

## **Minority Electorates and Ranked-Choice Voting Executive Summary**

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Following the rise of political polarization in the United States and its negative consequences for effective governance, many scholars and activists have turned to electoral reform as a corrective. Some arguments have focused on certain perceived deficiencies associated with the United States' reliance on the combination of plurality voting and party primaries to elect most officeholders. The critics contend that such a combination leads to pathologies that reduce voter choice and generate polarized outcomes.

First, the critics argue that partisan primaries are dominated by the preferences of the most extreme voters who in turn nominate only extreme candidates leading to general elections in which voters must choose among polarized alternatives. Second, they argue that the use of plurality voting deters the entry of independent candidates and third-parties because they are very unlikely to obtain a plurality of the vote. Moreover, if such candidates do enter, they mostly serve as "spoilers" by elevating one candidate over another, often the less popular of the major party candidates. Finally, some scholars argue that the winner-take-all nature of plurality elections heightens conflict and negative campaigning in ways that heighten polarization.

To address these concerns, scholars and advocates have touted a set of reforms ranging from altering the rules for participation in primary elections, fusion voting, and various forms of proportional representation. But by far and away the most popular reform calls for the widespread adoption of ranked-choice voting (RCV). In a RCV election, voters rank a set of candidates, and election officials use these rankings to determine the election winners. In general, the system operates as follows:

- The ballot asks voters to rank the candidates in order of the voter's preference. In some systems, they can rank all of the candidates while others ask only that the voters rank up to a certain number of candidates.
- The first stage of the vote tabulation procedure counts the first rank votes. If any candidate receives a majority of the first rank votes, she wins the election. This is often referred to as the "first round."
- If there is no majority winner in the first round, the last place candidate, as well as any additional candidates that have been mathematically eliminated, are eliminated from the tabulation, and the vote tabulation proceeds to a "second round."

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- In the second round, the votes are recounted using the first ranked votes of the remaining candidates and the second ranked votes of those who supported one of the eliminated candidates.

If a candidate obtains a majority on this round, she is the winner. If not, the process continues to a third round, and so on, with candidates being eliminated in each round while counting first, second and third or subsequent ranked votes, until there is a winner receiving a majority of first rank votes plus subsequent ranked votes.

- Significantly, if a voter's first rank is for a candidate who is eliminated, but does not rank a candidate still standing in a subsequent round, that voter's ballot is "exhausted" and eliminated from subsequent tabulation rounds.

Advocates of RCV suggest many ways in which it would improve upon plurality voting. First, the promoters contend that the system improves the electoral fortunes of small parties and independent candidates. By encouraging a larger set of candidates to contest office, advocates argue that RCV provides voters with more choice, which in turn should result in greater voter turnout and engagement. RCV also purportedly eliminates the possibility of spoiler candidates who siphon off too many votes from the most popular major candidate. Finally, advocates argue RCV elections are more legitimate because the winner has earned the support of a majority of the electorate.

As discussed in my research paper, the evidence that RCV has demonstrated these advantages in practice is mixed, at best. But even if RCV elections achieve the touted features, RCV raises important questions about the impact on minority and disadvantaged voters and their opportunities for electoral representation and effective influence in election outcomes.

First, RCV elections, by design, are more majoritarian than plurality elections. Indeed, a common argument is that they provide a way to get the benefits of a majority-runoff system without holding separate elections. Whereas minority candidates have some chance of winning plurality elections when votes are closely divided between majority-group candidates, RCV works to reduce those opportunities especially in the presence of racially or ethnically polarized voting. RCV advocates may defend that attribute by arguing that RCV would increase the likelihood that the majority-candidate most favorable to the minority group wins. But such an outcome depends on majority candidates willing to appeal to minority voters to obtain their second-preference votes and for the minority voters to fully use their ballots to support such candidates in the later rounds. However, if the preferences of the majority and minority groups are sufficiently distinct, both majority candidates may compete for the support of majority voters in hopes of entering a second round against the minority-backed candidate in which they will win. Moreover, minority-group voters may "exhaust" their ballots and fail to rank either majority-backed candidate. Thus, such voters lose influence in the case of a majority-versus-majority second round. Such arguments highlight the problems of ballot exhaustion which previous research has found to be both endemic to RCV and concentrated in minority electoral precincts.

Given these concerns, my paper focuses on the concentration of exhausted ballots among minority electorates as well as its potential to decrease representation and electoral influence of minority voters. Specifically, I examine two cases in which RCV was recently adopted and show that exhausted ballots were far more common in precincts and electoral districts with high concentrations of minority voters. The first case is the New York City Democratic Primary elections held in 2021. Using micro-data on cast vote records (CVR) combined with demographic records of primary voters from the voter registration file, I show that electoral districts with large concentrations of minority voters cast substantially more exhausted ballots than other districts. These correlations persist even in those cases where a co-ethnic candidate advances to the final round of tabulation. I then examine the introduction of the Top Four Primary system and RCV general election in Alaska. There I combine the cast vote records with Census demographics to examine the correlates of ballot exhaustion in the special and regular elections held there in 2022. I find that areas with high concentrations of Native Alaskans are more prone to ballot exhaustion.

### **Key Findings**

- Except in cases where a co-ethnic reached the final round of tabulation, I find that exhaustion rates in the NYC Democratic primaries for executive office were higher in precincts with high concentrations of minority (Black, Asian, and Hispanic) primary voters than they were in predominately White precincts.
- Exhaustion rates in the NYC Democratic mayor's primary were lower for Black electorates than White electorates. But this was the result of high Black support in first-rank preferences for Eric Adams who proceeded to the final round and won the election. Exhaustion rates in Black precincts were higher than those of White precincts among those voters who did not rank Adams first.
- In the executive office primaries, the proportion of voters ranking only a single candidate was generally higher in minority precincts.
- In the Democratic primaries for City Council, ballot exhaustion was as high as the rates of wasted votes (votes for non-competitive candidates) in the plurality elections of 2017. Moreover, the 2021 RCV elections had fewer majority winners and had lower winning margins than 2017 plurality elections. Both of these outcomes run contrary to the arguments proffered by RCV advocates. These patterns can be explained primarily by the vast proliferation of candidates under RCV.
- In the Council elections, exhaustion rates were considerably higher in minority precincts than in predominately White ones. These disparities were lower, however, when there was a co-ethnic candidate in the final round. The racial and ethnic disparities were greatest when there were a large number of candidates. This result suggests that minority electorates were less able to take advantage of the expanded "choice" of candidates.

- Ballot roll-off (also known as “drop-off” in down-ballot races) between the mayor and Council primaries was much larger in 2021 under RCV than in 2017 under plurality. This is contrary to claims that RCV would boost voter engagement. Moreover, roll-off rates tended to be the highest in minority precincts, especially when there was not a strong co-ethnic candidate.
- The results in Alaska largely confirm those of NYC for heavily Alaskan Native precincts. Their exhaustion rates were higher in all state-wide races and for state legislative races except in the case of the U.S. House election which featured a co-ethnic winner.

## **Conclusions**

Partisan polarization and related political dysfunctions have greatly increased interest in fundamental reforms to our electoral processes. But such reforms often come with a variety of trade-offs and unintended consequences. Therefore, careful scrutiny and evaluation of the effects of reforms is crucial.

Ranked choice voting is clearly a reform that has excited a lot of people. Its advocates suggest that it can both turn down the temperature surrounding electoral politics and increase the diversity of choices available to voters. But scholarly attempts to evaluate such claims and to root out the downsides are still in their infancy. In my paper, I try to evaluate one such downside -- the high rates of ballot exhaustion and their concentration in precincts with large minority populations. The findings suggest that these are indeed drawbacks of RCV. Across a variety of electoral contexts in New York City and Alaska, I find consistent correlations between the ethnic and racial composition of a precinct and the share of exhausted ballots. These correlations are especially large when there are large numbers of candidates and when there are not strong co-ethnic candidates in the race.

These findings are consistent with RCV providing an advantage to majority-group voters over minority-group voters. Whereas RCV allows majority-group voters an additional opportunity to resolve candidate coordination problems, the patterns of ballot exhaustion suggest that minority-group voters are not taking full advantage. Whether those higher rates of exhaustion are due to ballot complexity, lower levels of information and mobilization, or racial and ethnic polarization, it is clear that the potential effects of RCV on minority voters needs to be carefully scrutinized before adoption.