

Where's the evidence supporting Ranked Choice Voting Claims?

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Reform to create Ranked Choice Voting reflects widespread disaffection with today's venomous politics dominated by angry ideologues. Change is a must.

But does Ranked Choice Voting deliver on its promises? America has a long history of passionate calls for change that failed to deliver. The evidence is all around us. Primary elections were introduced a century ago as a means to create a democracy that responds to "the people." Today, primary elections are driven by relatively small groups of activists devoted to agendas that often lack wide support.

We have carefully reviewed the track record of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) and it fails to support four of the advocates' promises for improvements over today's system.

#1 RCV claim: Reduce today's polarization of the political parties.

Claim: RCV predicts less partisan polarization as more moderates and independents run for office because voters no longer fear "wasting" their vote by casting a ballot for preferred candidates and allowing the election of extreme alternatives.

What have researchers found?

There is little research to support the proposition that RCV decreased polarization.

- A particularly sophisticated analysis found that RCV actually *increased* animosity among Democrats and Republicans compared to our current system.¹
- A study of the 2020 election found that RCV elections were more open to new parties in Maine but that independent and third-party candidates still only received 6.6% of the vote.²

#2. RCV claim: Increase the diversity of elected government officials.

There is little support for this claim.

- RCV may have contributed to an increase in the number of candidates who are racial and ethnic minorities, but there is little evidence that they were more successful in winning office.³

- A study found a modest 2% increase in the number of women winning election to the city council in the Bay Area of California after the introduction of an RCV election, but this may have resulted from the increased recruitment of women candidates and a national trend of more women being elected to office.⁴

#3. RCV claim: Increased voter turnout and engagement of voters of color.

Claim: Advocates claim that RCV allows voters to choose among a wider range of candidates, which in turn improves voter engagement among those who previously didn't like any of the candidates.

There is little research to support that RCV increases voter engagement and turnout by voters of color and some evidence that it chases them away.

- A series of studies report that RCV *decreases turnout and the use of ranking opportunities* among African Americans.⁵ Conversely, whites were more likely to report ranking a higher number of candidates.⁶
- Overall, analysts found no difference in turnout in cities using RCV compared to those using the current system.⁷ They report errors, confusion, and lower turnout due to the greater complexity of RCV and its process of ranking candidates and tabulating multiple rounds of voting.⁸

#4. RCV claim: Decreased negative campaigning.

Claim: Candidates in a RCV system have an incentive to make positive appeals to voters for their second or third votes and steer away from alienating these voters who may list other candidates above them.

While some studies report that RCV reduced negative campaigning,⁹ most research found little to no impact or even increased negativity.

- A study found only a 'slightly' more positive tone in newspaper articles in cities with RCV compared to those without it. But Twitter traffic was more negative in RCV cities.¹⁰
- A separate study reports increased negativity in Maine's RCV elections in 2018.¹¹

¹ Sean Fisher, Amber Lee, and Yptach Lelkes. 2021. "Electoral Systems and Political Attitudes: Experimental Evidence." Available at:

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3803603

² Joseph Cerrone and Cynthia McClintock. 2021. "Ranked-Choice Voting, Runoff, and Democracy: Insights from Maine and Other U.S. States." Available at:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3769409>

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- ³ David C. Kimball and Joseph Anthony. 2016. "Voter Participation with Ranked Choice Voting in the United States," *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*; Sarah John, Haley Smith, and Elizabeth Zack. 2018. "The alternative vote: Do changes in single-member voting systems affect descriptive representation of women and minorities?" *Electoral Studies* 54: 90-102.
- ⁴ Cynthia Richie Terrell, Courtney Lamendola and Maura Reilly. 2021. "Election Reform and Women's Representation: Ranked Choice Voting in the U.S." *Politics and Governance* 9(2): 332-343.
- ⁵ Jason A. McDaniel. 2016. "Writing the Rules to Rank the Candidates: Examining the Impact of Instant-Runoff Voting on Racial Group Turnout in San Francisco Mayoral Elections," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 38:387-408.
- ⁶ Francis Neely, Corey Cook, and Lisel Blash. 2006. "An Assessment of Ranked-Choice Voting in the San Francisco 2005 Election." Daly City, CA: Public Research Institute, San Francisco State University.
- ⁷ David C. Kimball and Joseph Anthony. 2016. "Voter Participation with Ranked Choice Voting in the United States," *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*.
- ⁸ Craig M. Burnett and Vladimir Kogan. 2015. "Ballot (and Voter) 'Exhaustion' under Instant Runoff Voting: An Examination of Four Ranked-Choice Elections." *Electoral Studies* 37:41-49.
- ⁹ Todd Donovan, Caroline Tolbert, and Kellen Gracey, 2016. "Campaign civility under preferential and plurality voting." *Electoral Studies* 42: 157-163.
- ¹⁰ Martha Kropf. 2021. "Using Campaign Communications to Analyze Civility in Ranked Choice Voting Elections" *Politics and Governance* 9(2): 280-292.
- ¹¹ Jesse Clark. 2020. "Rank Deficiency? Analyzing the Costs and Benefits of Single-Winner Ranked-Choice Voting." Available at:
https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3703197