



The Rise of Ranked-Choice Voting

BY AMANDA ZOCH

Ranked-choice voting—where voters rank candidates by preference instead of voting for just one person—is on the rise. In 2020, [four state Democratic parties](#) used ranked-choice voting to winnow the crowded field of contenders in the presidential preference primaries, and [both the Utah Democratic and Republican parties](#) used it for their virtual conventions this year. This November, Maine will become the first state to use ranked-choice voting in the general presidential election.

While this system seems newfangled, in fact, ranked-choice voting has a 100-year history in the U.S. Several cities adopted it throughout the 1920s and 1930s, according to the [Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center](#). The system fell out of favor in the 1950s—in part because counting was done by hand and single-choice systems could be counted on machines—until a resurgence of use by cities in the last two decades. Currently, [18 cities use ranked-choice voting](#), including Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn.; Payson and Vineyard, Utah; and San Francisco, Oakland and other Bay Area cities in California.

■ **How Does Ranked-Choice Voting Work?** Most elections use a winner-take-all, or plurality, approach, where the highest vote-getter wins, even if their share of the vote was well under 50%. With a ranked-choice system (also known as “instant-runoff voting”), voters are not limited to one choice. Instead, voters rank the candidates in preferential order, and a winner is not declared until one candidate receives over 50% of the votes. Here’s how that works:

- The votes are first tallied based on the first choice on every ballot.
- If no candidate receives 50% or more of the votes in the first round, the candidate with the fewest number of votes is eliminated, and the votes are counted again.
- If a voter’s number-one choice was the eliminated candidate, then that ballot is tabulated with the voter’s second-choice candidate.
- The elimination process is repeated until one candidate receives over 50% of the vote.

■ **What proponents say:** In a plurality election with several candidates, the winner may receive less

Did You Know?

- Eighteen U.S. cities use ranked-choice voting in municipal elections, and at least three more will begin doing so in 2021.

- In 2020, Maine will become the first and only state to use ranked-choice voting in a general presidential election.

- Ranked-choice voting is used by colleges and universities, private non-government organizations and even the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for deciding the prestigious Academy Awards.

than a majority of the votes. For instance, the 2010 Maine governor’s race was won by Paul LePage (R) with 38% of the vote; three other candidates split the rest. Supporters of ranked choice argue that candidates should receive at least 50% of the vote to win, proving broad support from their constituents.

This voting system also limits the “spoiler” effect of independent or minor-party candidates. In a plurality election, it’s possible for minor-party candidates to siphon off votes from major-party candidates. With ranked-choice voting, voters can select their first choice from a minority party, and a candidate from one of the two major parties as their second choice. If no candidate receives 50% of the first-choice selections, the voter’s second choice—a Democrat or a Republican—would get the vote.

Ranked-choice voting may also lend itself well to races with large candidate pools—such as the 2016 Republican presidential preference primary or the 2020 Democratic presidential preference primary—because it does not require voters to choose just one candidate when many may appeal to them.

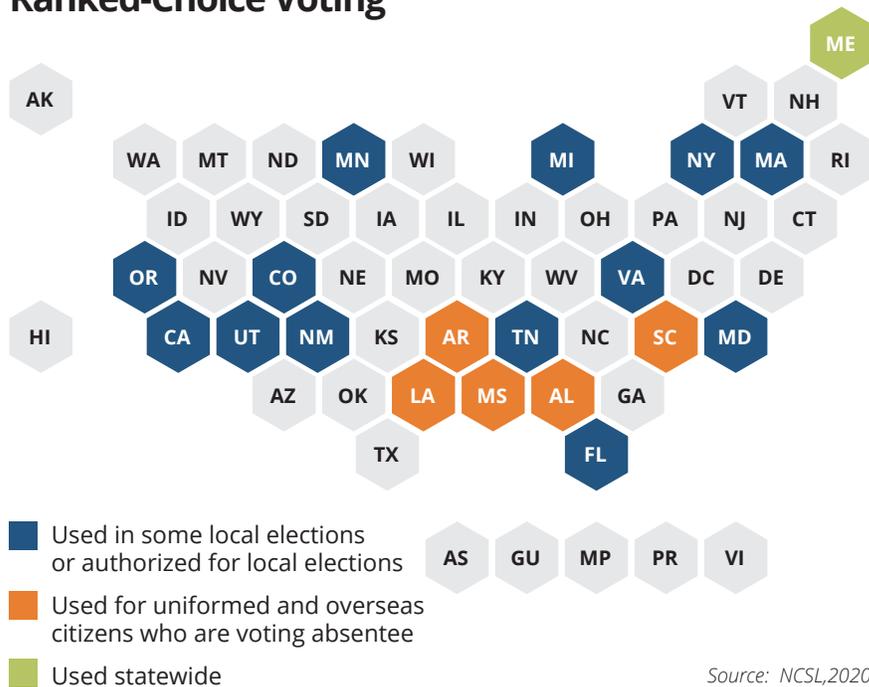
Ranked-choice voting may also bolster access for military and overseas voters in the states where [primary runoffs](#) are used. States must adhere to federal law mandating that ballots be sent 45 days ahead of time to overseas voters, a hard deadline to meet for a primary runoff. Five states—[Alabama](#), [Arkansas](#), [Louisiana](#), [Mississippi](#) and [South Carolina](#)—use a ranked-choice system for military and overseas voters for these runoffs. These voters are sent just one ballot, on which they mark their first and second choices. If a runoff is needed and their first-choice candidate is no longer in the race, their second choice gets their vote.

■ **What opponents say:** Fairness is in the eye of the beholder. Some argue that winning with a plurality is a fine way to choose our elected officials, and that ranked-choice voting only [contrives a majority](#) by narrowing the field each round. In addition, if a voter decides to only vote for one candidate and not rank the others (sometimes called “bullet” voting), and the counting goes to a second level, the voter’s ballot would be “exhausted” and may not count at all, thus nullifying that citizen’s vote.

Because ranked-choice voting diverges from traditional voting methods, the voting populace may not be properly educated about the new system. This could lead to frustration and the possibility that voters will not properly complete their ballots—again resulting in more nullified votes.

While supporters argue that ranked choice [discourages polarization](#), opponents say that it may have the opposite effect—[encouraging fringe candidates or strategic coalitions](#).

Ranked-Choice Voting



Source: NCSL, 2020

State Action

An increased interest in ranked-choice voting can be seen in bill introductions. To date this year, 67 bills have been introduced in 22 states and Washington, D.C., to use ranked-choice voting in elections at various levels. In contrast, just 31 bills were introduced in 17 states in 2017. Implementing ranked-choice voting is a state, not a federal, decision. NCSL is tracking these bills and any that relate to other alternative forms of voting on its [State Elections Legislation Database](#).

In 2016, [Maine](#) became the first state to authorize ranked-choice voting for statewide races, using it for all state and federal primaries, as well as all general congressional elections, in 2018. In response to constitutional requirements that state officials be elected “by a plurality of all votes returned,” the state has enacted [legislation](#) clarifying ranked-choice voting laws. In 2020, the Pine Tree State passed a [bill](#) requiring the use of ranked-choice voting in the general presidential election and presidential primaries, beginning in 2020 and 2024, respectively.

Both red and blue states have seen action on ranked-choice voting. [Utah](#) in 2018 and [Virginia](#) in 2020 enacted legislation authorizing ranked-choice voting in local elections. California’s legislature did the [same](#) in 2019, although the governor [vetoed](#) it.

In [Alaska](#) and [Massachusetts](#), the voters will get to decide. Citizen initiatives implementing statewide ranked-choice voting will be on both state’s ballots this November.

Additional Resources

- [NCSL’s Ranked Choice Voting webpage](#)
- [Ranked-Choice Voting Resource Center](#)
- [Ranked-Choice Voting, Fair Vote](#)

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