

RANKED CHOICE VOTING

In most elections for a political office, voters choose one candidate. But with ranked choice voting (RCV), if there are more than two candidates for the same office, voters can mark each candidate as their first, second, third choice and so on, according to their preferences. A voter can't give the same ranking to more than one candidate. But they can rank every candidate, from their most to their least favorite. Or if they prefer, they can vote for just one or a few candidates. A few areas that have RCV limit the number of candidates that voters can rank, but most don't have that limitation.

On election day, if any candidate gets more than half of the first choice votes, they win. Otherwise, the RCV process removes the candidate with the fewest first-place votes. Then, for every voter who ranked the eliminated candidate as their first choice, the process adds their vote to the total for the candidate they marked as their second choice. At that point, if any of the remaining candidates has received more than half of the votes, they win. If not, the process repeats itself.

After each round of counting, if no candidate has more than half of the votes, the last-place candidate is eliminated. And each voter for that candidate has their vote added to the total for their next-favorite candidate. Eventually, one candidate has a majority of the votes cast and wins the election.

No voter gets more than one vote. A voter's choice for second (or third or fourth and so on) only counts if the candidate who received their first or previous choice has been eliminated.

As of 2021, two states and more than 20 cities were using RCV for designated elections. Part of its appeal is that it guarantees

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majority rule, a key characteristic of democracy, since no candidate can win an RCV election without a majority of votes. In elections with multiple candidates that don't use RCV, the winning candidate may have less than half of the votes and a majority of voters might have preferred someone else.

Another advantage of RCV is that no voter needs to worry about "wasting" their vote by voting for a third-party candidate or a candidate who isn't at the top of the public opinion polls. Candidates like that might ultimately win with ranked choice voting. And even if they don't, a first-place vote for them won't give the win to another candidate who didn't receive a majority of first-place votes.

Ranked choice voting also makes election campaigns more civil and informative. In an RCV election, most candidates try to win a second- or third-place ranking from voters whose first choice is someone else. For that reason, they are less likely to alienate voters by insulting other candidates or refusing to address issues that voters care about.

Another benefit of RCV is that it can eliminate the need for primaries or runoff elections. That lowers the cost of elections, which taxpayers pay for, and reduces the cost and length of political campaigns.

Finally, RCV can give independent or third-party candidates a greater chance of winning elections. This is not a plus for the two major parties, but that shouldn't concern voters, because no candidate will win an election without winning a majority of votes. And major party candidates will no longer lose an election because independent or third-party candidates took first-choice votes away from them.

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The one disadvantage of RCV is that it makes voting and the election process more complex. It takes more time and effort to rank multiple candidates. And RCV requires election officials to use a computerized system or to spend more time counting votes to determine the winner of an election. It's possible that the extra effort that RCV takes might reduce voter turnout. However, voters don't have to rank multiple candidates. And some studies have suggested that RCV actually increases voter turnout.

Before a state or community can implement it, the state and local constitutions must allow RCV. Many legal scholars believe that nothing in the U.S. constitution prevents the states from using RCV.

For RCV to be adopted, state or local legislators must pass a law that puts it in place. Or in states and communities whose laws allow it, citizen activists can put the issue directly on the ballot so that voters can decide whether to approve it. Recently, voters have approved RCV in Maine, New York City and Burlington, Vermont. Ranked choice voting may continue to spread to more states and communities, which would be a good thing, since it is an electoral system that allows the full will of the voters to prevail.