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SWITCHING IT UP

# Ranked-choice voting and the quest to save democracy in the US


Who was AOC's first choice candidate?

Image: Reuters/Andrew Kelley

By Ephrat Livni Published July 31, 2019

Americans are accustomed to choice. We like options and equate them with freedom. Yet

when it comes to federal elections our system is remarkably rigid—you can only ever vote for one candidate for one position at a time.

There is an alternative approach, however. It's a notion called ranked-choice voting, or RCV, which is being adopted by counties nationwide, and which some 2020 Democratic presidential candidates support.

## What is ranked-choice voting?

This method, also known as "instant-runoff voting," was invented around 1870 and has since been adopted by a handful of democracies across the world. Australia has used ranked-choice voting in its lower house elections since 1918. The system essentially allows voters to choose candidates in the order of their preference, and is meant to yield a winner who most pleases the most people.

Here's how it works. In ranked-choice voting elections, voters can—but do not have to—rank the candidates on the ballot in their order of preference. If a candidate wins a majority of first-preference votes, they win the race. If not, the candidate with the fewest first-preference votes is eliminated, and the second-choice votes of voters who preferred the eliminated candidate are allocated to those who remain in the race. This process continues until one candidate has a majority.

If it sounds confusing, that's because it is, at least a little. "This is one of those things I had thought, 'Nah, I don't think so. I don't think I understand this well enough,'" Massachusetts senator and Democratic presidential contender Elizabeth Warren said in a podcast with Vox's Ezra Klein in June. "And yet, I've started reading more of the data, working through more of the examples, and there's a lot to be said for it."

## What's wrong with what we have?

Currently, in most US elections, voters have to choose twice, during party primaries, and in the final election. The process is expensive and unsatisfying to voters because it doesn't always end with someone who represents the majority.

Ultimately, voters choose between one of two or three candidates, a Democrat, a

Republican, and an Independent, if one runs. That means a winner could have a mere 34% of the vote and take the race, leaving a majority of the electorate—a whopping 66%—unhappy with their representative.

## What are the advantages of ranked-choice voting?

Ranked-choice voting could ensure that a winner has the approval of a majority of voters by taking into account their preferences, apart from first choice. In this way, the problem of winning on a mere plurality is mitigated and public servants are chosen because they more truly reflect the electorate's desires.

It could also streamline the election process, making it less expensive, more efficient, and more fair. Primaries and runoffs are costly. Critics of the contemporary system say elections will work better if voters rank their choices on the ballot rather than being forced to go to the polls twice and ultimately vote for a party primary winner that they don't much care for.

Rather than holding primaries, political parties would list all eligible candidates on a single final ballot and allow a true consensus choice to emerge. Instant-runoff voting would also eliminate the need for runoffs in close elections, according to ranked-choice supporters.

While the ranked-choice voting system makes the process of determining a winner more complicated, the most important advantage of this approach, according to its proponents, is that it leads to better results.

Entrepreneur Andrew Yang, who is campaigning for the 2020 presidential race, argues that ranked-choice voting leads to more moderate representatives who better reflect voter preferences rather than rewarding ideological extremists. The system also prevents a "spoiler effect" in which a third (or fourth or fifth) candidate splits the vote of the most-popular candidates by making elections less of an either-or proposition. Yang also says it leads to less negative campaigning, stating on his website page devoted to ranked-choice voting, "Since each voter can potentially vote for a candidate as well as their opponent, candidates shy from negative campaigning that would alienate the supporters of other candidates, instead trying to appeal to those voters as their second or third choice."

This month, another presidential contender, New York senator Kirsten Gillibrand, at a Portsmouth, New Hampshire town hall also expressed her support for instant-runoff voting. She joined Yang, Colorado senator Michael Bennet, former Alaskan senator Mike Gravel, Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, and Massachusetts congressman Seth Moulton, all of whom support the ranked-choice approach.

## What are the disadvantages of ranked-choice voting?

Opponents of ranked-choice voting contend that it is not a democratic approach and that it won't solve election problems. They say it will, in fact, create more of them. "Ranked-choice voting is the flavor of the day. And it will turn out to have a bitter taste," according to Gordon Weil, a former Maine state agency head and municipal selectman, writing in 2015 when voters in that state were mulling the system's adoption. "Its advocates want to replace real democracy, in which a majority picks the winner, with something akin to a game show method of selection. The result could be more like *Family Feud* than a decision about one of the most important choices people can make."

In a 2016 essay in Democracy, Simon Waxman argues that RCV doesn't actually lead to a candidate who represents the majority of voters. Also, an easily exhausted electorate doesn't always rank all the candidates on a ballot, according to a 2014 paper in the journal Electoral Studies that looked at ballots from 600,000 voters in California and Washington counties. As a result, some voters end up with their ballots eliminated and no say in the final outcome.

Say there were five names on a ballot and you only ranked three, who were all eliminated, your now-blank ballot wouldn't be counted in the final vote at all. You will not have expressed any choice about the two leading candidates.

Waxman contends that RCV is not a "solution." It may just be another complication, and of that we should be wary. He writes, "[T]here are reasons for skepticism when it comes to RCV—and not just RCV itself, but the larger notion that what is broken in American politics, and therefore what will fix it, is procedure."

## Which US cities and states already use ranked-choice voting?

New York City voters will decide in November whether to adopt a ranked-choice voting system for municipal elections, thus eliminating runoff contests in crowded races. Four California regions already use the instant-runoff system; one county in Oregon has RCV; and municipalities in Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Maryland, New Mexico, Utah, and Tennessee have all adopted the new voting system. Maine has approved instant-runoff voting in state and federal elections.

In 2018, after ballots were counted in Maine's second congressional district, Democrat Jared Golden trailed Republican incumbent Bruce Poliquin by about 2,000 votes. But with the ranked-choice voting system, Golden ultimately won by about 3,000 votes, picking up Democratic votes that initially went to independents Tiffany Bond and Will Hoar.

*Correction: This post was updated to reflect the fact that many US municipalities, not counties, have adopted RCV.*

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