

Elections & Democracy

Ranked Choice Voting Results Don't Have to Be Slow

August 23, 2022 / [William T. Adler](#)

Last week, Alaska voters used a [new electoral system](#) to select who will represent them in their one congressional seat. Rather than voting for a single candidate, they ranked up to four candidates in order of preference.

It will be another week until we know who won Alaska's congressional seat. That kind of delay can undermine trust in elections: we know that unnecessary delays in processing absentee ballots in 2020 [led to election misinformation](#) spreading out of control. But nothing about Alaska's new system requires holding back results.

In [ranked choice voting \(RCV\) elections](#), candidates who come in last get eliminated. Voters who ranked that candidate first have their votes reallocated to the candidate who they ranked next (if they decided to rank more candidates). This repeats in a series of rounds until one candidate has a majority of the remaining votes.

Alaska's Division of Elections has so far only publicly announced Alaska voters' first choices. (Currently, Democrat Mary S. Peltola leads, with Republicans Sarah Palin and Nick Begich sharing the remaining vote. Begich looks likely to be eliminated, but it's [unclear](#) whether Palin or Peltola will prevail after Begich's first-choice ballots

are reallocated.) The Division of Elections has [decided not to conduct the ranked choice tabulation process](#) until the deadline for absentee ballots has passed.

It is important to note that this delay is a choice; it's not inherent to RCV elections. If ballots are scanned and stored digitally, running the RCV process takes only "a matter of seconds" according to Deb Otis, Director of Research at [FairVote](#), an organization that advocates for electoral reforms, including RCV. For example, San Francisco and Utah conduct preliminary RCV tabulations on election night, updating the tabulation as ballots continue to arrive.

FairVote and the Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center ([RCVRC](#)), which helps election officials implement RCV, have published a set of [recommendations](#) for releasing RCV results. They recommend that election officials release a round-by-round tally on election night and that they continue to update those tallies as votes come in. Voters have come to expect results quickly, and a vacuum leads to the risk of mis- and disinformation.

So why might election officials want to delay running the RCV process, preventing voters from quickly knowing who won — or at least is leading — the race? Perhaps election officials are worried that voters will be unsettled by seeing a candidate be eliminated, only for a new batch of ballots to "un-eliminate" them a day later. But the apparent winner in unofficial results can vary greatly under any election system, not just under RCV. Election officials should be swift and transparent with the results. Any potential voter confusion is an opportunity for election officials, journalists, and members of civil society to educate voters about how the RCV process works. Luckily, FairVote and RCVRC's recommendations also include guidance for election officials on visualizing and communicating more clearly about the tabulation process and the results.

This year, I had the pleasure of serving on the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) Advisory Panel on RCV, helping to produce their [recent report](#) on what policymakers should know about RCV. To launch the report, NCSL held [a day of events and panel discussions](#) with state lawmakers, researchers, and

advocates interested in RCV. We discussed questions that lawmakers might have, such as: *Does RCV delay results? Do voters like using it? Does it save money? Does it impact election security?*

RCV has now been used in over [500 elections](#) in the U.S. Over 50 jurisdictions are actively using it (including New York City with its roughly 5 million registered voters), and from the discussions I was a part of at the NCSL event, it's fair to say that the results so far are very good. RCV prevents the "spoiler effect," where two similar candidates split a majority of votes, allowing a dispreferred candidate to win with only a plurality. It allows voters to vote for their favorite candidate without worrying that they are "throwing their ballot away." It seems to improve the [electoral prospects of women and people of color](#). And it has the potential to save taxpayer money, especially if it eliminates a runoff election that would have otherwise been held.

But as with just about everything in election administration, the devil is in the details. Whether voters like, understand, and trust the system — or whether they view it skeptically — will depend on how it's implemented and how it's explained, emphasizing the important role played by election officials, candidates, and reporters.

Alaska voters will rank their choices for other offices this November, [including](#) for governor and U.S. Senator. Alaska still has a chance to implement RCV best practices before then.



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