Ranked Choice Voting

What is Ranked Choice Voting?

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) is an enhanced system of voting that allows voters to rank the candidates for an office in order of their most desired to their least desired – no. 1, no. 2, no. 3, etc. It uses this information to select the candidate that has the broadest appeal.

Voters can vote for only one candidate, or rank as many candidates as they choose. If a candidate gets a majority of the first-place votes, he or she wins the election. If no candidate reaches 50%, the candidate who received the fewest no. 1 votes is eliminated. Voters who gave that candidate a no. 1 will have their votes transferred to the candidate to whom they gave a no. 2. If this raises one candidate above the 50% level, that candidate is the winner. If not, the process continues until one candidate gets 50% of the active voters. (If a voter does not select all of the possible candidates or if there are more candidates than choices, that voter's choices may not count towards the final outcome.)

Benefits of Ranked Choice Voting

Ranked Choice Voting Eliminates Spoilers:
- A 'spoiler' occurs when a second candidate joins the main candidate from one party, potentially splitting the vote among the two, and enabling the one candidate from the opposing party to win. As a result, candidates that represent an important sub-group of voters are often discouraged from running, thus depriving some voters a chance to express their view, and willingness to participate at all. RCV changes this. With RCV when a voter's desired candidate is not among the top vote getters, that voter's no. 2 vote is then counted and can add to the total of the leading candidate and count toward his or her victory. Having additional candidates with important views from one party need not be spoilers. An example of how this actually worked in Maine is shown on page 5.

Ranked Choice Voting Promotes Broader Perspectives.
- The impact of RCV on candidates is to make them fully aware that to increase their chances of winning, they have to cater to a much broader portion of the electorate. The winners of RCV elections are not necessarily those who receive the highest number of votes on the first round, but rather those who can build a broad coalition by attracting #2, #3, and #4 preferences from those who originally favored other candidates. This means less partisanship, more attention to the electorate as a whole, and a greater willingness to compromise. To many, this is exactly what the public wants and needs.

Ranked Choice Voting Discourages Polarizing Candidates and Negative Campaigning
- Polarizing candidates tend to lose in RCV because while they may get strong support from their bases, they get very few votes from other parts of the electorate. Moderates tend to do well, because they attract second-, third-, and fourth-choice votes from eliminated candidates.
- Negative campaigning is significantly reduced, because candidates do not want to jeopardize their chances of getting votes from eliminated candidates. In fact, in many RCV elections, candidates campaign together, hoping to get #2, #3, and #4 votes from others. In an RCV election in Portland ME in 2011, a survey of early voters revealed 41% responded that there was "less negative campaigning than usual." Professors at the University of Iowa in 2014 found that only 5% of voters in 7 cities using RCV thought that candidates criticized each other "a great deal" compared with 25% of voters in cities not using RCV.

Ranked Choice Voting Promotes Higher Voter Turnout
- Candidates with small but significant constituencies can run and state their positions, without helping a candidate with divergent views get elected. With a large number of candidates representing different views, election debates tend to be far more positive. Turnout is usually increased significantly, because more voters have candidates they truly support.
- RCV can stop the "my vote doesn't count" attitude. This is because even if the voter's favorite candidate is unlikely to win, the remaining ranked choice votes by the voter can definitely influence the election.
- If voters know that their ranked choice votes may count, they can avoid the common practice of voting for the 'least offensive candidate' and instead choose the candidates they like.

Voter Turnout in Mayoral Elections

RCV		NON-RCV	
San Francisco	53%	Dallas	6%
Oakland	68%	New York	22%
Minneapolis	43%	Miami	12%

- These dramatic differences in turnout reflect the success of RCV elections in getting people to vote.

Ranked Choice Voting Eliminates Costly Run-offs
- RCV will eliminate the need for run-off elections when it is required that one candidate reach a total of 50% of the vote. This saves the substantial cost to the public of running another election and avoids the potential bias of a typically small voter turnout.

Issues with Ranked Choice Voting

If Ranked Choice Voting eliminates spoilers, promotes broad coalitions, discourages polarizing candidates and negative campaigning, and promotes higher voter turnout, why is it not used everywhere? There are a number of problems that have hurt its implementation.

1. RCV is difficult to explain. Voters need to be educated so they can understand the process and the ranking of candidates.
2. RCV can discriminate against less educated voters, who either do not fully understand the system or do not know enough about all the candidates to fill out the ballot in its entirety.
3. RCV requires reprogramming computers and voting machines. Yet all three of the top voting machine vendors have the new capabilities available.
4. RCV is applied differently in different jurisdictions. In Minneapolis, people can rank 6 candidates. In St. Paul, they can only rank 3. Voters should be able to rank all candidates.
5. In many instances, because there are more candidates than ranks or because some people do not utilize all their rankings, votes are "exhausted," meaning they do not count in the final round. As a result, many winners have been elected with less than 50% of total votes cast. New technologies, higher limits on ballot eligibility, and better education can resolve most of these problems.
6. Entrenched political leaders do not like Ranked Choice Voting because it weakens their power and the power of their endorsed candidate.

With improved education, to explain RCV to the electorate, improved computer and voting systems, so all candidates can be ranked, and more rigorous ballot access requirements, so elections do not have 15 or more candidates, many of these problems can be overcome.

Where is Ranked Choice Voting Used?

1. Ranked Choice voting is used in the State of Maine and major cities such as Minneapolis, St. Paul, San Francisco, and Oakland.
2. It is also used for military personnel and overseas voters in run-offs in Alabama, Arkansas, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana, as well as in some special elections in these states, because there are only three weeks between the election and the run-off and there might not be time to get ballots to people in far-flung areas.
3. Internationally, Ranked Choice Voting is used in Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Malta, Northern Ireland, and Scotland, and party elections in Canada and the U.K. Forms of RCV are also utilized in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.
4. RCV is also used in the Academy Awards. Without RCV, with the choice of 10 films, a niche film with loyal supporters could win with less than 20% of the vote.

Example of Ranked Choice Voting

In 2018, the 2nd Congressional district had an election that demonstrates the function of RCV. As can be seen in the table below, in the first round of voting, the Republican, Bruce Poliquin was ahead. However, when the ranked votes from the independent candidate were distributed in the next round, the Democrat, Jared Golden won. This gave Maine voters the chance to support independent candidates without wasting their votes.

Candidate	1st Round	Last Round
Bruce Poliquin (Republican)	134,184	138,931
Jared Golden (Democrat)	132,013	142,440
Tiffany Bond (Independent)	16,551	
Will Hoar (Independent)	6,875	

How Would RCV Work if We Used It in Presidential Elections?

Obviously, Ranked Choice Voting has never been used in a Presidential election. But nineteen Presidents have been elected with less than 50% of the popular vote. In all these cases, there were third party candidates with important platforms. However, with the "winner take all" system, third party candidates often siphoned away votes from candidates with somewhat similar views, allowing a different minority candidate to get elected.

If RCV had been used in 1992, many of H. Ross Perot's voters might have given George H/W/ Bush their #2 votes, and he might have defeated Bill Clinton. In 2000, most Ralph Nader voters would have given Al Gore their #2 votes. Gore would have won Florida and the election. People who supported Nader would have been able to vote their conscience without worrying about being blamed for throwing the election.

There are about 20 Democratic Presidential candidates announced or planning to announce for the 2020 election. How can voters choose between 20 candidates? How can the Democrats assure themselves that a fringe candidate with less than 20% of the vote will win major primaries? Ranked Choice Voting would have been a perfect solution.

Conclusion

1. Ranked Choice Voting offers a method to reduce the impact of electing candidates supporting the radical fringe and increases the likelihood of electing candidates that reflect the will of a broader portion of the total population and are likely to be willing to compromise in order to achieve the generally desired results.
2. RCV elections tend to have much higher turnout and the winners tend to be more moderate.
3. RCV is controversial, especially disliked by many politicians and interest groups that anticipate a weakening of their parochial power – including some incumbents, fringe parties, some caucuses, and some unions.
4. Nevertheless, the awareness and appeal of RCV is growing substantially, especially in the press and among political leaders. Among others, columnists such as David Brooks of the New York Times wrote an Op-Ed on June 1, 2018 endorsing RCV as an important electoral improvement.

For further information on RCV and how it is faring, refer to:
      www.rcvmaine.com/how_does_ranked_choice_voting_work
The FAQ section and corresponding answers are excellent.