

DEMOCRACY REFORM PRIMER SERIES

Ranked Choice Voting

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Summary

In the US, “ranked choice voting” (RCV) refers to an electoral system in which voters rank the candidates and the winner is chosen through a process of sequential elimination and vote transfers. If any candidate has a majority of top rankings, that’s the winner. If not, the candidate with the fewest top rankings is eliminated from all ballots (so that voters who ranked that candidate first now rank another candidate first) and the process is repeated until one candidate does have a majority of top rankings.

In the last two decades, RCV has become a popular reform adopted for municipal elections in many US cities including San Francisco, Minneapolis, and New York City, and for congressional elections in Maine and Alaska. Advocates argue that in most circumstances, RCV should encourage a wider range of candidates to run and incentivize existing candidates to adopt more moderate platforms.

Plurality elections often struggle with the ‘spoiler effect’ or entry of a third candidate that saps support from a similar candidate who would otherwise win an election in a simple matchup. These ‘spoiler candidates’ are often women, people of color, or moderates and are discouraged from entering a race so as not to advantage of their ideological opponent. RCV eliminates this electoral tradeoff by allowing voters to fully rank candidates, automatically appropriating the votes of a losing candidate to a voter’s second choice versus forcing voters into a run-off election that statistically suffers low turnout.

Advocates also argue that, because being ranked second or lower on the ballots of other candidates’ supporters can help a candidate win, candidates will take a more moderate and conciliatory approach to seek out these lower rankings. The data supporting these claims is mixed. In some instances, RCV could increase polarization in electoral races as candidates choose more extreme positions to differentiate themselves to voters. Thus whether RCV increases or decreases polarization depends on assumptions about who is running, who is voting, and what candidates can do to win the support (both top rankings and lower rankings) of key groups of voters.

Critics of RCV point to surveys that US voters are more comfortable with plurality and runoff elections than with RCV, raising questions about public acceptance of a broader reform. Additionally, empirical research on RCV shows small effects of RCV adoption in US cities in which the runoff system was previously used. Despite these initial low findings, the empirical literature on RCV adoption in US cities provides some encouraging results for advocates in increasing women and minority candidates and civility in electoral races. While it is unclear which of these effects are directly applicable to American cities, the initial research is promising enough to continue debate and investment in the reform.

