Ranked choice voting (RCV) is the fastest-growing nonpartisan voting reform in America. RCV bills have been approved by state legislatures, city councils, and voters, and signed by governors. The system is now used in over 50 jurisdictions, from Maine to Utah to Alaska. Some jurisdictions use RCV for primaries, some use it for general elections, and some use it for both. Below is an overview of the different options jurisdictions have for how to use RCV in relation to primaries.

▶ RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN PRIMARY ELECTIONS

Some jurisdictions use ranked choice voting for their primary elections, but not general elections. The best-known example is New York City, where RCV was successfully implemented in 2021 for the Democratic and Republican primaries. State parties across the nation have also used RCV to nominate candidates in their conventions.

When used in primaries or conventions, ranked choice voting picks strong nominees who can unite the party heading into the general election. Virginia Republicans famously used RCV in their 2021 convention prior to their sweep of statewide offices that year.

▶ RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN GENERAL ELECTIONS

Some jurisdictions use ranked choice voting in their general elections. For example, Maine has now conducted several election cycles using RCV in both primaries and general elections for the U.S. House and Senate, receiving great reviews from voters. (Maine also uses RCV in its primary elections for state offices.)

Alaska uses RCV for general elections, but not in its primaries. Instead, Alaska's primaries use a "Top 4" system, where each voter picks one candidate, and the four candidates with the most votes advance to the general election. This is similar to California's Top 2 primaries, except that four candidates advance to the general election instead of two. However, jurisdictions can have RCV general elections without Top 4 primaries; they could use traditional plurality primaries followed by an RCV general election.

When used in general elections, RCV ensures that whoever wins does so with widespread support from the public. Winners enter office with a clear mandate to lead and a better understanding of their constituents' preferences.

▶ RANKED CHOICE VOTING USED TO REPLACE PRIMARIES OR RUNOFFS

Many American cities use ranked choice voting in general elections as a way to replace primaries or runoffs entirely. For example, Salt Lake City and several other Utah cities implemented RCV to consolidate its nonpartisan primary and general elections into a single contest.

When RCV is used to consolidate separate rounds of elections into one, governments save money because they don't have to pay the cost of bringing out election equipment and staff a second time. The outcomes are also more representative because all voters get the chance to weigh in during a single, high-turnout general election; RCV avoids the huge drop in turnout traditionally associated with runoffs.

▶ RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

In the highly competitive 2020 presidential primaries, several state Democratic Parties used ranked choice voting in party-run contents. These included Kansas, Wyoming, Alaska, and Hawaii. In addition, Nevada's Democratic Party used it for absentee voters in its presidential caucus.

Due to their volatility, presidential primaries have long been plagued by the phenomenon of "lost votes," where voters cast an early vote for a candidate who then drops out before Election Day. In 2020, over 3 million Democratic primary voters lost their votes this way in states that held plurality primaries. RCV solves that problem by allowing each person's vote to be counted for their highest-ranked candidate who remains in the race. Due to the success of these early RCV adopters, more states are considering RCV for their presidential primaries as well.

In addition, two states use ranked choice voting in presidential general elections to determine who wins the state's electoral votes. Maine first implemented it in the 2020 presidential election, and Alaska will implement it in 2024.

▶ MULTI-WINNER RANKED CHOICE VOTING

In most places where it is used, RCV is used to elect a single winner in each contest (like a mayor, governor, or member of Congress). Some jurisdictions use "multi-winner" forms of ranked choice voting that pick multiple officials with a single contest. Multi-winner ranked choice voting comes in two main forms: proportional and winner-take-all.

Several cities, including Cambridge, MA and Minneapolis, MN, use the "proportional" form of RCV that allocates seats in proportion to the size of voting blocs. This is the gold standard for conducting legislative elections because it ensures that every person gets a real voice in elected bodies. It is the version of RCV that Portland, Oregon is voting to adopt in 2022.

Many Utah cities use the winner-take-all form, where the largest voting block can effectively pick every seat. While not as representative as proportional RCV, this system still has the benefits of incentivizing positive campaigns and ensuring majority rule.