



## How Ranked-Choice Voting Could Empower Independents and Make American Elections More Inclusive

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Polarization in the United States is nearing crisis levels. Although Republican and Democratic leaders have been at partisan odds for years, hostility recently has grown within each party toward anyone willing to make a deal with the other side. And research now shows that bitter partisan divides reach into state and local politics as well.

Polarization is worsened by the way the United States runs elections – as winner-take-all contests, district-by-district, state-by-state. If all a candidate needs to win is more votes than the other person, each candidate has incentives to paint their main rival in the worst possible light and do the same thing to any other competitor who might appeal to their voter base.

How could these incentives change? Some are considering a reform called **ranked-choice voting**. In this system, citizens rank multiple candidates in order of their preference – rather than having to choose between two frontrunners or play the role of spoilers by picking a non-front-running candidate who cannot prevail. As we discuss below, ranked-choice voting takes two forms. Both versions make it easier for independents to run and win.

### Vanishing Independents in an Era of Polarization

“Independents” are politicians willing to break with the major parties, at least some of the time. We use legislative voting records to find independents, rather than just counting candidates who run for office without major-party labels. According to measures of Congressional polarization, there are fewer independents in office than at any point since Reconstruction.

Why have independents vanished? One reason is that each party’s base has learned how to game the primary elections that choose finalists for the general election. Recent books such as *The Party Decides* spell out this dynamic: A party’s most extreme supporters pressure its public figures. Then these figures anoint a candidate acceptable to the base. When the primary comes, the citizens most inclined to vote turn to party leadership for cues and ratify their frontrunner pick. As a result, the general election usually features two party-ratified extremists.

### How Ranked-Choice Voting Works

There are two forms of ranked-choice voting: **single-winner**, where only one seat is available for multiple candidates, and **multi-winner**, where there are multiple seats available. In either case, the voter ranks

candidates in order of his or her preference.

When the **single-winner** approach to ranked-choice voting is used in single-member districts, the winning candidate ultimately needs to get 50 percent plus one vote. If no candidate initially gets a majority of first-place votes, the candidate with the fewest is eliminated, and the votes cast for that candidate pass on to the candidates those voters ranked second on their ballots. The count continues in this way until one candidate wins a majority of ballots that remain in the final round of counting.

In **multi-winner** races, ranked-choice approximates proportional representation because the percentage of votes needed to win goes down as the number of seats in a district goes up. This leads to greater minority representation than we tend to see under single-member districts. Votes for Democrats in very Republican districts, for example, would help elect some candidates. Another name for this system is the single transferable vote, which was part of the National Municipal League's *Model City Charter* from 1914 to 1964 and used in 24 cities.

## How Ranked-choice Voting Empowers Independents and Encourages Outreach

In the single-winner ranked-choice system, when more than two candidates run for a single seat, they usually craft broader appeals. Because the ultimate winner is aiming to get just over half of all votes cast, some of his or her votes usually come from second- or third-place rankings. New research by Todd Donovan, Caroline Tolbert, and Kellen Gracey shows that voters in ranked-choice cities do perceive these broader appeals. Likewise, single-winner ranked voting allows a voter to register a first choice for an independent or third-party candidate without wasting their vote or spoiling the chances of their second-most-preferred candidate.

Multi-winner ranked-choice voting leads party leaders to seek candidates they otherwise might not bring into politics. When parties compete in a proportional system, they have to get as many votes as they can – in contrast to the current system, where all each party needs is a series of bare pluralities, district-by-district. In a multi-winner system, a party that needs more votes to bounce back may decide to nominate more independents.

In fact, recent research by Jack Santucci shows how, under multi-winner ranked voting, competition led parties to slate independents who had made strong showings in previous elections. For example, in Cincinnati from 1925 through 1957, the parties alternated in recruiting local Civil Rights leaders when they needed votes to expand their seat shares. Other groups benefitted as well: labor leaders in the New Deal, women during World War II, and people who later became Goldwater conservatives. We find a similar pattern in Worcester, Massachusetts from 1949 through 1959, where contending factions of a largely Irish Democratic Party gradually welcomed Jews and Italians.

## Both Versions of Ranked-Choice Voting Hold Promise

As scholars who have studied the available evidence about ranked-choice voting systems, we see value in both approaches. We agree that single-winner ranked voting is useful for all levels of government. By removing the spoiler effect (where voters fear to waste their votes on non-frontrunning candidates), it invites more than two candidates to run. And this system then creates incentives for contending candidates to appeal beyond extreme partisans. In addition, we agree that multi-winner ranked-choice should be tried on the state and local levels. How this second approach might affect Congress or interact with the national separation of

powers is not clear, but the historical record suggests this multi-winner version of ranked-choice voting leads parties to nominate candidates they might not otherwise consider.