranked a distant third. In your mind, it comes down to Heinz or HP, and you choose the Heinz. You buy that bottle and head home to the grill. Now imagine if, instead, you had to rank-order all the steak sauces—even the ones you dislike—and at checkout the cashier swaps out your bottle of Heinz 57 with the cheap generic you ranked dead last.

First, notice that the first sentence implicitly assumes elections with a single winner, in itself a significant problem with the status quo. Supermarkets don't limit their customers to a single flavor of steak sauce, with good reason. RCV easily supports elections with multiple winners,⁹ while our current system does not. But I'll set that aside for now.

Second, "it comes down to Heinz or HP" is an implicit endorsement of the two-party system and elections with two obvious frontrunners. This is only one possible variation of the type of elections that RCV can support.

The conclusion implies a shopper who had no understanding of the rules of the shop in advance, who didn't know that all customers ultimately had to get the same sauce, that other customers might rank their sauce preferences differently, and the resulting sauce that everyone gets would be determined by everyone's preferences, not just his. A more accurate scenario would be where the customer

goes to the cashier, hands in her ranked list of preferences, and then waits by the door with all the other customers. At 9:00 p.m., when the store closes, it announces the steak sauce that best reflects the preferences of everyone who shopped that day and gives a bottle of it to everyone. Only then do they "head home to the grill."

When put this way, the problems of the grocery store metaphor are a little clearer. It's not the best metaphor precisely because electoral politics are not pluralistic (although RCV is more so than its alternatives). That said, let's retell the story of the grocery store. This time I'll apply the metaphor to both our current system and RCV, with a little bit of proportional representation thrown in.

Sauce Selection Day is coming up, and your neighborhood needs some steak sauce. You've read articles on how to properly season a steak, what spices work best, and you've decided you like Indie Sauce because it contains just the right combination of ingredients. Your neighborhood can only have one steak sauce, so you walk around the neighborhood singing the praises of Indie and urging others to vote for it. Many people like it, but they tell you it's a waste of time to bother voting for it because the makers of Red Sauce and Blue Sauce own the grocery store.

You walk into your local Red and Blue Market and find out they make pretty much everything on the shelves. They don't stock Indie, or for that matter any sauces other than Red and Blue because that would be "too confusing for the shopper." You look at the ingredients for Red Sauce and Blue Sauce and find something to like

Supermarkets don't limit their customers to a single flavor of steak sauce, with good reason. RCV easily supports elections with multiple winners, while our current system does not.

in each, but the right combination for you is Indie. You ask the manager if they'll ever stock it. They say they might consider it if you can bring ten percent of the neighborhood down to the grocery store to sign a petition. "In the meantime," they say, "let us know which sauce you like better: Red or Blue. We'll tell you which sauce the neighborhood gets when the doors close tonight."

That night, you learn Red Sauce is the choice of your neighborhood. The 45 percent of those who wanted Blue are not happy, but your community has spoken. Nobody even bothers about the remainder who wrote their preferences on their receipt and turned it in to customer service.

Two years later, you learn about a new grocery store promising "reliable, consistent validation" of shopper preferences. In their store, you can vote for a whole bunch of sauces, including Red and Blue, but you don't have to vote for either and you can order your preferences however you want. That way, if Indie doesn't win, you can say what you'd rather have next, and so on. Red still wins, but because more people felt comfortable expressing their preference for Indie, Blue takes a look at Indie's ingredients and decides to change its formula. You decide Blue might be worth a shot next time.

Still later, you find the rules of sauce selection change, thanks to the new store's promise of reliable, consistent validation of shopper preferences. Red still won the majority Sauce Selection, but now

everybody on the block gets to pick either a full-size bottle of Red, a medium-size bottle of Blue, or a small bottle of Indie. The old Red and Blue business model couldn't support that. Finally, you get the steak sauce you wanted. Although your bottle is smaller than others, you give out free spoonfuls to your neighbors. After all, there's always the next Sauce Selection Day to consider.

The last paragraph is an allegory for proportional representation, another vital electoral reform highlighted by Drutman and already in place in a number of modern democracies. Proportional representation allows for districts with multiple seats, allocated in proportion to the vote totals received by candidates. Winner-take-all systems, by definition, cannot support proportional representation. RCV, by contrast, does so easily. Space prohibits a detailed exploration of this question here. Further exploration of problems with the current system that RCV and proportional representation can solve is a work in progress.

CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICANS WHO ALREADY SUPPORT RCV

Conservatives are rightly suspicious of ambitious social engineering programs proposed by the liberal left, who tend to view themselves as sculptors and citizens as clay for whatever morally impassioned artwork strikes their fancy to create. That being said, the fact that Democrats support a change in electoral systems shouldn't automatically generate reactionary opposition from Republicans. RCV is a neutral voting system with well-studied properties. It should be accepted or rejected on its merits, and not on *ad hominem* attacks.

As an example, I offer two long-time Republican activists who have studied and subsequently endorsed RCV: Mr. Stan

Lockhart and Ms. Jennifer Nassour. Mr. Lockhart has held numerous positions in Utah civic life, including serving as the Chair of the Utah Republican Party,¹⁰ and is an enthusiastic advocate of RCV. Ms. Nassour has had the unenviable task of leading the Republican Party of Massachusetts. Her support of RCV is no doubt influenced by its ability to strengthen support and visibility for those voices normally shouted down in the din of one-party dominance.

...the fact that Democrats support a change in electoral systems shouldn't automatically generate reactionary opposition from Republicans.

RECENT ELECTIONS AND RCV

I now consider some recent elections and their impact, either because RCV was used or because it wasn't.

GA-9 Republican primary in 2020

Consider first the 2020 Republican primary in Georgia Congressional District 9, with a total of eight candidates.¹¹ The top vote getter was Mark Gurtler, with 21 percent of the vote, followed by Andrew Clyde, with 19 percent. A strict plurality system would have elected Gurtler with barely one-fifth of the vote. To avoid this, a runoff was held, at additional taxpayer expense, of which Clyde was declared the winner with 56 percent of the vote.

In an election as nuanced and a field as wide as this was, while it is theoretically possible, there is little reason to assume this outcome was most reflective of voter preference. Any two of the next three finishers (with 15.5, 13.3, and 12.1 percent respectively) had combined

vote totals higher than both Gurtler and Clyde. In fact, 71.4 percent of the voters did not vote for Clyde in the primary, the supposed "winner" of the election. Had RCV been employed, not only could the runoff have been avoided, but a result would have been produced that was more accurate, less costly, and faster.

While we cannot say for certain how RCV would have responded to differences in fundraising, we note that Clyde spent almost as much money as all the other candidates combined and won the nomination despite losing 71.4 percent of votes in the primary. It is difficult to imagine how differences in campaign spending would have achieved a more distortive result under RCV.

ME-2 Congressional election in 2018

RCV is a neutral voting system, favoring no specific political party or philosophy. In the 2018 election for Maine's 2nd

Congressional District, Republican Bruce Poliquin received 46.3 percent of the vote, compared to Democrat Jared Golden's 45.6 percent (a difference of 2,171 votes).¹² Had this been a first-past-the-post, winner-take-all election, Poliquin would have won the seat.

However, because RCV was used, a second round was required to examine the second choices, if expressed, of the 23,397 ballots who did not rank either Poliquin or Golden first. Of those, the vast majority went to Golden, who was declared the winner. Poliquin initiated a recall and challenged the result, but eventually backed down.

While conservatives presumably did not approve of the outcome, it is difficult to see any failing of RCV here. The thousands of voters who did not prefer either duopoly candidate mattered no less than those who ranked Poliquin or Golden first. Their first choice did not win, but their preferences for Golden to Poliquin were very clear. RCV expressed the will of the people and found the Condorcet winner (candidate who would defeat all other candidates in separate head-to-head contests) with a broad base of support. That's exactly what it was supposed to do. It is difficult to imagine how principled conservatives could endorse the victory of a candidate whom the majority of voters did not prefer, even if that candidate was one of their own.

CONCLUSIONS

It does not require a great deal of insight to see that the status quo of two-party, winner-take-all elections has not delivered the America conservatives claim to want. Taxes and spending have exploded, the national debt is of gargantuan proportions, federal spending as a percent of GDP is at an astonishing

GA Senate runoff in 2020

The most conspicuous example of how RCV could have and should have turned the tide was in last year's Georgia Senate runoff. Republican David Perdue received 49.7 percent of the vote, 13,604 votes shy of a majority. Democrat Joel Ossof won 47.9 percent of the vote, 101,702 votes short. Libertarian Shane Hazel received 2.3 percent of the vote, earning a total of 115,039 votes. Conservatives need no reminding that Ossof won the ensuing runoff, flipping the Senate to the Democrats (with Vice President Harris breaking ties as the speaker).

The small distance between Perdue and a majority, combined with the large number of votes for Hazel, makes the outcome under a hypothetical RCV election easy to predict. Had voters been given the opportunity to rank their choices, and had a mere 12 percent of Hazel's voters marked Perdue as their second favorite, Perdue would have won. In all likelihood, he would have won handily, since Libertarian voters tend to skew Republican. The use of RCV would have produced a more accurate reflection of voter preferences, avoided a costly and time-consuming runoff, and saved the Senate for Republicans.

high of 44 percent. Free trade is routinely ignored by both parties, Presidents wield imperial power through executive order and declare war without asking Congress. Forty percent of births now occur outside of marriage, and almost one-fifth of the US population is on welfare. All this has happened before COVID, through

It does not require a great deal of insight to see that the status quo of two-party, winner-take-all elections has not delivered the America conservatives claim to want.

Democratic governments, through Republican governments, and through divided governments. How much worse must it get for conservatives before they are ready to consider structural electoral reform?

I have noted that conservatives support gradual, measured change. Two-party, winner-take-all systems, by contrast, do not support incremental change, reasoned discussion, or compromise, and in fact lend themselves to grand social engineering projects once a particular party gains enough power. The other side is demonized, and the most important objective is to get *them* out of power, put *us* in, and then rig the process to keep things the way they are. As tempting as it is to believe in perpetual majorities wielded by people we approve of, history suggests no one party wields total control for very long. Each time the other party gets in power, their agenda becomes more radical and more ambitious. This is not a system that conservatives should welcome.

Most importantly, I believe conservatives should consider the possibility that RCV is a *more moral* voting system. Conservatives, as Russell Kirk points out, believe in an enduring moral order.¹³ I would argue such an order, when applied to elections, includes the following social goods:

- Voter participation
- Voter information
- Competition in parties
- Competition in ideas
- Majority winners (as opposed to plurality)
- Likelihood of a match between a voter's preference and the candidate he/she supports
- Proportional representation of both majorities and minorities
- Positive campaigning¹⁴
- Coalition building

RCV does a better job at promoting these than the alternatives, including the status quo. I would suggest conservative opposition to RCV weakens its claims to the moral high ground and belief in an enduring moral order. Instead, it gives aid and comfort to those who would paint conservatives as reactionaries, opposed to all change on principle, and motivated more by a hunger for political power than by a desire for the common good. Conservative support for RCV, I believe, would show a genuine concern for the common good and the welfare of the body politic.

Conservative support for RCV, I believe, would show a genuine concern for the common good and the welfare of the body politic.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For example, https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=160
- ² Drutman, Lee “Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop”, cited originally as <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-10-02-0113>
- ³ Drutman, originally cited as https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1_9_1s20.html
- ⁴ Duverger F, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*, 1964, ISBN 978-0-416-68320-2
- ⁵ <https://www.heritage.org/conservatism/commentary/defining-the-principles-conservatism>
- ⁶ <https://kirkcenter.org/conservatism/ten-conservative-principles/>
- ⁷ Op cit, see footnote 2.
- ⁸ Von Spakovsky and Adams, “Ranked Choice Voting is a Bad Choice”, Issue Brief #4996, Heritage Foundation, August 2019, available online <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/IB4996.pdf>
- ⁹ This is required for countries with proportional representation.
- ¹⁰ <https://utahrcv.com/about-utahrcv/>
- ¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/09/us/elections/results-georgia-house-district-9-primary-election.html>
- ¹² https://ballotpedia.org/Maine%27s_2nd_Congressional_District_election,_2018#Candidates_and_election_results
- ¹³ Op cit, see footnote 6.
- ¹⁴ The June 16th 2018 issue of The Economist, in the article “In Praise of Ranked Choice Voting,” ran a photo of two candidates in an RCV election who were encouraging their supporters to pick the other as their second choice.

Copyright ©2021, Independence Institute

INDEPENDENCE INSTITUTE is a non-profit, non-partisan Colorado think tank. It is governed by a statewide board of trustees and holds a 501(c)(3) tax exemption from the IRS. Its public policy research focuses on economic growth, education reform, local government effectiveness, and constitutional rights.

JON CALDARA is President of Independence Institute.

DAVID KOPEL is Research Director of Independence Institute.

BARRY FAGIN is a Senior Fellow at Independence Institute.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES on this subject can be found at: <https://i2i.org>.

NOTHING WRITTEN here is to be construed as necessarily representing the views of the Independence Institute or as an attempt to influence any election or legislative action.

PERMISSION TO REPRINT this paper in whole or in part is hereby granted provided full credit is given to the Independence Institute.



INDEPENDENCE
INSTITUTE.ORG

727 East 16th Avenue | Denver, Colorado 80203 | 303.279.6536

INDEPENDENCEINSTITUTE.ORG