

FAIRVOTE



**TWO DECADES OF RANKED
CHOICE VOTING IN CALIFORNIA**

Executive summary

- Ranked choice voting (RCV) was first used in California in 2004 in San Francisco. Since then, RCV has expanded to seven Golden State cities, and most voters continue to support it.
- RCV elections have led to increased representation for Asian American and Latino communities, as well as more women winning office. In total, candidates of color have won 64% of RCV races, compared to 36% in the same cities prior to adopting RCV. Women have won 44% of RCV races, compared to 34% before RCV — a ten-point increase.
- RCV has saved California cities \$5 million per election cycle and driven higher participation by eliminating two-round elections.
 - For example, in San Francisco's last Board of Supervisors election before implementing RCV, runoff turnout declined by 42% from the general election.
- Officials elected with RCV have a strong mandate. An average of 73% of voters rank winning candidates in their top three choices, meaning winners have affirmative support from roughly three-quarters of their constituents.

2024 marked two decades of ranked choice voting in California. Since San Francisco implemented RCV in 2004, six other California cities have adopted the reform, and it has been used in elections for 70 offices.

Reformers in these cities hoped RCV would lead to better representation, more accountable government, and lower costs for taxpayers. This report shows how RCV has accomplished reformers' goals. Through analysis of 20 years of election results in California cities, this report demonstrates that RCV has improved representation for historically underrepresented communities and led to greater participation in decisive elections. RCV has also saved taxpayer dollars by eliminating expensive runoff elections.

Figure 1: RCV cities in California

City	Year RCV implemented	Elections that use RCV
San Francisco	2004	Mayor, Board of Supervisors, city attorney, district attorney, treasurer, assessor-recorder, public defender, sheriff
Oakland	2010	Mayor, City Council, Board of Education, city auditor, city attorney
Berkeley	2010	Mayor, City Council, city auditor
San Leandro	2010	Mayor, City Council
Albany	2022	City Council, Board of Education
Redondo Beach	2024	Mayor, City Council, city attorney
Eureka	N/A*	City Council

*Eureka voters approved RCV in 2020, but the city has not used RCV yet because not enough candidates have run in its elections. As such, it is excluded from the analysis below.

Before RCV: expensive elections, less representative results

Before implementing RCV, these California cities used two-round election systems. Some used a top-two primary where the general election effectively served as a runoff, while others used a delayed runoff following the general election. Both systems include a majority requirement – just like RCV – but both also have flaws that led the cities to adopt RCV.

A major problem in either two-round system is low turnout, especially for people of color, young people, and renters. In Sacramento, San Bernardino, and San Jose, which still use two-round elections, White voters are typically a larger share of the primary electorate than the general electorate by a median of 7 percentage points. In Sacramento, White voters were 48% of the electorate on average in the last three primary elections, despite being only 43% of the average general electorate. Likewise, in San Jose, White voters made up at least 40% of the primary electorate in the last four elections, despite making up only 36% of the general electorate on average.

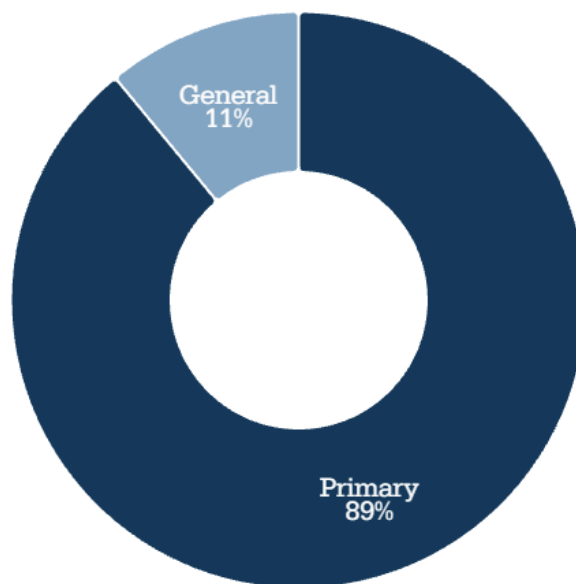
FairVote has observed similar trends for age, income, and homeownership. For example, in 2024, voters aged 65+ made up 39% of Sacramento's primary electorate, but only 26% of the general election electorate. Older voters, White voters, and homeowner voters tend to be overrepresented in primary elections, which can bias the interests and views that winning candidates listen to.

In these cities, if a candidate wins a majority in the primary, the general election is canceled. That means the small, unrepresentative primary electorate can determine the winner – without the input of the larger, more representative general electorate.

This was a major driver of the adoption of RCV in Oakland. The last Oakland mayoral election before RCV was decided in the May 2006 primary by 83,830 voters. The 2022 Oakland mayoral race with RCV was decided by 126,332 voters in November – representing a 50% increase in participation in Oakland's decisive election.

From 2002 to 2008, before Oakland implemented RCV, 89% of its elections were decided in the primary alone. On average, turnout was 61% higher for the general election than the primary during that time; in other words, if those elections were decided in November with RCV, the outcomes would have reflected the voices of 61% more voters.

Figure 2: Oakland elections decided in primary, 2002-2008



On the other hand, San Francisco used delayed runoff elections prior to RCV – rather than a primary and a general election. Yet delayed runoffs also have a voter turnout problem – it's hard to get voters to return to the polls a month after the general election.

In San Francisco's 2000 elections, prior to RCV, nine of the 11 City Council races went to delayed runoffs in December because no candidate earned a majority of votes in November. Those nine districts saw a total of 223,000 votes cast in November, but only 129,000 in December – a 42% decline. The runoffs failed to serve their purpose of electing candidates with majority support, because many voters weren't participating. Since San Francisco adopted RCV, voters only have to turn out once in November.

Ranked choice voting solved slightly different turnout problems for Oakland and San Francisco, but in both cases it increased the number of voters participating in the decisive election.

Ranked choice voting saves money

Ranked choice voting eliminates the need for costly, two-round elections while maintaining their main benefit – majority winners.

By using RCV, San Francisco saves \$3.7 million per election, and Berkeley saves about \$760,000 per election. Oakland and San Leandro save \$140,000 and \$75,000 per election, respectively. That money can now be spent on infrastructure, schools, emergency services, or other priorities. When the Redondo Beach City Council put RCV on the ballot, one of the stated reasons was that the city's typical runoff election cost \$300,000.

Across these cities, savings per election amount to a total of \$5 million.

RCV delivers strong mandates for winning candidates

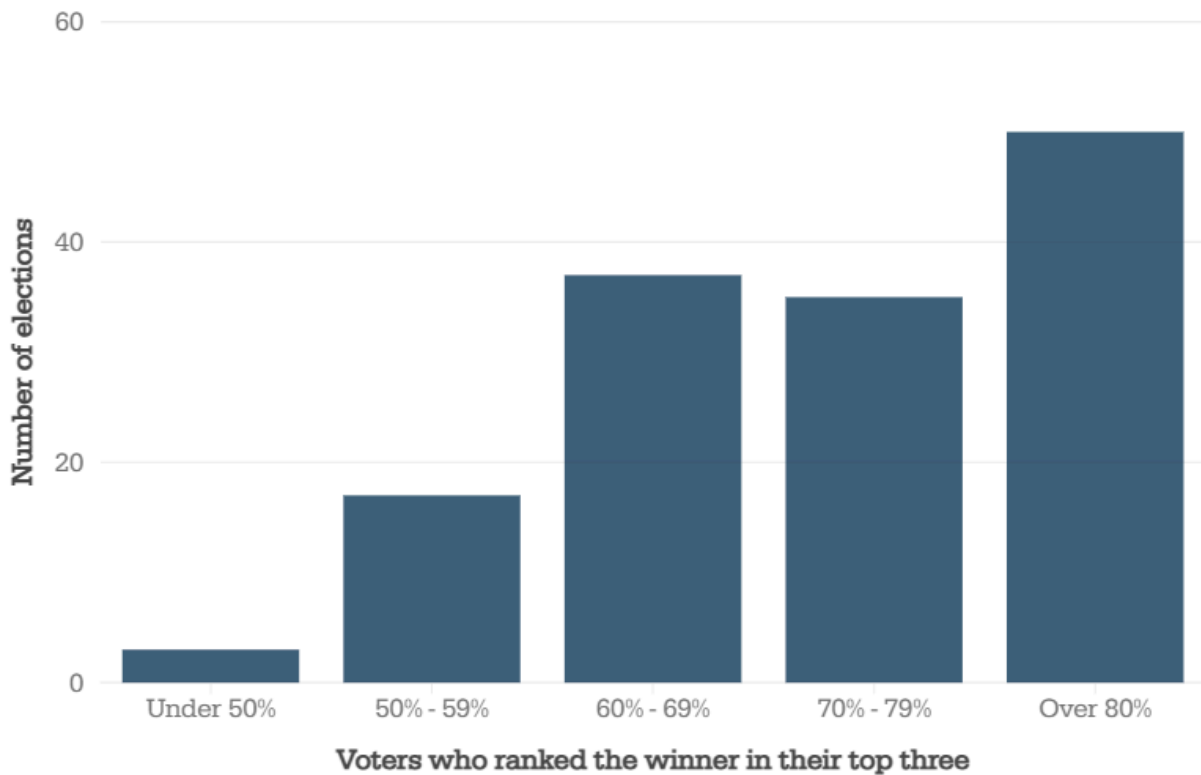
In RCV elections, candidates often try to appeal to voters as a second or third choice, either by explicitly cross-endorsing their rivals or by campaigning on issues that appeal beyond their base. RCV has been shown to reduce negative campaigning and promote civility. It also gives elected officials a clear mandate to lead, because they enter office with support from a majority of

voters. While this report focuses on election mechanics and results, future researchers might consider how candidates elected with RCV used their mandates and performed while in office.

To examine the extent to which RCV encourages winners to seek broad support, we analyzed results from the single-winner elections with at least three candidates in the dataset – a total of 148 elections. We calculated the consensus support for each winner, defined as the percentage of voters who ranked the winning candidate in their top three choices. Consensus support is a good indicator of a winning candidate’s mandate to govern; because voters can rank one candidate, several candidates, or no candidates, consensus support demonstrates how many voters actively supported the winner as one of their top three choices.

The average and median winner’s consensus support across California’s 20 years of RCV elections is 73%, meaning winners typically have the support of roughly three-quarters of their constituents.²

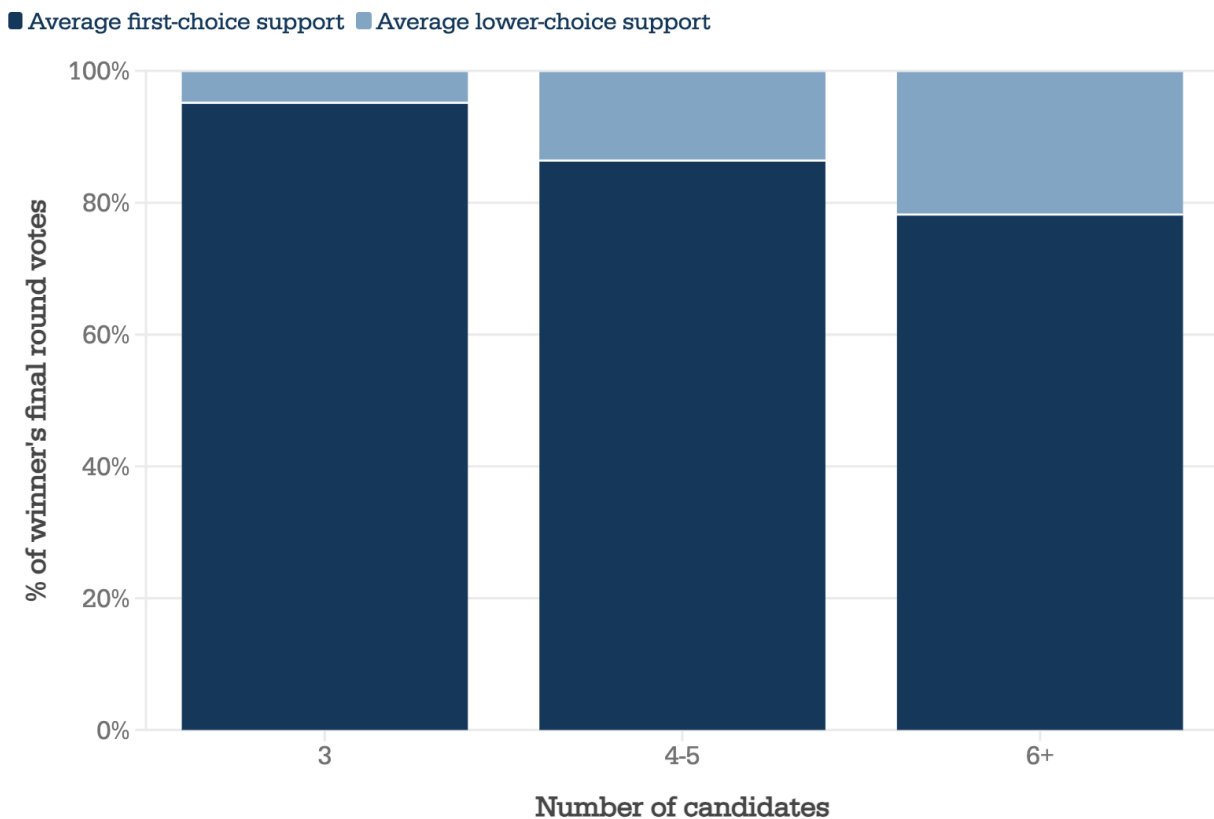
Figure 3: Consensus for winners in California RCV elections



Another way to look at how RCV encourages candidates to campaign for broad support is how many votes winning candidates receive from rankings besides first. Candidates with strong first-choice support tend to win most RCV elections, so the best RCV strategy is still to try to be the first choice of as many voters as possible. But inevitably, some elections with three or more candidates will need multiple rounds of tabulation, so candidates will have to rely on voters' lower rankings to win.

On average in California RCV elections, winning candidates receive 19% of their total votes from voters' backup rankings. Those rankings represent voters who were able to vote for their favorite candidate, and still have their vote count for the winner. That means both more choice for voters and a clear mandate for the winner.

Figure 4: First-choice and lower-choice rankings for RCV winners



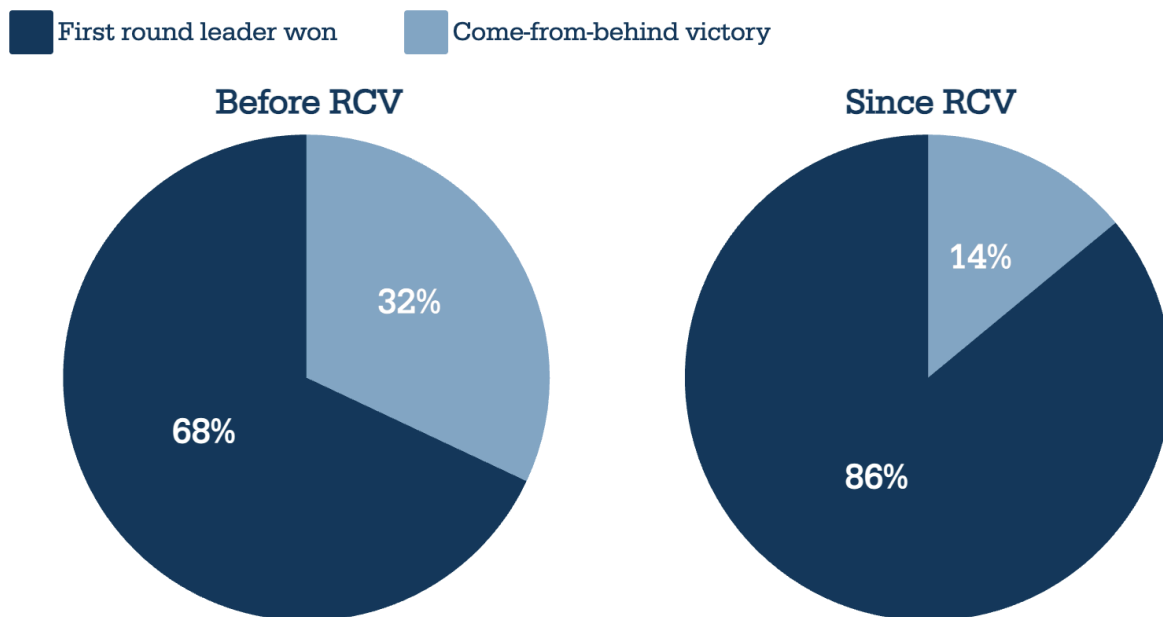
In some ranked choice voting elections, candidates win a “come-from-behind” victory, meaning they did not have the most first choices, but won in the RCV count thanks to strong later-choice support. A come-from-behind victory in an RCV election simply means the candidate who led in first choices was not the one most voters preferred overall. When lower-performing candidates are

eliminated and their supporters' next choices are counted, a broad majority can consolidate behind someone else — usually the contender with the widest appeal.

Come-from-behind victories happen even more often in two-round elections, but it is more difficult to pinpoint why. It may be because voters whose first choice lost consolidate around one of the other candidates, voter turnout changes between the two rounds, or other factors. RCV reveals the full picture of voter preferences in one election, rather than relying on a snapshot of first choices.

Of California RCV races that needed multiple rounds of counting to identify a majority winner, 14% had come-from-behind victories. There was a higher rate of come-from-behind victories prior to RCV adoption, under two-round elections. 32% of multi-round races elected a candidate other than the first-round leader.

Figure 5: Share of come-from-behind wins, before and after RCV



Typically, come-from-behind wins occur in races where, without RCV, vote-splitting would have denied a victory to the majority group of voters. For example, in San Francisco's 2024 Board of Supervisors District 5 race, newcomer Bilal Mahmood won a come-from-behind victory after earning more lower-choice support than incumbent Dean Preston.

Mahmood and other challengers were united in opposing Preston. Organizations like the [San Francisco Housing Action Coalition](#) and [TogetherSF Action](#) agreed, endorsing Mahmood and other challengers, but not Preston. When all candidates besides Mahmood and Preston were eliminated, 73% of ballots transferred to Mahmood. Without RCV, voters seeking change may have split their votes between multiple challengers. RCV allowed them to consolidate and elect a candidate of their choice.

Figure 6: 2024 San Francisco District 5 Supervisor election, round-by-round

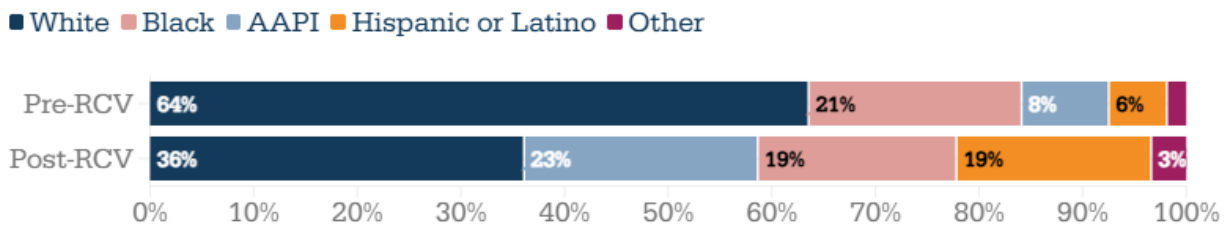
	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4
Dean Preston	40%	41%	43%	47%
Bilal Mahmood	40%	40%	44%	53%
Scotty Jacobs	9%	10%	13%	
Autumn Hope Looijen	9%	9%		
Allen Jones	2%			

Similarly, in San Leandro’s 2022 mayoral election, Juan Gonzalez won a come-from-behind victory, where a non-RCV race would likely have ended in a less representative result due to vote-splitting. The San Jose Mercury News [endorsed](#) both Gonzalez and third-place candidate Lee Thomas, indicating policy similarities between them. Voters agreed; when Thomas was eliminated, his voters preferred Gonzalez over first-choice leader Bryan Azevedo by a 12-point margin.

More candidates of color elected with RCV

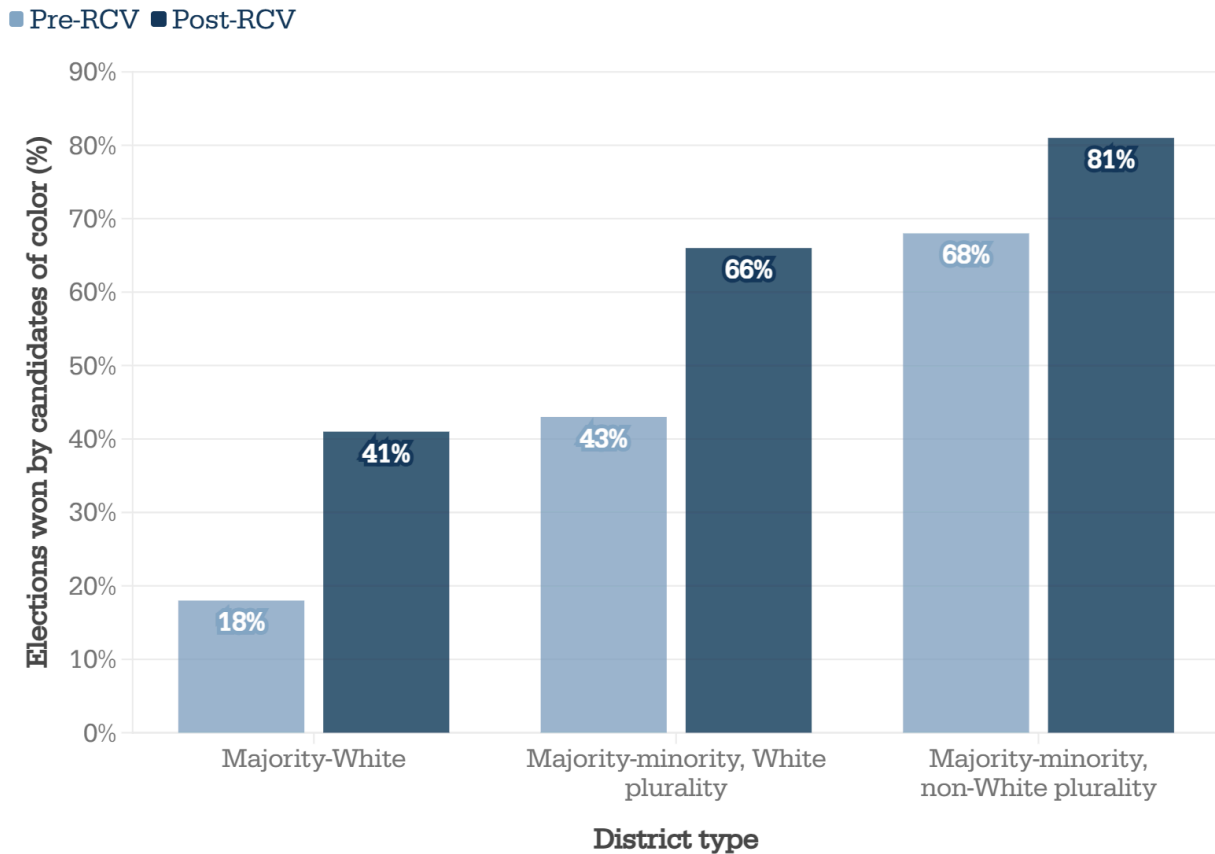
Ranked choice voting has a strong track record of improving representation for voters of color, with voters electing governments that look more like the people they serve. Analysis of 20 years of RCV elections, compared with elections before RCV, shows Hispanic or Latino and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) candidates have won a higher percentage of races under RCV. Candidates of color have won 64% of RCV races, compared to 36% in the same cities prior to adopting RCV.

Figure 7: Winning candidates of color, before and after RCV³



The increase in winning candidates of color is present in districts with varying demographic profiles. In majority-minority districts – where the citizen voting age population (CVAP) of people of color is greater than 50% – candidates of color won 68% of races before RCV and 81% with RCV. In majority-White districts, candidates of color have won more than twice as much with RCV – from 18% to 41% of winners. And in majority-minority districts where White voters are a plurality, candidates of color win more than half the time – showing how candidates can build multi-racial coalitions in RCV contests.

Figure 8: Winning candidates of color by district type, pre- and post-RCV



In several cities, increases in victories for AAPI and Hispanic or Latino candidates since RCV was adopted have coincided with increases in the CVAP of these groups. However, the percentage of office-holders from each group typically increased more than each group’s share of the population increased. For example, in San Leandro, the Hispanic or Latino population rose from about 20% to about 30% of the voter population, while the percentage of Hispanic or Latino office-holders went from 0% to 31%. In Oakland, the percentage of winning AAPI candidates slightly increased despite the AAPI population declining.

For Black candidates, this analysis is less conclusive due to the small size of the Black population in these RCV cities, except Oakland. In Oakland and Redondo Beach, the percentage of winning Black candidates increased despite declining and static Black CVAP, respectively. In San Francisco, San Leandro, and Berkeley, the number of winning Black candidates and Black population declined together. In all of these cities, winning Black candidates were overrepresented relative to their share of the population both before and

after RCV was adopted. More detail on demographic change can be found in the appendix.

These examples illustrate RCV's potential for empowering communities of color. While other factors may facilitate gains in representation for underrepresented communities, RCV prevents vote-splitting between people of color and within minority communities. In addition, replacing low-turnout primaries and runoffs with RCV means more people – including more people of color – have a say in the electoral process.

Case study: Fair representation with proportional RCV in Albany

In 2020, the Albany City Council referred a proportional ranked choice voting measure to the ballot, in response to advocacy from a community group. The measure passed with 73% support. Proportional RCV was ultimately implemented in 2022 after the city received a California Voting Rights Act demand letter. The California VRA attorney, the community group, and the City of Albany signed a legal settlement that allowed the city to use proportional RCV to remedy the voting rights violation.

Albany previously elected city councilors using “block plurality voting” – a voting method that allows the largest group of voters to elect every seat, and can lock other groups out of representation. This effectively blocked Latino and AAPI representation on the City Council. No Hispanic or Latino or AAPI candidate had even run for City Council in the previous five elections.

Some cities pursue single-member districts in order to ensure fair representation for different communities. But in Albany, the Hispanic or Latino and Asian American populations are dispersed throughout the city in a way that makes drawing majority-minority districts nearly impossible. Proportional RCV can deliver fair representation even in situations where majority-minority districts can't be drawn.

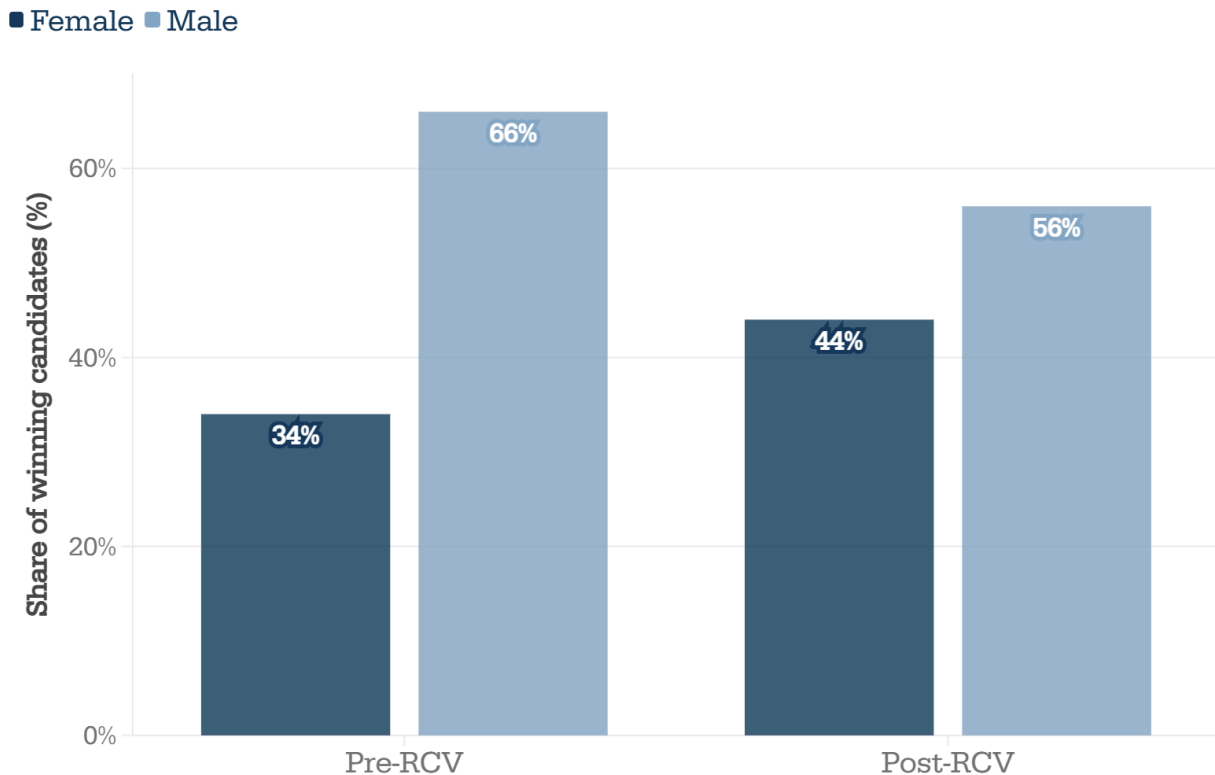
In Albany's first proportional RCV election, voters elected two city councilors – John Miki and Robin López – from a field of five candidates. Both candidates are people of color and represent different areas of the city. Miki is from southeastern Albany, while López lives in University Village. Miki is only the second AAPI councilor in Albany's history, and in 2024, López became the first Latino and indigenous mayor of Albany.

More women elected with RCV

Ranked choice voting has also led to greater representation of women in public office. Women have won 44% of RCV races, compared to 38% before RCV — a six-point increase. Oakland elected its first women mayors under RCV, while San Francisco elected its first Black woman mayor and Berkeley elected its first Asian-American woman mayor.

This finding is consistent with [past research](#) about the impact of RCV on women's representation.

Figure 9: Winning candidates by gender (pre- and post-RCV)



Ranked choice voting leads to more civil campaigns

The same incentives of ranked choice voting that encourage candidates to seek broad support also encourage them to run more civil and issue-focused campaigns. A strategic candidate in an RCV race should want to win second- and third-choice rankings from supporters of their competitors, so the candidate will highlight areas of agreement with their competitors. In some

cases, two candidates in the same race will even cross-endorse each other and campaign together. California's RCV cities are no exception, seeing less negative campaigning since they adopted RCV.

For example, in Oakland's 2025 mayoral special election, there were multiple cross-endorsements. In an Oakland City Council race in November 2024, Marcie Hodge and Ken Houston cross-endorsed each other, and Houston went on to win.

San Francisco and Albany have also seen cross-endorsements. In San Francisco's District 1 Board of Supervisors election in 2020, Connie Chan and David Lee endorsed each other, with Chan going on to win. Two candidates in San Francisco's most recent mayoral election also cross-endorsed.

Candidates can also run more civil and issues-focused campaigns without a formal cross-endorsement. Former Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf described her strategy when running for election in 2014:

"Because of RCV, I didn't have to – nor did I choose to – engage in the typical campaign strategy of attacking the incumbent. My campaign was positive and respectful, and that strategy paid off when the last round of transferred votes were counted." – former Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf

In Albany's proportional RCV system, there are even more opportunities for collaborative campaigning. Similar candidates can benefit from campaigning together in slates to indicate that their views are aligned. In 2022, for instance, three candidates from the Albany Forward slate campaigned together and were elected. Two of those candidates, Robin López and John Miki, had also cross-endorsed each other. Notably, the Albany Forward slate ran more candidates than there were seats available, giving voters more choice in which of the slate's candidates would succeed.

California voters like RCV

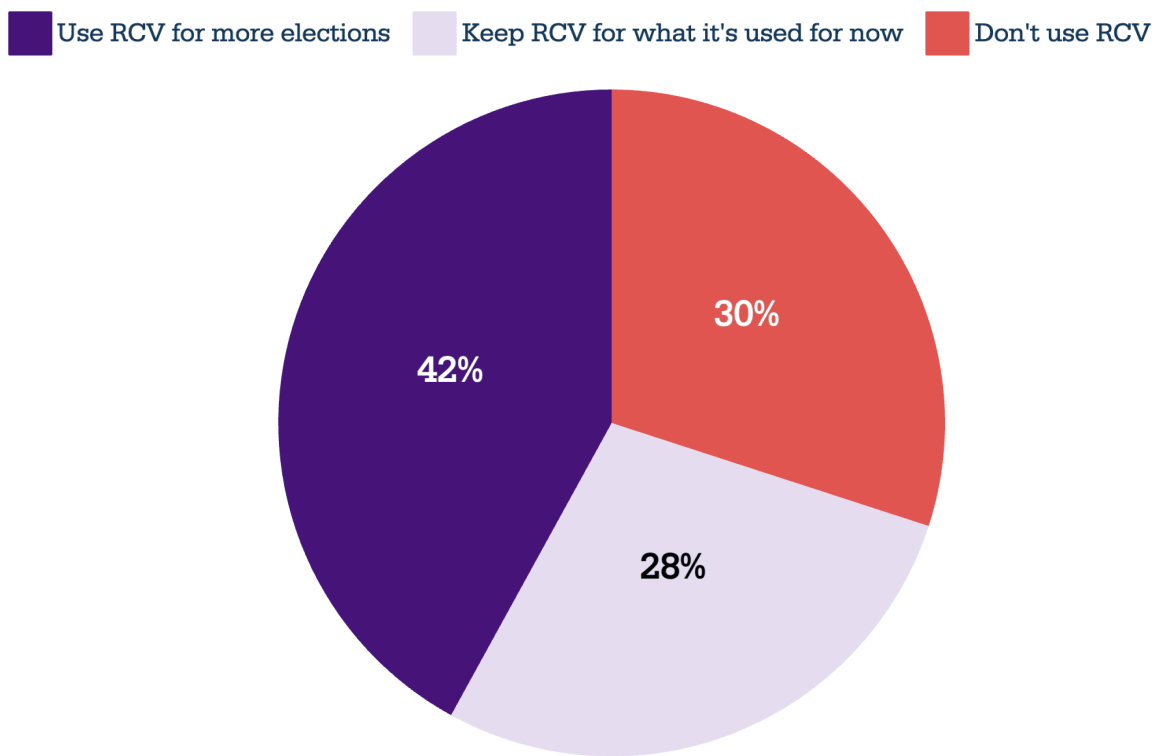
California voters – and voters around the nation – like RCV when they use it. Two recent surveys build on this body of evidence.

In an exit poll following their first use of RCV last year, 61% of Redondo Beach voters supported the reform.

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Support for RCV is even greater in the California cities where RCV has been used for a decade or more. In a [2024 poll](#), 70% of voters across the four Bay Area cities that use single-winner RCV for their municipal elections said they want to keep using RCV. Across San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, and San Leandro, 42% of voters wanted to expand RCV's use to other elections, like statewide or federal offices. Additionally, 63% of voters were interested in [proportional representation with RCV](#), which Albany, CA and Portland, OR use for municipal elections.

Figure 10: Voter support for ranked choice voting in four Bay Area cities



In both of these polls, the vast majority of voters – 87%-92% – report understanding RCV.

Conclusion

Ranked choice voting has lived up to its promise of better elections and fairer representation in the California cities that use it. Six cities in California that used to have low-turnout, unrepresentative primary or runoff elections now benefit from RCV. Winners have greater support, and the higher-turnout general electorate makes the key decisions of who should govern their city.

Our analysis provides additional evidence that RCV facilitates better representation for historically underrepresented groups. In California, there have been particular gains in representation for AAPI and Hispanic or Latino communities. Implementing RCV has played a role in empowering these groups and ensuring city governments better represent California cities' diversity.

Bolstering representation of marginalized communities, promoting broad consensus support for winners, and increasing the number of voters who decide elections are just a few reasons why RCV is growing in California and around the country. This track record is part of why RCV has been implemented in dozens of cities and counties nationwide.

Neither RCV nor any single election reform is a “silver bullet” to fix all the challenges that ail our democracy. However, this report shows that RCV has much to offer California voters and elected officials – and there are reasons to hope for RCV’s expansion in the state. There are active discussions about adopting RCV in places like [Los Angeles](#), [Sacramento](#), [San Diego](#), and [Santa Clara County](#).

This year’s [crowded gubernatorial race](#) is also a strong demonstration of the need for RCV. [61 candidates](#) are on the ballot in the top-two primary for governor, [including](#) six Democrats and two Republicans seen as competitive. A wide range of party leaders have expressed concern that Democrats will split the vote and help two Republicans advance – locking Democrats out of the general election in a deep-blue state.

Ranked choice voting would allow more voter choice – delivering a fair outcome in a crowded field. Additionally, much of this year’s campaign has [focused on](#) which candidates should drop out and when, including [an embarrassing episode](#) of all candidates of color being excluded from the first planned debate; this could be avoided with RCV.

If California advanced the top four candidates and used RCV in its general elections – as Alaska does – voters would have a greater voice in the gubernatorial race. The state could also consider using RCV in primaries, to narrow down the field to the top two candidates and address vote-splitting concerns. The local advocacy group [CalRCV](#) has plans to pursue statewide adoption after 2028.

Explore the data

Our full dataset is available [here](#).

Appendix: demographic change in California

This appendix adds additional data and context to supplement the above discussion on representation for communities of color.

Some of the increase in winning candidates of color may be due to changing demographics, but not all of it. As shown below, in cities where the share of voters of color has risen since adopting RCV, the share of winners of color has increased at a higher rate.

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Appendix figure 1: Change in voter demographics before and after RCV implementation



Appendix figure 2: Change in winning candidates' demographics before and after RCV implementation

City	White %	Black %	AAPI %	Hispanic or Latino %	Other
Albany	67% -> 70%	20% -> 0%	0% -> 10%	7% -> 10%	0% -> 10%
Berkeley	69% -> 53%	25% -> 19%	0% -> 16%	6% -> 12%	0% -> 0%
Oakland	43% -> 29%	29% -> 38%	14% -> 16%	14% -> 15%	0% -> 1%
Redondo Beach	89% -> 40%	0% -> 20%	0% -> 20%	0% -> 0%	11% -> 20%
San Francisco	57% -> 29%	14% -> 9%	14% -> 33%	11% -> 22%	3% -> 6%
San Leandro	80% -> 45%	20% -> 14%	0% -> 10%	0% -> 31%	0% -> 0%

Methodological note: The "before RCV" figures were determined by looking at just the races where RCV was later implemented, for a similar number of election cycles before RCV as there have been since RCV. Albany, for example, only looks at one election cycle since RCV was implemented in 2020, whereas Oakland is based on data from two election cycles.

There are likely many factors behind the increase in winning candidates of color in California's RCV cities, such as demographic change. For example, the reduction in winning White candidates in Redondo Beach after RCV implementation can partially be attributed to the reduction in the White citizen voting age population from 2010 to 2020. On the other hand, in Oakland, the Black population has declined since RCV implementation in 2010, but the percentage of winning Black candidates has increased.

Other examples present a clearer case for RCV's impact. San Leandro saw about a 10 percentage point increase in its Hispanic or Latino population after RCV implementation. But with RCV, Hispanic or Latino candidates have won 31% of elections, compared to no elections before RCV.

In Berkeley, with only a marginal increase in population, AAPI candidates went from winning no races to winning about one out of every six RCV elections.

In San Francisco, where we have the most post-RCV elections to observe, the AAPI population has held steady since RCV adoption, but AAPI candidates have more than doubled their share of election victories. After RCV was implemented, Hispanic or Latino candidates in San Francisco were nearly twice as likely to win.

The effect of RCV on Black representation is difficult to gauge because of the small sample size and the small size of the Black population in RCV cities, but a closer look at CVAP trends indicates the impact on Black representation in California has been neutral to positive. Oakland, where the Black CVAP decreased after RCV adoption, saw a sizable increase in Black winners, from 29% to 38% of winners. The Black CVAP of San Francisco declined from 8% to 6% between 2000 and 2010, while Black winners decreased from 14% to 9%. In Berkeley, the Black population declined from 10% to 7% between 2010 and 2020, while Black winners declined from 25% to 19%. In San Leandro, the Black population declined from 12% in 2010 to 11% in 2020, with Black winners declining from 20% to 14%. In all these cities, Black winners were overrepresented relative to their share of the population before and after RCV implementation.

Notably, in all these cities, there was a greater decline of White winners in RCV elections; those candidates were far more overrepresented before RCV. The gains for Hispanic or Latino and AAPI communities are driven by RCV reducing White overrepresentation, not by hindering Black representation.

Albany only had one Black elected official before RCV – Mayor Ge’Nell Gary – who moved out of the city in the year RCV was first used. Albany’s Black population is very low, at 3.5%. As such, Albany’s results should not be construed as indicative of RCV’s impact on Black representation there or elsewhere.

¹San Francisco and Berkeley have saved more money with RCV because they eliminated December runoff elections. Oakland and San Leandro have saved a smaller amount because they run federal and state primary elections, but have reduced the administrative costs the county government charges them for those elections.

²This figure is based on single-winner RCV elections, meaning it excludes Albany, CA’s proportional RCV elections. The consensus support measure works differently in proportional RCV elections; by design, proportional RCV in a three-winner election, for example, ensures at least 75% of voters elect a winning candidate. In a two-winner proportional RCV election, the consensus would be at least ~67%.

³Methodological note: The pre-RCV races included in the dataset go back at least two election cycles for each city. For instance, pre-RCV data on Albany – a city that has elections every two years for City Council – is from 2018 and 2020. All RCV elections are included in post-RCV data. Due to difficulty in obtaining demographic data for candidates earlier than the 1990s for many local races, there are more post-RCV elections in the dataset than pre-RCV elections.