Ranked Choice Voting: How to Advance Cutting-Edge Electoral Reform

Ranked choice voting (RCV) is increasingly recognized as a means to improve elections for voters. States can pass RCV in multiple ways, including presidential elections, general elections for major offices, primary elections, vacancy elections and local elections. Lawmakers have several options for introducing applications of RCV that can address structural problems and teach voters about the benefits of RCV. FairVote can work with interested lawmakers to craft legislation specific to the needs of their state. Here is a review from ambitious approaches to modest ones.

General elections
- Using RCV promotes civil campaigning, produces winners with broader support, and gives voters a stronger voice in the process.

In an RCV election for a single seat, if no candidate has more than half of first-choice votes, candidates finishing last are eliminated round-by-round in an instant runoff until two candidates are left. This elects candidates with broad support, avoiding the problem of winners with only plurality support and eliminating the need for runoff elections. RCV eliminates the problem of vote-splitting and “spoiler” candidates. With RCV, candidates do best when they reach out to as many voters as possible, including those supporting opponents who are defeated after being in last place, thereby, reducing incentives for negative campaigning. Maine has already adopted RCV for general elections for the U.S. House and Senate along with state and federal primaries.

Presidential primaries and caucuses
- Using RCV in presidential nomination contests can reward candidates who reach out to more voters

Presidential elections often feature a large slate of candidates. Due to this feature, candidates can win states with low pluralities, and votes for candidates who drop out or do poorly are “wasted.” Voters also often want to indicate support for more than one candidate. In-person caucuses can shut out voters who are working people, parents of young children, and people with health issues. RCV helps to solve all these problems.

Primary elections
- Using RCV in primary elections can produce nominees who seek broad party support.
- Primaries with many candidates often result in nominees with only a plurality of support.

Primaries using RCV can produce candidates that have broad support within the party and eliminate the need for primary runoffs, which typically have low turnout. RCV promotes more civil campaigning that can help to unify a party going into the general election. RCV also combines well with changes to primary systems designed to uphold voting rights for the growing number of unaffiliated voters, such as an adoption of a “public primary.”
Local Option

- A local option law can provide local governments with the freedom to adopt RCV and empowers them to find new ways to promote civic engagement and reduce election-related costs.

In the United States, RCV is most commonly used at the local level. Local governments are often attracted to more civil campaigns, higher turnout, and the savings associated with eliminating separate runoff elections. In some states, local governments are unable to choose their method of elections and state-level legislation is required to allow them to adopt RCV. Colorado and Utah are among states that have recently passed laws allowing cities to use RCV.

Vacancy elections

- Adopting RCV for vacancy elections can reduce election-related costs and ensure vacancies are filled sooner.

When an elected officer resigns or dies prior to the expiration of the officer’s term, the position must often be filled earlier than the next scheduled election. Vacancy elections can be expensive and frequently suffer from low voter turnout. This is especially problematic when there must be a primary and general election to fill a vacancy. Some places even hold runoffs during their special elections. Multiple rounds of elections increase costs and prolong the vacancy. RCV confers the benefits of two elections (or more), but only requires one.

Military and overseas voters

- Using RCV ballots for military and overseas voters can allow states to reduce the delay between elections and runoffs without violating federal law.

Military and overseas voters often face difficulties voting in elections because they do not recite to have counted. The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act of 1986 and the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act of 2009 mandate that states send timely requested absentee ballots to UOCAVA voters at least 45 days before federal elections. This often causes states to lengthen the time between primary and runoff elections. This delay produces comparatively lower turnout in the runoff. States like Louisiana, Alabama, Arkansas, and South Carolina use RCV absentee ballots as a legal and practical solution to the disenfranchisement of military and overseas voters in runoff elections.

Study commissions

- States can create study commissions to determine how RCV can best meet their needs and begin a public conversation

Rhode Island and Colorado have created study commissions to analyze how electoral changes like RCV can improve elections in their state. The Colorado commission ultimately recommended that all cities be given the power to adopt RCV and that the Secretary of State’s office establish standards for RCV elections. The following year these recommendations were enacted into law.