

Ranked Choice Voting message for the Sunnyvale Democratic Club
Written July 3, 2024 by David Newswanger

In August, the Santa Clara Board of Supervisors is expected to consider using Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) for future elections. RCV allows voters to rank their choices 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc. If no candidate gets a majority, then an “instant runoff” occurs. The last place candidate is eliminated, and his/her votes are transferred to the voters’ second choice candidates. What that means for you as a voter is that if your first choice can’t win, your vote isn’t wasted. It counts for your next choice.

Here are some videos that explain RCV.

[RCV explained by Minnesota Public Radio](#) – 1 minute, easiest

[RCV explained by FairVote](#) – 1 ½ minute, shows ballot

[RCV explained by Robert Reich](#) – 4 minutes, includes reasons to use RCV

Why do this?

75% of Santa Clara County elections (for supervisors, assessor, DA, sheriff) are decided in the primary (because if a candidate gets a majority in the primary, then no general election is held). But primary elections have far fewer voters than general elections (just 37% of registered voters this year) and those primary voters do not represent the diversity of the community.

Underrepresented groups include Asian, Black, & Latino communities, independent voters, young people (under age 55), and renters. A Ranked Choice election would be held entirely in the general election where there are far more voters, and they are more representative of the diversity in the community. In addition, RCV vastly decreases or eliminates vote splitting (where two similar candidates split the vote allowing a less popular candidate to win), and it reduces the negative campaigning because candidates want the second-choice votes of their opponents’ supporters. Women and candidates of color tend to win in Ranked Choice elections. A poll showed that 64% of likely voters in Santa Clara County support RCV.

Please ask your supervisor to support using Ranked Choice Voting in future elections. You can use this link or scan the QR code to go to the CalRCV page which will help you write to your supervisor.

calrcv.org/santa-clara-county-support-rcv



Here are some frequent questions:

Do voters understand RCV? - Yes

Location	Percent responding RCV is “Easy” or “Excellent or Good”
Alaska	85%
New York	95%
Maine	90%
Utah cities	81%
Multi-city survey	90%
Minneapolis	92%
Santa Fe	67% were not confused on first election but 94% wanted to continue using RCV
Arlington, VA	88%

Is RCV confusing to minority groups?

- There is no difference in understanding between race/ethnicities. ¹
- Voters of color tend to rank more candidates than White voters. ²
- RCV increases youth voter turnout. ³

Is RCV confusing to older voters?

- Older voters (75+) are less likely to report that instructions are “very easy” to understand ⁴, but older voters are more likely to rank all the candidates than younger voters ⁵. So, older voters perform better than younger voters even though they say the instructions are not very easy.

Do voters make more mistakes on RCV ballots?

- Traditional and RCV have comparable ballot error rates overall
 - Ranked ballots and score ballots produced more valid votes than traditional choose-one ballots ⁶
 - Ranked ballots do not raise the probability that a voter would cast a void (uncountable) vote, despite raising the probability of at least one violation of voting instructions. ⁷
 - The adoption of RCV was not associated with any change in the number of residual votes, including overvotes and undervotes, in a study of 26 cities. ⁸
- Racial and ethnic groups perform the same regardless of ballot type ⁹
 - But racial and ethnic groups do perform differently from each other regardless of ballot type ⁹

Do I get more votes if I rank more candidates?

- No - Everyone only gets one vote. If you rank multiple candidates, and your first choice can't win, then your vote will be transferred to your second choice - just like a runoff election. A voter whose first choice is still in the running will also have that first choice counted in the "runoff". Everyone gets one vote. (If you chose not to rank all the candidates then you have chosen not to participate in the remaining "runoff" after your last choice is eliminated. In other words, you don't care who wins after that point.)

Does my vote count if I don't rank ALL the candidates?

- Yes - If you only rank one candidate, your vote counts exactly the same as in a plurality election.
- If you rank multiple candidates, you still only have one vote, but it will transfer to your second choice if your first choice can't win.

Is RCV Constitutional?

The following cases upheld RCV against federal constitutional claims:

- Baber v. Dunlap, 376 F. Supp. 3d 125 (D.Me. 2018) (upholding RCV in Maine against claims it violated the Due Process and Equal Protection)
- Dudum v. Arntz, 640 F.3d 1098 (9th Cir. 2011) (upholding RCV in San Francisco against claims that RCV excludes some voters)
- McSweeney v. City of Cambridge, 665 N.E.2d 11 (Mass. 1996) (upholding RCV in Cambridge, Massachusetts against claims that it violated the Fourteenth Amendment)
- Minn. Voters Alliance v. City of Minneapolis, 766 N.W.2d 683 (Minn. 2009) (upholding RCV in Minneapolis against Equal Protection claims)
- Stephenson v. Ann Arbor Bd. of Comm'rs, No. 75-10166 AW (Mich. Cir. Ct. Ct'y of Jackson 1975) (Michigan district level court upholding RCV in Ann Arbor, Michigan against Equal Protection claims)

How much will it cost?

- The Registrar of Voters has estimated a cost of \$1.7M every two years – 0.015% of the annual budget
 - This covers software for the voting machines and additional printing costs for longer ballots.
- RCV can save a lot of money by eliminating a primary or runoff election, but that is not the case in Santa Clara County because the county still must run the state primary.

Does RCV increase turnout?

- YES! About 80% greater if the low-turnout primary is eliminated in favor of a RCV general election
- Minimal effect if comparing RCV to traditional systems in general elections alone
 - Turnout depends on many factors
 - Competitive races
 - Popular candidates
 - Important of issues on the ballot
 - Voter mobilization efforts
 - General vs. Primary election

- Voting system (plurality vs RCV)
- Most studies find increased turnout with RCV ^{10, 11, 12}
- Youth turnout increased with RCV in one study ¹³
- A frequently cited study ¹⁴ found a decrease in turnout with RCV but it failed to consider the factors above. ¹⁵ For example, in San Francisco:
 - Before RCV - Willie Brown was on the ballot and it was competitive
 - After RCV - Gavin Newsom was on the ballot and it was not competitive
 - The compelling candidate and competitive race in the election before RCV was undoubtedly a larger influence on turnout than the election system.

Does RCV disenfranchise women or minorities?

NO – and it shows in the outcomes

- Representation of women (especially women of color) increased in the Bay Area cities where RCV was adopted
- In 2021, NYC’s first RCV election saw a majority women and people of color City Council for the first time ever, 31 of 51 seats (up from 15)
- Las Cruces City Council average age dropped by 40 years since 2019
- The St. Paul City Council is all women

Does RCV increase “gaming”? - NO

- In Ranked Choice Voting
 - Candidates have an incentive to find common ground:
 - They ask voters to rank them second if the voter plans to rank someone else first.
 - They sometimes advertise along with other similar candidates and ask voters to rank them both highly
 - Candidates have an incentive to be civil in campaigning - they don’t want to antagonize supporters of other candidates because they want the second-choice votes.
 - **These are features of RCV, not flaws.**
- Compare this to traditional elections where
 - Candidates use vote splitting to their advantage
 - Some candidates are encouraged to run simply because they will split the opponent’s votes.
 - Some candidates are discouraged from running because they will split the vote of a party’s candidate
 - Voters must vote “strategically” - you might vote for your second choice because you think they have a better chance of winning.
 - Candidates have an incentive to disparage their opponents

Does RCV guarantee that the winner has a majority?

- The winner of a RCV election has a majority of the votes in the last round.
- Sometimes voters don’t rank all the candidates and their ranked candidates are all eliminated. So the final round may have fewer votes counted than the first round.
- Therefore, it is possible for the winner to have a majority in the last round, but not a majority of the entire voter pool.

- Compare this to a plurality election where it is common for the winner not to have a majority.

About 2/3 of voters prefer RCV in exit polls

Jurisdiction	% who prefer RCV	% Neutral	% who Prefer Plurality	Survey Year
Alaska	62%	4%	33%	2022
Virginia Republican Primary	56%	4%	40%	2022
New York City	77%		23% or less (calculated)	2021
Maine	61%		39%	2018
Santa Fe, NM	94%		4%	2018
Minneapolis	66%	18%	16%	2017
Utah Cities	62%		37%	2021
Arlington, VA Dem Primary	67%	14%	19%	2024

Sources:

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3. [Ranked Choice Voting and Youth Voter Turnout: The Roles of Campaign Civility and Candidate Contact](#); Courtney L. Juelich, Joseph A. Coll. 15 June 2021
4. [Self-Reported Understanding of Ranked-Choice Voting](#) Todd Donovan, Caroline Tolbert, Kellen Gracey; 23 April 2019
5. [Demographic Disparities Using Ranked-Choice Voting? Ranking Difficulty, Under-Voting, and the 2020 Democratic Primary](#); Joseph A. Coll; 15 June 2021
6. [Voting Error Across Multiple Ballot Types: Results from Super Tuesday \(2020\) Experiments in Four American States](#), by Jason Maloy. October 2020
7. [The Impact of Input Rules and Ballot Options on Voting Error: An Experimental Analysis](#) by J.S. Maloy and Matthew Ward. June 2021.
8. [Voter Participation with Ranked Choice Voting in the United States](#), by David Kimball and Joseph Anthony. October 2016.
9. [Overvoting and the Equality of Voice under Instant-Runoff Voting in San Francisco](#), by Francis Neely and Jason McDaniel. 2015
10. 17% increase in turnout: [Does ranked choice Voting Increase voter turnout and mobilization?](#) Dowling, Tolbert, Micatka, and Donovan. August 2024
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14. [Ranked Choice Voting Likely means Lower Turnout, More Errors](#) Likely Means Lower Turnout, More Errors, McDaniel 2016
15. [Ranked Choice Voting and Racial Group Turnout: Methodological Flaws Skew Recent Study on RCV](#) Andrew Douglas, November 2015