

Ranked Choice Voting: How Does It Compare to our Current Election Process?

A voting method exists which is slightly different from traditional voting methods, but which has significant advantages over our current system. There are several names for this method: Single Transferable Voting, Choice Voting, Ranked Choice Voting, and others. During conversations about Ranked Choice Voting (RCV), the conversation frequently returns to a couple of points. There are usually comments about how it sounds amazing and that they have no previous encounter with such an idea. This is frequently followed by a series of questions about how it actually works, including a request for a “simple” explanation. In reality, the system we have in place now is infinitely more complex and difficult to understand, but people are used to it. It is comfortable; familiar. Thus this explanation of “What is RCV” will piggyback on the current system, making use of ways the systems are similar, and pointing out specifically where they are different.

Casting Votes: In our current system, a person votes for the ONE person they wish to receive their vote. This system can result in “spoilers” and “predictive voting.”

Under RCV, a person votes for as many candidates as they desire, and they RANK the candidates based on the voter’s own criteria. For example, a voter may like three of the people running. They can vote for “all three” in descending order of preference; first choice, second choice, third choice.

The image shows two examples of ballots. The left one is a Wyoming general election ballot for Casper College City Council. It has sections for Federal, State, and Non-Partisan candidates. The right one is a sample ballot for the N.C. Court of Appeals, showing a grid for ranking candidates from 1st to 3rd choice. A pencil is shown marking the 3rd choice for Ben Franklin.

N.C. COURT OF APPEALS (SAMPLE)		
Fill in one oval per choice	Your 2nd or 3rd choices will not count against your 1st choice. They will only be considered in a runoff if your 1st choice is not in the runoff.	
1st ↓ Mark your 1st choice here	2nd ↓ Mark your 2nd choice here	3rd ↓ Mark your 3rd choice here
<input checked="" type="radio"/> John Adams	<input type="radio"/> John Adams	<input type="radio"/> John Adams
<input type="radio"/> Ben Franklin	<input type="radio"/> Ben Franklin	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Ben Franklin
<input type="radio"/> Tom Jefferson	<input type="radio"/> Tom Jefferson	<input type="radio"/> Tom Jefferson
<input type="radio"/> Betsy Ross	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Betsy Ross	<input type="radio"/> Betsy Ross

How votes are counted: In our current system, votes are counted one for one. This means you vote for one person, and your vote is assigned to that person no matter what else happens. You have indicated that you want only that person to succeed. If the person you voted for is eliminated, your vote is thrown out with the candidate. Likewise if your candidate wins by a huge margin, any amount of votes above the 50% threshold become meaningless.

Under RCV, your vote counts for one candidate at a time. But in the case that your first choice candidate is eliminated, your vote is transferred to your second choice, and becomes a vote for them. If your second choice candidate is eliminated, your vote is transferred to your third choice. This continues until either all your choice candidates are eliminated, or one of your choices wins. What are the advantages of RCV?

1. This method gives your vote a tremendous amount of power.
2. This method frees you to vote for lesser known candidates if you support their cause, without fear of having “wasted” your vote.
3. And finally, if your first candidate wins by a landslide, and there are multiple seats available to be filled such as with Congress, then your second choice candidate ALSO receives a boost to their tally from your vote -- furthering the influence of your vote even more.

How candidates are selected: In the current system, each political party has a primary or a caucus during which people choose their preferred candidate. This of course limits any party to only that one person, their history, their views, and their ability to attract votes from the public. Any second person running from the same party would create a spoiler effect where they might split the vote of the party between themselves, and the primary candidate, thus handing the victory to an opposing party. The Democratic Party always uses a proportional method for awarding delegates. The percentage of delegates each candidate is awarded (or the number of undecided delegates) is representative of the mood of the caucus-goers or the number of primary votes for the candidate. For example imagine a state with ten delegates and three candidates. If 60% of the people supported candidate X, 20% supported candidate Y, and 20% supported candidate Z, candidate X would receive six delegates and candidates Y and Z would each receive two delegates. However it also includes so called “super delegates” which can make their own decision about who to cast their vote for within the party primary, so these numbers are not always correct. It depends on the situation. The Republican Party, unlike the Democratic Party, allows each state to decide whether to use the winner-take-all method or the proportional method. In the winner-take-all method the candidate whom the majority of caucus participants or voters support receives all the delegates for the state. Other parties decide in their own manners.

What are the advantages of RCV?

1. Under Ranked Choice Voting, there is no need for a primary.
2. There is also no need to eliminate candidates, and their views and ideas, from the general election. Under RCV, multiple candidates from each party can run in the general election without any fear of becoming “spoilers.”

How the general election is won: You may think the system we use now is simple, but it is not. Here is a brief excerpt from the Electoral College documentation:

<https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/roles.html>

Under the current system, the general election becomes a competition between the candidates and their parties to win votes from each person. Each vote is cast within a state and each state is awarded a certain number of “elector votes” in the Electoral College. If a state is split, say 45%, 35%, 20%, then the person with the 45% takes all the Electoral College votes despite not having a majority win with the population of the state. The United States Constitution and Federal law do not prescribe the method of appointment other than requiring that electors must be appointed on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. In most States, the political parties nominate slates of electors at State conventions or central committee meetings. Then the citizens of each State appoint the electors by popular vote in the state-wide general election. However, State laws on the appointment of electors may vary. Under the Constitution, State legislatures have broad powers to direct the process for selecting electors, with one exception regarding the qualifications of electors. Article II, section 1, clause 2 provides that “no Senator, Representative, or Person holding an Office of Trust or Profit under the United States” may be appointed as an elector. It is not settled as to whether this restriction extends to all Federal officials regardless of their level of authority or the capacity in which they serve, but we advise the States that the restriction could disqualify any person who holds a Federal government job from serving as an elector. On the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December, the electors meet in their respective States. Federal law does not permit the States to choose an alternate date for the meeting of Electors—it must be held on. The State legislature may designate where in the State the meeting will take place, usually in the State capital. At this meeting, the Electors cast their votes for President and Vice President. However each Elector is not necessary bound to vote for the candidate who won the majority vote of their state. There is no Constitutional provision or Federal law that requires Electors to vote according to the results of the popular vote in their states. Some states, however, require Electors to cast their votes according to the popular vote. These pledges fall into two categories—Electors bound by state law and those bound by pledges to political parties. The U.S. Supreme Court has held that the Constitution does not require that Electors be completely free to act as they choose and therefore, political parties may extract pledges from electors to vote for the parties' nominees. Some state laws provide that so-called “faithless Electors” may be subject to fines or may be disqualified for casting an invalid vote and be replaced by a substitute elector. The Supreme Court has not specifically ruled on the question of whether pledges and penalties for failure to vote as pledged may be enforced under the Constitution. No Elector has ever been prosecuted for failing to vote as pledged. If no candidate receives a majority of Electoral votes, the House of Representatives elects the President from the 3 Presidential candidates who received the most Electoral votes. Each state delegation has one vote. The Senate would elect the Vice President from the 2 Vice Presidential candidates with the most Electoral votes. Each Senator would cast one vote for Vice President. If the House of Representatives fails to elect a President by Inauguration Day, the Vice-President Elect serves as acting President until the deadlock is resolved in the House.

This is just a brief, abridged version of how our current system works. Now contrast that with

Ranked Choice Voting.

Under RCV, We could keep the electoral college as is and run each state as RCV to find a winner for that state, thus eliminating the problem of having a state split 45/35/20. Furthermore we could actually do away with the electoral college entirely and have a popular vote under RCV rules, using a nationwide RCV election method which, as in the state, would eliminate any issues with a candidate failing to meet the 270 requirement. As an added bonus, it is far more likely under RCV that the candidate selected would be within the top 3 choices of all citizens, and opposed to the strongly divisive nature of our current first-past-the-post, winner takes all system. We simply continue to eliminate the least-supported candidate and reallocating their votes until we have one winner. No ties. If there is a tie for last place, and multiple possibilities for being eliminated, we use the Borda counting method and remove the candidate with the lowest score and then continue. No electors or faithless electors. No need to turn to Congress to decide the winner. RCV is simple and straightforward if it were ever implemented on a national level. And it is just as simple for State elections.

Additional Advantages of RCV::

Ensuring No **Wasted Votes**: Under our current system, any vote cast in favor of the candidate who loses is tossed out with that candidate and in a sense, wasted. Also, any votes in excess of the “majority” of votes cast are not needed, and again, are wasted

Under RCV Any vote cast in favor of the candidate who is eliminated are transferred via the voter’s choices to another candidate still in the running. This means that over time, more people will have had a voice in electing the winning candidate and thus will be better represented. In multiple seat elections, winning votes above a minimum threshold will be transferred based on proportion to the next choice, further increasing the representation of the public.

-- Winner takes all vs proportional representation: Under the current system, our districts are allocated as “winner take all” and thus, just as with the presidential election, even when there are multiple seats available (such as congress), each race is subjected to the “two party bias” and ‘spoiler” effects of outside parties. This results, just as it does under the presidential “wasted votes” section above, in many votes being tossed out, and representation being less fair and reflective of the population.

Under RCV, the population can either increase the number of representatives, or they can form slightly larger districts out of the smaller districts, and then each district sends multiple candidates. The result is there could be both a Democratic, AND a Conservative representative sent from each district in accordance with the demographics of the population of the district. Or you could have two from one party and a third from a different party. Whatever the outcome it will more fairly represent the actual population.

-- **Solving the Problem of Gerrymandering:** Under the current system, the parties and their affiliates divide up the boundaries of districts to ensure that the majority of the population of each district is generally “loyal” to one of two parties. This directly and purposefully excludes third parties and new ideas, and ensures that only party insiders, who are frequently corrupt and beholden to the party, not the people, are elected every year. This is the primary cause for the paradox of Congressional approval ratings being near 10%, while retention rate is over 90%.

Under RCV, the population isn’t penalized for voting for third parties because even if their candidate “loses,” their vote is transferred rather than thrown away. Furthermore, RCV makes it easier to draw larger districts, which means it would be less likely those boundaries would be exclusive to one of the two common parties. Since each district would be sending multiple candidates, it reduces the influence of this form of corruption. The overall effect could be that new ideas are more likely to survive and make it into our government on both a local and national level.

-- Reducing Opportunities for Corruption: Under the current system, we are subjected to a wide array of confusing and potentially corrupt steps, mechanisms and people in selecting our leaders -- thrown out votes, super delegates, the electoral college, the House of Representative. The situation can be worse if we fall prey to a statistical tie in any state or within the Electoral College.

Under RCV the system works on two mathematical formulas. That’s it. It is extremely direct and simple even for those not good with math or numbers. There are no people in the process. There are only numbers and votes. The two formulas are:

$$\text{votes needed to win} = \text{floor} \left(\frac{\text{valid votes cast}}{\text{seats to fill} + 1} \right) + 1$$

$$\text{transferred votes given to the next preference} = \left(\frac{\text{votes for next preference belonging to the original candidate}}{\text{total votes for the original candidate}} \right) * \text{surplus votes for original candidate}$$

-- Spoiler effect: As talked about above, under the current system, if a party runs two candidates with similar ideas, they will split the vote and hand the win to the opposition. Additionally if a third party appeals to a section of voters for another party, that third party can act as a “spoiler” in a similar fashion. Because of this, people start to guess about how others will vote. We saw this dramatically played out in the 2016 election with Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. MANY voters did not like either candidate, but because each party only ran the one candidate, and each party used fear mongering to spread the message, “If you don’t vote for our person, the other one will win,” the people fell in line and voted for candidates they didn’t actually like or support.

Under RCV, this would no longer be “required”. It would happen far less frequently. Under RCV, there could be multiple candidates for each party, not just one. Under RCV a vote for any party could not act as a spoiler because even if that candidate did end up being eliminated, their vote would transfer - they didn’t “spoil” anything. Under RCV, the system works FOR the people who are voting, giving them power, and reducing the influence of the parties.

In conclusion, we can see that by allowing people to rank their choices, we solve many of the issues associated with the current voting system. We ensure better representation on a local level, and more palatable choices for the presidency and other single occupant offices of government. We do away with sources of corruption like gerrymandering. We promote new ideas by allowing them to be cast without fear of spoiling anything. Let’s face facts, our current system is based on methods which are 240 years old. While there are some good ideas that still apply today, there is also occasion to question and to apply new, better ways of doing things. This was the reason the Constitution of the US and the Colorado Constitution were written with the ability to amend them. It is time to amend our Constitution and free voting from the corruption of the current system.