



Rhode Island Presentation on Non-Plurality Voting Methods

Ben Williams, Principal, Elections and Redistricting

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Defining Alternative Voting Systems

- NCSL working definition
 - A system where the candidate with the most votes wins, and the number of choices a voter can select equals the number of officeholders being elected.
- Other definitions
 - Pew Research Center: a voting method “other than the standard single-winner, plurality system most American voters know.”
 - Center for Election Science: a voting method that fosters “real” competition, chooses a “real” winner, and is easy to understand.

What are Alternative Voting Systems?

Three common examples

- Ranked Choice Voting/Instant Runoff Voting
- Approval Voting
- STAR Voting

Questions to ask when analyzing each system

- How does it work?
- Is it used by local or state governments?
- Which features make it distinct from traditional plurality voting?
- Does it achieve its objectives?



Report 

Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Implementation Considerations for Policymakers




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Introduction

In most American elections, the winning candidate is the one who receives the most votes, even if most voters selected someone else. Some states in the Deep South hold runoffs between the top two vote-getters if no candidate receives at least 50% of total votes, ensuring whoever wins is supported by a majority of the electorate. In a small but growing number of states and municipalities, another majoritarian system—ranked choice voting, or RCV—is used. RCV combines the general election and the runoff by letting voters select—or “rank”—the candidates in order of preference. If no candidate receives 50% of the first-choice votes, the lowest-ranking candidate is eliminated, and their second-place votes are reallocated among the remaining candidates. The process repeats itself until a winner is selected. Variations of RCV exist for different

Ranked Choice Voting – Synopsis

○ How it operates

- Voters rank all candidates for a given office by their preference—first choice, second choice, etc.
- Votes are tallied based on the first choice on every ballot. If no candidate receives a majority of votes, the candidate with the lowest number of first choice votes is eliminated and their votes are distributed to voters' second choices and the votes are tallied again.
- This process continues until a candidate receives a majority of votes and is declared the winner.

○ Where it is used

- Statewide: Alaska and Maine
- Locally: 60 jurisdictions use or are implementing ranked choice voting for some elections (source: FairVote)
- Ranked choice voting is by far the most prevalent alternative voting system used in the United States.

Ranked Choice Voting Visualized



Where Ranked Choice Voting is Used

Localities

- When: since early 20th century (varies)
- Form: Varies (traditional and multi-winner most common)
- Applies to: Municipal and county elections

Maine

- When: since 2018
- Form: Traditional
- Applies to: Statewide elections for federal office

Alaska

- When: since 2022
- Form: Traditional, combined with top-four primary
- Applies to: All statewide elections

Notable Elections with Ranked Choice Voting

○ Maine

- 2018 election, 2nd Congressional District*
 - Jared Golden (D) defeats Bruce Poliquin (R) in second round of voting.
- 2022 election, 2nd Congressional District
 - Jared Golden (D) defeats Bruce Poliquin (R) in second round of voting.
- 2020 election, U.S. Senate
 - Susan Collins (R) wins in first round of voting.

○ Alaska

- 2022 special election, at-large Congressional district
 - Mary Peltola (D) defeats Sarah Palin (R) in second round of voting.
- 2022 election, at-large Congressional district
 - Mary Peltola (D) defeats Sarah Palin (R) in second round of voting.
- 2022 election, Governor
 - Mike Dunleavy (R) wins in first round of voting.

Options Besides Ranked Choice Voting

Approval Voting

- How it works
 - Voters cast votes for as many candidates as they like in a given race, rather than for a single candidate.
 - The votes are tallied and the candidate with the highest number of votes wins the election.
- Where is it used?
 - Fargo, North Dakota
 - St. Louis, Missouri
 - The U.N. (selecting the Secretary-General)

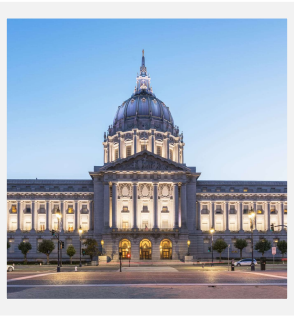
STAR Voting

- Means “Score then Automatic Runoff”
- How it works
 - First, voters score each candidate on a scale.
 - Second, the two candidates with the highest scores move on to a runoff.
 - Third, votes are assigned to whichever candidate a voter scored higher, and a winner is chosen.
- Where is it used?
 - Nowhere in the United States

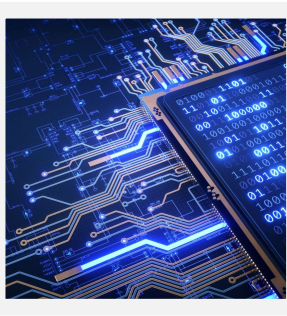
Alternative Voting Systems – Things to Consider



Moderating effects?



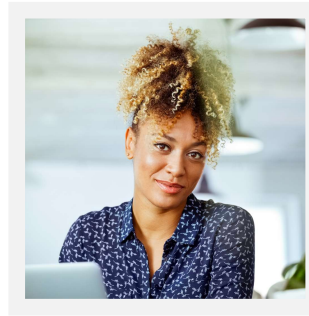
Politically beneficial?



Is it auditable?



Cost to adopt?



Impacts on administrators?



Voter education?

General Criticisms of Alternative Voting Systems



- They can be difficult for voters to understand without public education efforts.
- Evidence on their ability to moderate politics is mixed.
- While inexpensive, switching to alternative voting systems is not free.
- They can complicate the work of election officials.

Specific Criticisms of Each System

Ranked Choice Voting

- Ballot exhaustion could lead to a “majority winner” with fewer than 50% of votes cast in initial tally

Approval Voting

- Does not guarantee a majority winner
- Used far less frequently than ranked choice voting, so fewer test cases to identify concerns

STAR Voting

- No real-world examples to study
- Unclear if auditable
- Potentially more confusing than other available options

Final Thoughts

- Look at the studies that are available, but keep in mind the sample size of elections to analyze is limited.
- Even if promised benefits of adopting an alternative voting system do occur, the degree of impact can vary depending on a system's structure.
- These potential reforms are only one part of a much broader electoral system and can be considered holistically.
- None of these potential reforms is a “silver bullet” for whatever may ail politics.



Ben Williams

Principal, Elections &
Redistricting Program



Reach Out Anytime!

Email

ben.williams@ncsl.org

Phone

1-303-856-1648