

What is ranked choice voting?

Ranked choice voting is an increasingly common election method that allows voters to rank candidates in order of choice. Those rankings ensure that as many voters as possible will help elect a candidate they support.

Ranked choice voting has a long history of use in U.S. elections. It has been used to elect city councils in more than two dozen cities, including New York City, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Boulder, and Sacramento. It is used to elect multiple offices in Cambridge, MA and in Minneapolis, MN, and it is used to elect single-winner offices in four cities in the Bay Area in California, the two largest cities in Minnesota, and other cities in Colorado, Maine, Minnesota, and Maryland. Five states have used ranked choice ballots to ensure that overseas and military voters can fully express their choices in elections that may go to a runoff.

Ranked choice voting is widely used in the English-speaking world. It is used in at least one election by every voter in Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. Its single-winner method is recommended by Robert's Rules of Order for elections of officers when repeated voting is impractical and, as a result, is widely used in non-governmental elections.

Is ranked choice voting the same as instant runoff voting, single transferable vote, preference voting, and the alternative vote?

Yes. The terms “instant runoff voting,” “single transferable vote,” “preference voting,” “the alternative vote,” all refer to ranked choice voting. Usually, the term “instant runoff voting” or “IRV” only refers to electing a single-winner office like mayor or governor, because when used to elect one candidate, RCV allows a jurisdiction to have the benefits of multiple runoff elections, but voters only need to vote a single time.

Also, the term “single transferable vote” or “STV” usually refers to electing a multi-winner office, like a city council or legislature. It is a “single” vote, because every voter has one vote, as compared to block voting, in which voters may vote for more than one candidate if more than one will be elected; and it is a “transferable” vote, because it uses round-by-round tabulation in which votes may “transfer” from candidates who are elected or who are defeated in the prior round.

Why is ranked choice voting better?

Ranked choice voting has a number of benefits, including promoting majority support, minimizing negative campaigning, and providing voters with more choices. In multi-winner districts, it can promote fairer and more inclusive representation than winner-take-all methods. For example, the Fair Representation Act for Congress (which uses ranked choice voting to elect multi-winner districts) would help ensure that Representatives to Congress would better represent the full spectrum of voter opinion in the United States and have more incentive to work across party lines in the interest of their constituents.

How does ranked choice voting work?

Ranked choice voting is simple for voters: rank candidates in order of choice. Voters can rank as many or as few candidates as they want to. The votes are counted to ensure that as many voters as possible help to elect a candidate they support. In a single-winner election like for mayor or governor, that means that ranked choice voting helps to elect a candidate with majority support. In a multi-winner election, it means that ranked choice voting helps a supermajority of voters elect a candidate they support, by allowing smaller groups of voters to each elect one of the winners.

Where is ranked choice voting used?

Ranked choice voting has been adopted in U.S. cities in ten states. It is used by overseas and military voters to vote in places with runoff elections in five other states. Over 50 U.S. colleges and universities use ranked choice voting to elect student government officers. Internationally, it is used by every voter in six countries and in local elections in many more. Ranked choice voting is recommended for private organizations by Roberts Rules of Order, and many private organizations use it, including the Academy Awards in both nominating and selecting the winner for its prestigious awards.

What do voters think of ranked choice voting in the places where it is used?

The Eagleton Poll at Rutgers University and a core team of four academics led by Professor Caroline Tolbert of the University of Iowa analyzed the views and experiences of Bay Area voters in large independent public opinion surveys, and explored the tone of newspaper coverage and candidates' social media activity.

In each city that was studied, ranked choice voting received a majority of support from voters. Likely voters in cities that used RCV in their local elections in 2013 and 2014 were more satisfied with the conduct of candidate campaigns, and perceived less candidate criticism and negative campaigning in the lead up to their local elections. With ranked choice voting, candidates refrain from negative attacks that serve to alienate voters who might rank them second or third. Instead, candidates know that positive, issue focused campaigns give them the best chance to win under ranked choice voting.

What about other “alternative” voting reforms, like Top Two, party list proportional representation, cumulative voting, approval voting, or others?

There are many ways to elect officers. Although they all have some benefits and they all have some flaws, FairVote has identified ranked choice voting as the most empowering and effective voting method for use in United States elections, from city councils to Congress.