

RANKED CHOICE VOTING 101

How RCV works

RCV is straightforward for voters: rank candidates in order of preference. Voters can rank as many candidates as they want without fear that ranking others will hurt the chances of their favorite candidate.

How Votes are Counted

All first choices are tallied and if a candidate receives more than half of the first choices, that candidate wins, just like in any other election.

If there is no majority winner after counting first choices, the race is decided by an “instant runoff.”

The candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and voters who picked that candidate as their top choice will have their next choice counted. This process continues until there’s a majority winner or a candidate won with more than half of the vote.

RCV prevents wasted votes

In 2020, over 3 million votes were “wasted” on Democratic presidential primary candidates who had already withdrawn from the race, representing over 8% of total votes. In 2016, hundreds of thousands of votes were wasted in the Republican primaries.

RCV advances nominees with broad support

RCV produces nominees with strong and widespread support, even in a crowded field of candidates. RCV incentivizes candidates to build an inclusive campaign and appeal to the broadest group of primary voters — rather than target a single “base” of voters. Meanwhile, candidates with similar ideologies or backgrounds don’t have to worry about dividing support because ranking allows them to express preferences for multiple candidates.

RCV lets voters express their honest preferences

Many voters feel that they must vote strategically in presidential primaries, rather than selecting the candidate who best represents their views. In a single-choice primary with numerous candidates, voters often feel pressure to vote for someone whom they believe has the best chance of defeating their last choice in a primary.

With RCV, voters can rank the candidates they like best without worrying that doing so will help the candidate they like least.

RCV lets voters “realign” with an active candidate

While many states are moving toward primary elections, caucuses still carry one key benefit — realignment. Caucuses give voters the option to realign with their second-choice candidate if their first choice does not clear the threshold for earning delegates (typically 15% of the vote in contests that allocate delegates proportionally). This method puts more power directly in the hands of the voters, ensuring each individual can cast an impactful vote for a viable candidate.

RCV gives voters the same power as enjoyed by in-person caucus-goers. If a voter’s vote cannot help their first choice win delegates, their vote counts for their next preference instead.

How does RCV work in presidential primaries?

Democratic primaries award delegates proportionally among candidates that cross a certain threshold — typically 15% of the vote. Some Republican presidential primaries do the same, while other Republican contests are “winner-take-all,” meaning one candidate gets all delegates from that state. RCV improves both processes.

In winner-take-all presidential primaries, RCV uses its standard “instant runoff” format, awarding all delegates to the candidate who crosses the 50% threshold in the final round of tabulation.

In presidential primaries that award delegates proportionally, a small modification is used. If, after counting each ballot for the candidate marked as first choice, all candidates cross the vote threshold for earning delegates (typically 15%), the count is complete and delegates are awarded proportionally.

If candidates’ vote totals fall below the threshold, the one with the fewest votes is eliminated and their ballots are added to the totals of each voter’s next choice. This can potentially boost a candidate above the 15% threshold based on their strength as a second choice. The process continues until all candidates are either eliminated or cross the threshold. Delegates are awarded proportionally among the remaining candidates.

As Republicans in 2012 and 2016 and Democrats in 2020 have shown, parties increasingly draw crowded fields. RCV is both sensible, because it prevents plurality voting and runoff elections, and transformative, because it holds up majority rule and positively changes the culture of politics.