Opinion   Alaska's ranked-choice voting is flawed. But there's an easy fix.

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More than a few Pennsylvania voters are probably thinking, after the Senate debate last week between Democrat John Fetterman and Republican Mehmet Oz, that they would like to have other options.

Pennsylvania is not the only state where a large swath of voters are dissatisfied with the nominees chosen in this year's primaries. Many Arizona voters, for example, wish Karrin Taylor Robson, rather than ultra-MAGA Kari Lake, had received that state's GOP nomination for governor.

Alaska's new voting system — in which the top four candidates in a nonpartisan primary advance to the general election, where ranked-choice voting permits voters to indicate their preferences among all four candidates — shows a way out of this predicament.

If Pennsylvania used Alaska's system, the November choice for senator there would include not just Fetterman and Oz, as the winners of their respective partisan primaries, but also Conor Lamb and David McCormick as the runner-up in each of those races. In Arizona, New Hampshire, North Carolina and elsewhere, Alaska's system similarly would have added alternatives that include non-MAGA Republicans.

But before Pennsylvania or any other state embraces Alaska's system, there's an important detail that needs to be fixed.

Alaska's special election in August for the House of Representatives was heralded as a triumph for ranked-choice voting, because MAGA favorite Sarah Palin, a personification of polarization, could not attract enough second-choice votes from moderate Republican Nick Begich's supporters to win.

That's true. But the way Alaska uses ranked-choice voting also caused the defeat of Begich, whom most Alaska voters preferred to Democrat Mary Peltola, the candidate who ended up winning.

This anomalous outcome, contrary to the principle that the majority's preference should prevail, would be easily remedied by one small change.

The key to ranked-choice voting is that a voter lists the candidates in order of preference, starting with their favorite, rather than naming just that favorite. The problem in Alaska — and other ranked-choice systems now in use, from Maine to San Francisco — is the rule for eliminating candidates when no one gets a majority of first-place votes. By tweaking this rule, Alaska's system would become more palatable to Republicans and Democrats alike, and more likely to be adopted across the country.

Begich was eliminated because he had the fewest first-place votes. That seems logical at first glance. But the flaw in this outcome — and why Republicans have reason to be resentful — is that a majority of voters would have favored Begich had the race come down to a head-to-head matchup against either Peltola (52 percent to 48 percent) or Palin (61 percent to 39 percent). He lost only because it was a three-way race.

Here's how to fix the flaw. If Alaska eliminated the candidate with the fewest *total* votes, rather than the fewest *first-place* votes, the ranked-choice system would be sure to elect a candidate such as Begich who defeats all rivals in one-on-one matchups.

Call it a "Total Vote Runoff." A candidate's total votes in such a system would be determined by the number of other candidates he or she is ranked above. For example, when a candidate is ranked first on a ballot in an election involving three candidates, then this first-choice candidate is ranked above two other candidates and gets two votes from this ballot.

When that same candidate is ranked second on another ballot, the candidate is favored over only one other candidate and would receive only one vote from that ballot.

A candidate ranked last on a ballot, or not ranked at all, is not favored over anyone and gets no votes from that ballot.

Calculating the number of votes that a candidate gets on each ballot — two, one or zero — and adding up the candidate's votes from all the ballots yields the candidate's total votes.

Using this method, we can identify the number of ballots on which each of Alaska's three candidates was ranked first or second and then calculate each candidate's total votes (there were only three candidates in the House special election):

Alaska House results using total vote runoff

First-place votes get counted twice because voters put their first choice ahead of two other candidates.

CANDIDATE	FIRST-PLACE VOTES	FIRST-PLACE VOTES, COUNTED AGAIN	SECOND-PLACE VOTES	OVERALL TOTAL
Begich	53,810	53,810	81,253	**188,873**
Peltola	75,799	75,799	19,024	**170,622**
Palin	58,973	58,973	31,611	**149,557**

Source: Alaska official results, Alaska cast vote records,

Palin had the fewest total votes, so she would have been the first candidate eliminated in a "Total Vote Runoff" tweak to RCV.

With Palin eliminated, the race would have been between Begich and Peltola. Because a majority preferred Begich to Peltola, he would have been elected. Total Vote Runoff captures the will of the majority more accurately than Alaska's current elimination system does.

Republicans should like Total Vote Runoff because its procedure would help ameliorate the "candidate quality" problem that plagues their party, as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) lamented. A candidate popular only with the party's base would be eliminated early in a Total Vote Runoff, leaving a more broadly popular Republican to compete against a Democrat.

Democrats, too, should welcome Total Runoff Voting to protect against losses caused by excessively progressive candidates who are unacceptable to a large portion of independent voters. Alaska-style ranked-choice voting might keep in contention a left-wing candidate whose first-place votes reflect enthusiastic but limited support, but Total Runoff Voting would promote Democratic candidates whose wide appeal makes them more competitive overall.

The lesson of Alaska's special election is not to abandon ranked-choice voting, as some have misguidedly charged, but instead to improve it. One small yet powerful change in how it operates would help Alaska's new voting system achieve its objective of electing less polarizing, less extreme winners and fulfill ranked-choice voting's promise of making elections consistent with the premise that in a democracy the majority should prevail.