Ranked Choice Voting (RCV): What You Need to Know

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Understanding the System

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) is a method that allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference instead of selecting just one. It is used in some local elections, including in New York City for primaries and special elections. The goal is to achieve a winner with broader support, but its implementation raises important strategic and structural concerns.

Here's how RCV works: voters rank candidates (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.). If no one wins a majority (over 50%) of first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. Voters who chose that candidate have their votes reassigned to their next choice. This process continues until one candidate secures a majority of the remaining active ballots.

The Origins of RCV

Ranked Choice Voting was first developed in the 19th century by mathematicians like Carl Andræ (in Denmark) and later by political theorist Thomas Hare in the UK. The modern form, often called Instant Runoff Voting (IRV), gained attention in the United States during reform movements that sought to weaken political machines and promote broader representation. It has been promoted by organizations like FairVote and adopted in local U.S. jurisdictions as a response to concerns about vote-splitting and plurality winners with limited support.

In the U.S., early implementations occurred in cities like Cincinnati (1950s) and Cambridge, MA, which still uses a form of RCV for city council elections. More recent adoption has occurred in places like San Francisco, Minneapolis, and New York City, often through ballot initiatives. While initially framed as a way to increase fairness and representation, long-term results have been mixed, especially in cities with dominant single-party control.

Case Study: Alaska's 2022 Special Election

In 2020, Alaska adopted a top-four nonpartisan primary followed by a ranked-choice general election for statewide offices. In the 2022 U.S. House special election, Republican voters split their first-choice votes between Sarah Palin and Nick Begich III, while Democrat Mary Peltola consolidated support and ultimately won the seat. Despite the fact that a majority of voters preferred a Republican candidate initially, the redistribution of votes under RCV enabled the Democrat to win—a result that surprised many and sparked national debate. Critics argued that RCV did not reflect the true intent of the majority and contributed to voter disillusionment.

Do You Have to Rank All Candidates?

No. Voters are not required to rank more than one candidate. You may choose to rank just your top choice. However, if your top choice is eliminated and you haven't listed others, your ballot becomes inactive—this is called ballot exhaustion.

Strategic Voting Under RCV

Despite the intent to increase voter power, RCV does not necessarily enhance your influence. Ranking more candidates doesn't strengthen your vote—it can actually work against you. If you rank candidates you don't fully support, your vote may help elect someone you oppose over your top choice. This has led many campaign strategists to recommend "bullet voting": rank only your most preferred candidate and leave the rest blank. This strategy is particularly advised in contentious or ideologically polarized races, where:

- The risk of aiding ideological opponents is high
- Voters want to send a strong, uncompromised message of support
- Lesser-known or outsider candidates risk early elimination due to the structure of the system

Why 50%?

The majority threshold in RCV systems is designed to ensure the winning candidate has broad support. While not federally mandated, this standard aligns with democratic ideals of consensus. Courts have upheld RCV under the U.S. Constitution, provided it doesn't violate equal protection or disenfranchise voters. But it's important to note that "majority" in RCV means a majority of remaining active ballots, not all ballots cast. Many ballots can become inactive before the final round.

Pitfalls and Problems with RCV

1. Single-Party Outcomes: In cities dominated by one party (like NYC with its Democratic supermajority), nonpartisan RCV primaries can lead to general elections with only candidates from the same party, reducing political diversity and disenfranchising minority party voters.
2. Ballot Exhaustion: Many voters don't rank all candidates. If their choices are eliminated, their ballots stop counting in later rounds. This can leave final results decided by fewer active votes than were originally cast.
3. Center Squeeze Effect: Moderates may be eliminated early if they're not a popular first-choice, even if they could've been broadly acceptable. This can benefit more polarizing candidates who are strategically ranked.
4. Voter Confusion and Mistakes: RCV ballots are more complex. Errors—like ranking the same candidate multiple times—can invalidate a vote. Some voters also misunderstand that ranking others doesn't help their top choice, leading to disillusionment.
5. Delayed Results: Counting takes longer because of the elimination and redistribution process. This can delay official results and weaken public confidence.

Legal Context

- U.S. Constitution: Gives states authority to regulate elections (Article I, Sec. 4).
- Federal Law: Does not prohibit RCV but requires systems to meet constitutional fairness.
- New York Law: RCV is allowed in certain localities; NYC uses it in limited races. There is no statewide mandate or prohibition.

Conclusion

RCV is often presented as a way to increase fairness and voter choice, but in practice, it

introduces new complexities and strategic risks. It may reduce diversity in general elections, create confusion, and lead to outcomes that do not reflect the full will of the voters. Voters should understand not only how to use RCV, but also how to strategically protect their preferences—by only ranking candidates they genuinely support.

References

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