



4 Things to Dislike about Ranked Choice Voting

RCV Converts Elections into a Consensus-Gathering Exercise

October 2022 – Many Americans first came into contact with the concept of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) only months ago when former Alaska Governor and VP nominee Sarah Palin lost a special congressional election. The ranked choice voting system and skewed outcome left people confused as to whether they were witnessing innovation or outrageous gamesmanship in election processes.

Under RCV, the contents of your ballot, more so than your eligibility to cast it, can ultimately determine whether your vote counts.

Ranked Choice Voting Crash Course

Ranked Choice instructs the voter to vote more than once. Let's look at the Palin contest for perspective. Sarah Palin ran in a general special election under RCV against Nick Begich (R) and Mary Peltola (D).¹ Alaskans listed their first choices as: Peltola (75,799 or 40.19%), Palin (58,973 or 31.27%), and Begich (53,810 or 28.53%). No candidate clearly took the 50+1 percent needed to win outright, though Republican candidates took almost 60 percent of the votes. In many states, the top two candidates would go to a run-off election where voters could clearly choose between the two. But RCV has a different process.

Begich's third-place showing means he will not win; so, the RCV process drops him in the next round and redistributes his votes. Election officials looked at the second-choice preferences among voters who listed Begich as their first choice. Of those who voted for Begich, 27,053 listed Palin as their second choice, and 15,467 listed Peltola as their second choice. Those votes were applied accordingly to the two remaining candidates and Peltola won.

Round 2		
Candidate	Votes	Percentage
Begich, Nick	0	0.00%
Palin, Sarah	86,026	48.52%
Peltola, Mary S.	91,266	51.48%
Continuing Ballots Total	177,292	
Blanks	3,412	
Exhausted	11,243	
Overvotes	342	
Remainder Points	0	
Non Transferable Total	14,997	

But, what about people who were confused and voted for only one candidate or listed some other combination of choices? They fall into benign-sounding “exhausted” category, meaning their vote may not be counted in the final tally. A Begich-Firster (more than 11,000 of them) who listed some other choice than Palin or Peltola as their second did not get a voice in the second-round redistribution.

Issue 1: Rank Choice Voting Denies the Right to Vote

Ranked Choice Voting disenfranchises voters. In Ranked Choice, voters never get to vote in a real choice between final candidates. Ranked Choice forces voters to vote in hypothetical and fictional contests. Only the voters who filled out their bracket correctly (as if they were picking March Madness teams) have skin in the later rounds of vote tallies. Errors, refusal to play the RCV game, and bad picks end in disenfranchisement in the euphemistically named “exhausted” class.

Issue 2: RCV Protects Establishment Candidates/Incumbents

Ranked choice voting rewards establishment candidates with high name recognition. Sen. Lisa Murkowski’s team knew that in 2022.ⁱⁱ There are at least two ways to see this playing out.

RCV Pulls an Angry Base Back to the Establishment. Let’s say a Republican primary race shows the base wandering from the moderate incumbent to an upstart candidate and some lesser-name options. An RCV system could allow the angry base voter to sow their proverbial wild oats with their first choice, but then must decide to give their second choice to the known quantity or some person they have never heard of (and not get to reach into the later vote retabulations).

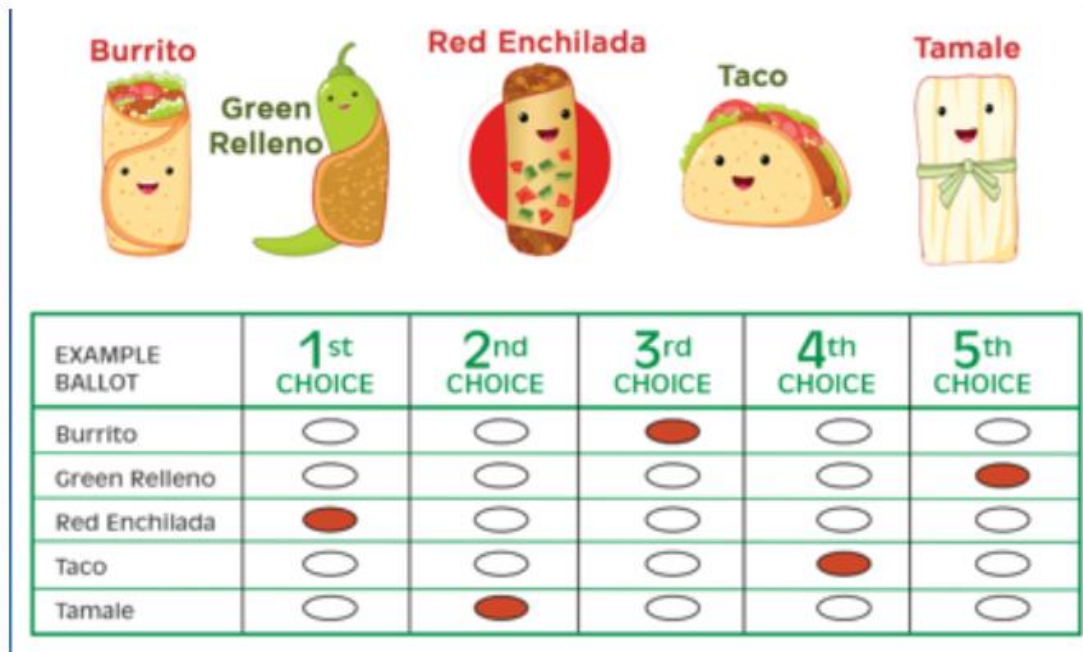
RCV Kneecaps Party Renegades Who Run Independent in a General Election. If Oregon were using Ranked Choice in 2022, the governor’s race would look very different today. There, a progressive Democrat faces the strongest Republican candidate in a generation. Meanwhile, a Democrat-turned-Joe Manchesque independent looks to syphon more votes from Team Blue than Red. In an RCV scenario, the Democrat nominee would fare better in the second round or, theoretically not have to worry about a defector candidate at all.

Issue 3: RCV Could Encourage Establishment Parties to Field Decoy Candidates

Let’s imagine a race where RCV is nothing new for the electorate and *you* are the incumbent. You’ve had a long career in this office and some old policy decisions haunt you with the base against a credible opponent from the other party. You can’t pretend to be a hardliner on issues where you’ve shown moderation. To protect you, your party props up single-issue independent candidates to get your wandering base to the polls so you can snatch them up in the second or later rounds.

Issue 4: Ranked Choice Burdens Election Officials with Teaching the Public How to RCV

Set aside some of these higher-level concerns about RCV for a moment. State and local officials will be stuck with instructing the electorate on how to behave with a ranked ballot on a practical level with whatever resources they have to spare. PILF research in 2019 found one experimenting county in New Mexico felt it necessary to share public education responsibilities with a left-leaning nonprofit invested in spreading RCV.ⁱⁱⁱ Even the public educational materials were confusing to the eye:



Doña Ana County-produced Graphic circa 2019.

Election administrators already have critical jobs to perform. They do not need to become crash-course civics teachers as well.

What’s Happening in Your State with RCV?

Unless you live in Florida or Tennessee, your state does not have a law banning Ranked Choice Voting.^{iv} The U.S. is still at early stages with the concept. In recent years, Alabama and Georgia have instituted RCV-like protocols for some military and overseas votes. Utah and Virginia created frameworks for local offices to be elected by RCV. Alaska and Maine are using the practice for some state and federal contests. Unless banned, expect RCV experiments to happen closer to home.

PILF President J. Christian Adams

“Ranked Choice Voting disenfranchises, confuses, and invites outside meddling into government functions like seen in 2020. The easiest way to crater confidence in American elections is to confuse the voter on the most basic elements of participation.”

ⁱ <https://www.elections.alaska.gov/results/22SSPG/RcvDetailedReport.pdf>

ⁱⁱ KINY; Project Veritas releases videos claiming Ballot Measure 2 is key to Sen. Murkowski win (August 11, 2022), <https://www.kinyradio.com/news/news-of-the-north/project-veritas-release-videos-claiming-ballot-measure-2-is-key-to-sen-murkowski-win/>

ⁱⁱⁱ PILF; *Down the Hatch* (2019), <https://publicinterestlegal.org/reports/down-the-hatch-how-left-wing-election-reforms-can-be-forced-on-unsuspecting-communities/>

^{iv} NCSL; Ranked Choice Voting guide (June 2022), <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting636934215.aspx>