

[DONATE](#)

POLITICS

Ranked choice is 'the hot reform' in democracy. Here's what you should know about it

DECEMBER 13, 2023 · 5:00 AM ET



Miles Parks

[8-Minute Listen](#)[PLAYLIST](#) [Download](#)

A clerk hands a ballot to a voter on Election Day, Nov. 8, 2022, in Lewiston, Maine. The state is one of 50 American voting jurisdictions to have moved to a ranked choice voting system, and more places may follow next year.

Robert F. Bukaty/AP

Most Americans are worried about the state of U.S. democracy.

Polls over the past year have consistently found 80% or more of Americans are concerned or feel there's a threat to the U.S. democratic system.

That has many people searching for a solution. And lately one proposed reform seems to be rising to the top.

"Ranked choice voting is the hot reform," said Larry Jacobs, a political science professor at the University of Minnesota. "It's being driven by deep, almost existential panic about the demise of American democracy. People are looking around what's going to respond to this. And ranked choice voting is the 'it' reform at this moment."

Roughly 50 American voting jurisdictions — from small cities to states — have now moved to a ranked choice voting system, according to tracking by the advocacy group FairVote, and it's shaping up to be one of the political subplots of 2024.

This story is part of a series of reports on alternatives to how U.S. voters cast ballots and elect their political leaders. Click here for more NPR voting stories.

Advocates say ranked choice voting could help take some of the toxicity out of American politics while giving voters access to a broader swath of ideas. Skeptics worry it makes voting more confusing, which could especially harm voters from marginalized communities.

Here are answers to some commonly asked questions about ranked choice voting:

How does it work?

In an election that features more than two candidates, most voters are used to picking their favorite and moving on.

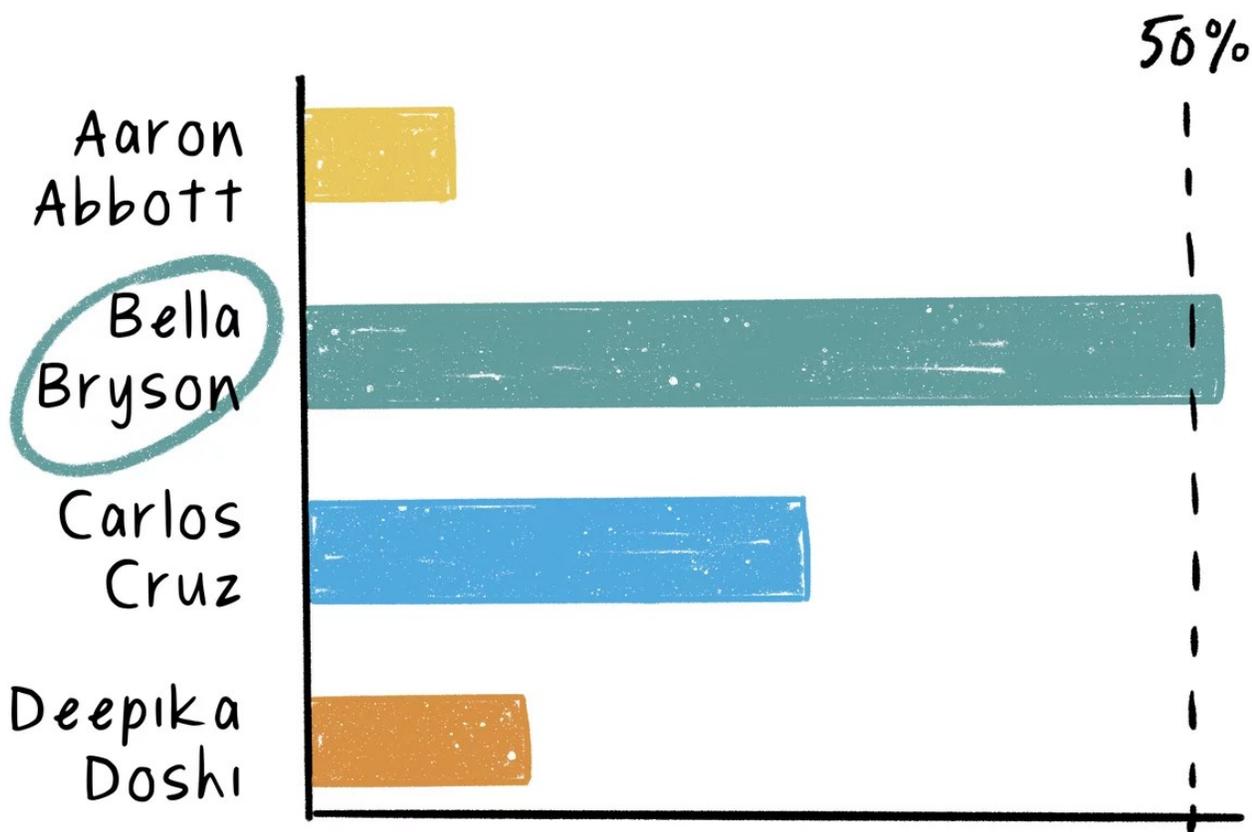
But in a ranked choice system, the voter has the opportunity to instead rank the candidates on the ballot from favorite to least favorite.

<u>Borough President</u> Rank up to four choices. Mark no more than one oval in each column.	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th
<u>Aaron Abbott</u>	○	○	○	○
<u>Bella Bryson</u>	○	○	○	○
<u>Carlos Cruz</u>	○	○	○	○
<u>Deepika Doshi</u>	○	○	○	○

Connie Hanzhang Jin/NPR

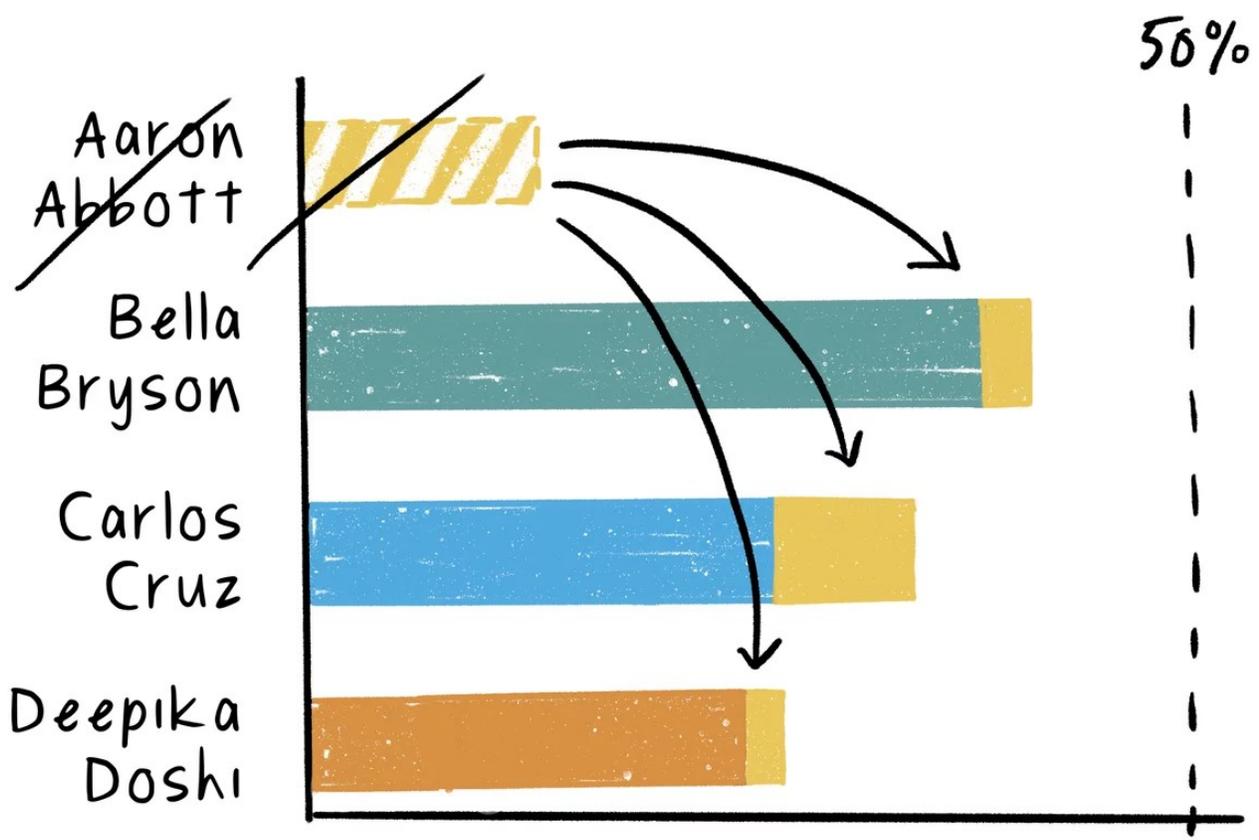
If one candidate has more than half of the first place votes, the election is over

and that candidate wins.



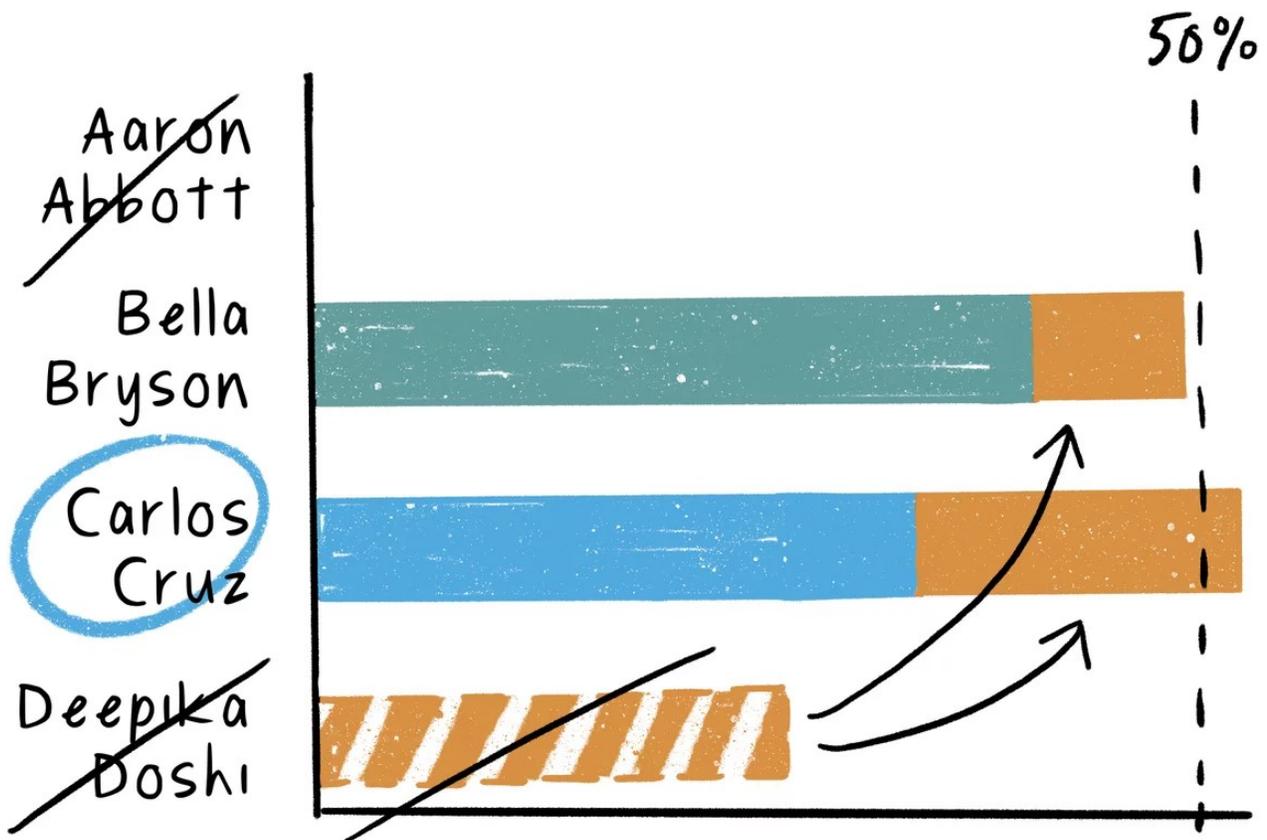
Connie Hanzhang Jin/NPR

If not, then the candidate with the least votes is eliminated and that candidate's voters are moved to their second choice.



Connie Hanzhang Jin/NPR

That keeps going until someone gets majority support.



Connie Hanzhang Jin/NPR

How does this help democracy?

Advocates argue that the system incentivizes politicians to find middle ground in their districts, to try to be voters' second and third choices even if they initially like someone more. That should, in theory, lead to less ideologically extreme lawmakers.

"A lot of voters are frustrated with the status quo in politics, and this method is not a huge change," said Deb Otis, who oversees research and policy at FairVote. "But in the places that use it, it has brought positive impacts."

In Alaska last year, Otis says, the system worked.

Voters there approved a move to a ranked choice voting system in 2020, and the state used it in 2022 for its statewide races. Voters reelected Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who voted to impeach former President Donald Trump after the Jan. 6 insurrection.

"While similar Republicans — Republicans who maybe bucked their party or

appeared bipartisan or moderate like Liz Cheney — were getting knocked out in primaries," Otis said. "[Alaska voters] also elected Mary Peltola to the House, who is considered one of the most moderate Democrats in the House in a race that included a couple of real hardliners who would not be considered moderate by any definition."

Another benefit to ranked choice is allowing voters to voice their true preferences, as opposed to settling.

Take the presidential race. Generally there's a Democratic and a Republican, and whenever someone notable considers running as a third-party candidate, there's a huge amount of hand-wringing over whether it'll have the unintended consequence of helping one candidate or the other by siphoning off votes.



TRACKING THE ISSUES IN THE 2024 ELECTION

How the Republican presidential candidates view Jan. 6, democracy and voting issues



POLITICS

Democrats sound alarms over No Labels third-party bid

But in a ranked choice system, theoretically it should allow more candidates to run who represent a wider swath of viewpoints, since voters can feel free to support them without fear of inadvertently helping a candidate they *definitely* don't want to win.

In Alaska and Maine, currently the only states that will use ranked choice voting next year in 2024, even if there's a third-party challenger, Otis says voters will be able to just vote for who they want to be president, without trying to game the system.

"Neighbors won't be telling their neighbors, 'Oh, you're wasting your vote if you vote for so-and-so,'" Otis said. "If a legitimate third-party challenge happens this year, all of the other voters in all the other states are going to have a really hard time with that, trying to navigate what to do, trying to play the strategist and figure out how to make our votes most impactful without harming our own side."

Advocates also say ranked choice voting can replace costly and complicated runoff voting systems, like the ones in Georgia among other places, because a ranked choice system is its own form of contained runoff election.

Where is ranked choice voting happening?

Alaska and Maine are currently the only states to use ranked choice voting in statewide races, but more could soon join them.

Voters in Nevada will vote in 2024 on whether to approve a constitutional amendment that would bring the voting method to the state's congressional and state elections, after clearing the first hurdle to passage in last year's midterms. In Oregon, the legislature this year passed a law to bring the question of ranked choice voting to voters next year too. Ballot measures have also been proposed in other states.

Close to four dozen cities, notably including New York City, have now moved to the voting system for local races as well.

And while momentum toward ranked choice has heated up recently, it's not actually new. Cambridge, Mass., adopted the voting method for its city council elections in 1941, and San Francisco has been voting that way since the early 2000s.

"It tends to start around one or two cities and then a lot of other cities in that region opt in," Otis said. "The Bay Area of California is one of those where they've had new adoptions on the heels of success in San Francisco, Berkeley and Oakland. Minnesota is another area. Minneapolis and Saint Paul have had it for years, and then several new Minnesota cities have opted in just over the last four years."

But changing how elections work always brings pushback too.

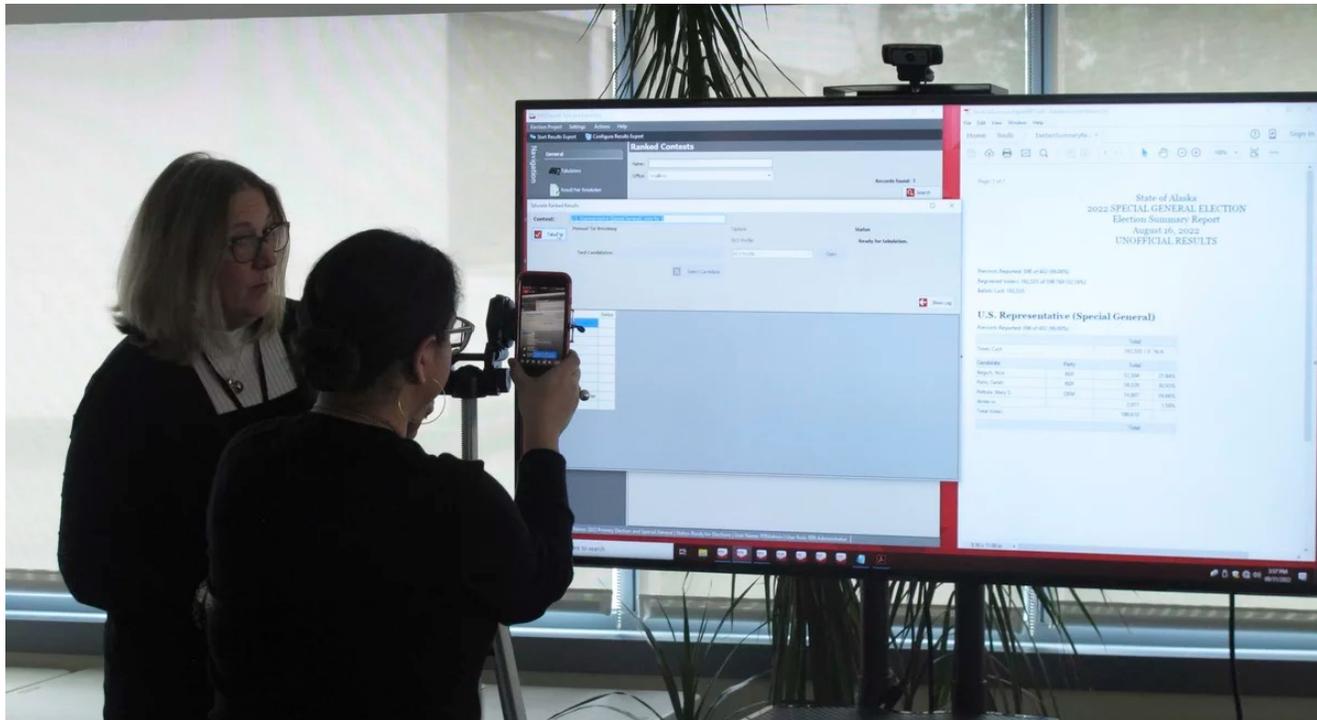
Five states, all controlled by Republicans, have now banned ranked choice voting in the last two years: Tennessee, Florida, Idaho, Montana and South Dakota.

Resistance to the reform hasn't been strictly along party lines, Otis says, but lately conservatives have started to push back more forcefully.

"It's really regional," Otis said. "In Virginia, the Virginia Republican Party is leading the way on ranked choice voting. But then in Alaska, Republicans have come out against it. In Nevada, both parties opposed their ballot measure [in 2022]. In other places, we've had both parties supporting it."

Generally, ranked choice voting is thought to somewhat dilute the power of the two major political parties in the U.S.

What's the case against ranked choice voting?



Alaska Division of Elections officials are shown during an Aug. 31, 2022, livestream of the results of a U.S. House special election. The contest won by Democrat Mary Peltola was the first statewide ranked choice vote election in Alaska under an initiative passed by voters in 2020.

Becky Bohrer/AP

Conservative groups like the Heritage Foundation and the Honest Elections Project argue that ranked choice voting is a way to "manipulate elections outcomes" as a way to "ensure left-leaning politicians get elected to office."

There's no evidence the voting system actually favors candidates from one political party over the other, however.

But Jason Snead, of the Honest Elections Project, also told NPR that ranked choice makes voting more confusing, which isn't what the U.S. needs at a time

when many voters are already sitting out of the democratic process.

"I think that we need to be careful about trying to address problems like divisiveness in politics by simply changing the system that we use to elect candidates," Snead said. "Many of the issues that we are experiencing, the bitterness and the division in our politics, are symptoms of other problems. And I don't know that we have to solve something at some sort of system level."

Even some experts who are more open-minded to the reform are skeptical it can bring about the sort of transformational change advocates promise.

Jacobs, of the University of Minnesota, co-wrote a paper poking holes in a number of claims ranked choice advocates have made about the voting system.

Most notably, he says, there isn't much evidence at this point that it decreases polarization. He does concede, though, it's possible the system just hasn't been in place long enough for the politics to change around it.

"We need some caution, because in America, we have a tendency going back a century or more to latch on to the new kind of quick fix to what ails us in our democracy," he said. "Some of those things have not worked out well."



ELECTIONS

Many voters say Congress is broken. Could proportional representation fix it?



ELECTIONS

The U.S. has a 'primary problem,' say advocates who call for new election systems

He pointed to primary elections, which when they were first implemented were seen by advocates as a change to include more people in the decision-making process. They would take power away from party elites and put it into the hands of voters.

"Instead, what we see is, it tends to be a fairly small number [of voters participating]," Jacobs said. "They tend to be quite ideological, and not

representative of the people."

With ranked choice voting, "there's a logic to it that makes it almost irrefutable," Jacobs said.

But in practice, research has found that the voters who actually take advantage of the ranking opportunities tend to be white voters, and affluent voters with more education.

"So it's kind of continuing and appearing to multiply the disparities in our current democracy," Jacobs said. "We need to be clear when we say 'democracy' that we mean a system in which there is equal participation."

Andrea Benjamin, an expert on race and voting behavior at the University of Oklahoma, agrees. She's optimistic about the potential of ranked choice voting to improve representation in the U.S., but at the end of the day, any real transformative change to the political system will only come from higher voter turnout. You can change vote-tallying methods all you want, she said, but it's still just a snapshot of the most motivated sliver of the population.

"The only accountability mechanism is that we agree to turn out and that we agree to chime in," Benjamin said. "When we're talking about primaries [that have] 15, 12% turnout ... we are not keeping our end of the bargain."

voting stories

Were you expecting a paywall? Not our style.

We are on a mission to create a more informed public. To make that happen, we need you to do something extraordinary: donate. Your dollars will be transformed into news, shows, and more. And, all that trustworthy journalism will be freely available to everyone. Can you help?

♥ YES, I'LL DONATE