



How Ranked Choice Voting Could Improve American Politics

Lee Drutman, New America

American democracy is facing a crisis – because increasing partisan polarization has made politics nasty and bitter, setting in motion a destructive feedback loop in which both sides are drawn into zero-sum political warfare. As both parties careen into extremism, more and more Americans feel they are not represented by the two-party system. Yet in our electoral system, voters have no other option but to choose what often feels like the lesser of two evils.

The current set up of the U.S. election system makes voting for third parties tantamount to wasting a vote. Because third parties have no chance of winning, few run. This clears the way for major party candidates to run negative campaigns, since those candidates know that if they can tear down their opponent, they will be the only beneficiary. One way out of the polarizing incentives in this system is to allow ranked choice voting.

What is Ranked-Choice Voting and How Might It Change Politics?

Under current electoral rules, voters can select only one candidate in any given election. Under ranked-choice voting, voters would be able to rank multiple candidates in order of preference. Ranked-choice voting works through a multi-round, instant-runoff mechanism. In the first round, voters' first choices are all tallied. If one candidate has a majority, that is it – she is the winner. But if nobody has a majority, then the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. Votes that were cast for the eliminated candidate instantly go to those voters' second choice. This process continues until a candidate receives a majority of votes and is declared the winner.

Ranked choice voting could work especially well in primaries or presidential caucuses. But it's most notable potential impact would be in general elections for the U.S.'s highest offices. In the 2016 presidential election, here is how it would have worked for a voter that did not like either major party candidate. Her first choice could have been registered for Evan McMullin, second choice for Gary Johnson, and third for Hillary Clinton. This voter may have absolutely not wanted Donald Trump to win, but she could still have avoided voting only for Clinton. Under ranked choice, she would simply have ranked McMullin #1, Johnson #2, and Clinton #3, and not selected Trump at all. If she picked McMullin first and he was eliminated, her vote would have been transferred to Johnson. After Johnson was eliminated, her vote would have gone to Clinton. Maybe, if there had been ranked-choice voting in 2016, Clinton might have become president. Or maybe, if Republicans had used this system in their primaries, Trump would not have been their nominee, since his support was not as broad as that of other candidates.

More than just changing election results, ranked-choice voting could have a significant impact on campaigns, and ultimately, politics overall. Let us examine how the 2016 election might have played out differently with ranked-choice voting. Third party candidates like McMullin, Johnson, and Stein probably would have enjoyed

more initial support, which would have allowed for a campaign with more perspectives. More voters might have had an opportunity to choose a candidate they genuinely preferred. And if these rules had been in place, different third-party candidates might have stepped forward.

Ideally, in more crowded fields, candidates would try to broaden their appeal to get second choice endorsements from other candidates. Perhaps McMullin would have told his supporters to vote for Clinton second, in exchange for an opportunity to have a role in the Clinton White House. Or perhaps John Kasich, Michael Bloomberg, or Bernie Sanders would have mounted independent candidacies, knowing they would not be spoilers. As a result, major parties' candidates would benefit from more inclusive campaigning.

These hypothetical examples are based on reasonable expectations, drawn from experiences in large American cities that have ranked-choice voting, such as Minneapolis, MN and San Francisco, CA. Survey research by Todd Donovan, Caroline Tolbert and Kellen Gracey has found that candidates under ranked-choice systems run more civil campaigns with less negativity. Competing candidates have even held joint fundraisers. Voters are happier with their elections – so happy that most would recommend other places also use ranked-choice voting.

At a national level, Australia has used a form of ranked-choice voting (they call it “alternative vote”) since 1918. The system is generally credited with keeping Australian politics reasonably moderate. Although third parties rarely win, they always compete and the major parties are more responsive to a wider range of views. What is more, researcher Annemarie S. Walter finds there is less negative campaigning in multi-party elections than there is in two-party elections. In a multi-party election, negative campaigning can hurt the standing of the negative-campaigner and some other candidate could benefit.

The Bottom Line

Our winner-take-all, plurality elections push candidates to engage in zero-sum negative campaigning, and candidates can win simply by being the lesser of two evils. Ranked-choice voting would shift these incentives. By giving voters the opportunity to rank multiple candidates, third parties would gain a foothold, bringing much-needed diversity to the political conversation. Voters would thus have more opportunities to express their true preferences, and participation would likely increase because more choices generally boost turnout. As a result, elections would likely become both more competitive and more civil. In a time of intense and destructive partisan polarization, ranked-choice voting is a straightforward way to remove some of the incentives driving our politics apart while adding incentives to bring us together.