

# **Reforming Our Electoral Process: Ranked Choice Voting**

## **Identification of the Issue & Problem Statement**

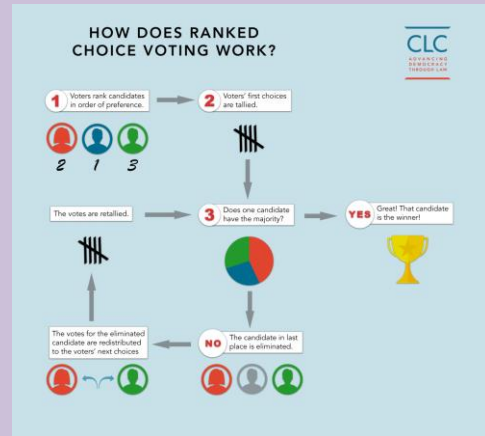
America has a two-party system in which there are only two viable major political parties to choose candidates from in national elections (the Democrats or the Republicans). This system has led to the prevalence of tactical voting choices (AKA “choosing the lesser evil”) instead of voting for candidates that most align with one’s interests. Some have described the American political system as a “duopoly” (Dubner, 2018) where always one of the two major parties will hold majorities in Congress and only someone from one of these two parties will be in the White House. As a result, even if a candidate does not align with the interests of the person voting, that person is more likely to vote for the candidate least detrimental to the things the voter values. This practice is called tactical voting. This stunted state of the American political system is a result of a first-past-the-post voting method in which voters pick only one candidate when voting and whichever candidate gets the most votes (even if that means getting less than a majority—50% plus one—votes) wins the election. The American use of first-past-the-post (AKA “plurality”) voting has resulted in a political system where the nuance of the broad electorate’s ideologies, policy preferences, and worldviews has been distilled down into a choice between two candidates who may not fully represent the population’s wishes. **The American electoral process is dominated by only two major political parties. This constricts the choice that American voters can exercise at the ballot box from choosing the most representative candidate to selecting the least harmful candidate for their interests.**

## **Background on Plurality Voting**

Plurality voting has been the primary method of voting since the beginning of the United States. The U.S. Constitution articulates “which national positions are electable, the required qualifications for the office, how often each position is elected, who elects them (electors, state legislatures, the people), and the qualifications for voting” (Yee, 2014). However, it leaves to the states the power to decide which specific voting method to use (Yee, 2014). Plurality voting is “the oldest and most frequently used voting system” (*Plurality Electoral Systems*, n.d.), largely because of its simplicity and intuitiveness: each person votes for one candidate and the candidate with the most votes wins. However, plurality voting has led to multiple issues: tactical voting, fewer political parties, and the spoiler effect. Tactical voting is the act of strategically choosing who to vote for to minimize the harm toward your interests at the cost of voting for who most accurately represents your interests. Think of the “lesser of two evils.” Plurality voting contributes to the emergence of only a few major political parties, often two, reducing voter choice and distilling the complex reality of American political ideology into just two choices. The spoiler effect is when two parties/candidates with similar ideologies split voters among each other, allowing an opponent of both to win an election without a majority of votes. One proposed solution to plurality voting’s major issues is Ranked Choice Voting.

## How Ranked Choice Voting Works

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) is a voting method where voters rank the candidates in order of preference. Instant runoff elections are held if no candidate receives more than 50% of the votes. In the instant runoff elections, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and those who ranked the eliminated candidate as their first choice have their votes transferred to their second choice. Vote reallocation continues until there is a majority winner, a candidate with more than 50% of the vote. RCV is as easy as ranking favorite ice cream flavors, and its benefits are numerous: it has bipartisan support (Kwak, 2020), gets rid of spoiler candidates, forces candidates to appeal to a broad swath of the population, eliminates the need to tactically vote, creates more representative election outcomes, and gives voters more choice at the ballot box.



(Ranked Choice Voting, n.d.)

**Your Ranked-Choice Ballot**

Rank up to 4 candidates. Mark no more than 1 oval in each column.	First Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice	Fourth Choice
Candidate A	●	○	○	○
Candidate B	○	●	○	○
Candidate C	○	○	●	○
Candidate D	○	○	○	●

(Giovannetti, 2019)

## Legislative/Policy History and Current Momentum

- In the most recent session of Congress, the Voter Choice Act has been introduced in both the House ([H.R.5500](#)) and the Senate ([S.2939](#)). This bill seeks a program from the Electoral Assistance Commission (EAC) to support state and local governments with technical assistance and grants to help them in their transition to Ranked Choice Voting (Phillips, 2021 and Bennet, 2021).

- In 2021, the Fair Representation Act was introduced in the House ([H.R.3863](#)), which calls for the use of Ranked Choice Voting in Congressional elections (Beyer Jr., 2021).
- The Voter Empowerment Act of 2021 ([H.R.2358](#)) includes a small section calling for a report on “how to best implement ranked-choice voting for Federal elections nationwide” (Clyburn, 2021)

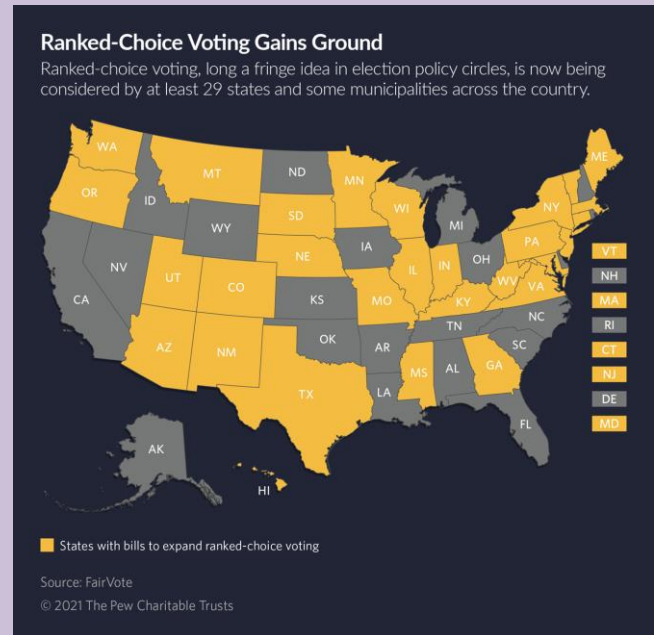
## Where Ranked Choice Voting is Used

- “As of July 2021, over 9.3 million voting-age citizens live in U.S. jurisdictions that currently use RCV

or have adopted RCV and plan to implement it for their next round of elections” (FairVote.org, n.d.-b).

- At the state, county, city, and local level, “43 jurisdictions used RCV in their most recent elections, and more than 50 jurisdictions are projected to use RCV in their next election” (FairVote.org, n.d.-e).
- For presidential and state-wide elections: Alaska and Maine (FairVote.org, n.d.-e).
- For certain local elections: California, Oregon, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Minnesota, Michigan, Florida, Tennessee, Maryland, Delaware, Massachusetts, Vermont, New York (FairVote.org, n.d.-e).
- RCV is gaining momentum nationwide, with a wave of political support spreading across various

states, cities, counties, and localities (Sturm et al.).



(Vasilogambros, 2021)

### **Stakeholder Analysis**

The primary stakeholders in the implementation of RCV are voters, major party politicians, third parties, and special interests in politics. First, voters are directly impacted by the current lack of choice at the ballot box, being increasingly disheartened by and unengaged in politics (Woodard 2020). Implementing RCV would allow voters to rank their candidate of choice first as opposed to tactically voting for the least harmful candidate for their interests. Second, major party politicians benefit from being one of only two viable options in elections. If RCV were to be implemented, the “duopoly” would be challenged, and major party candidates would have to change the way they campaign. Third, third parties and their candidates are often unlikely to win elections on a national level against major party candidates. Even if there is general support for their policies, the potential of being “spoilers” in plurality elections prevents third parties from receiving more votes. With RCV implementation, alternative candidates from non-major political parties could be ranked without serving as spoilers, creating the opportunity for more non-major party candidates to be elected. Finally, special interest groups involved in the political process wield vast amounts of money to maintain their influence. Part of their influence is their involvement with the two major political parties, including donating to major parties and their candidates’ campaigns. With the potential rise of alternative political parties as producers of viable candidates in elections, the financial influence of special interest groups in the current major political parties will be devalued. Implementing Ranked Choice Voting in Congressional and Presidential elections will undo the political duopoly, provide voters with more choice, create a more representative government, and allow non-major political parties to succeed.

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