COLLECTION IV — ELECTORAL REFORM

Ranked-Choice Voting Explained

How ranked-choice voting works, where it's used, and what research says about its effects.

By Daniel P. Devine · Civest Sphere · November 2026

How it works

In a ranked-choice election, you rank candidates in order of preference: first choice, second choice, and so on.

1. All first-choice votes are counted.
2. If a candidate has a majority, they win.
3. If not, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. Ballots for that candidate move to each voter's next choice.
4. The count repeats until one candidate has a majority of the remaining ballots.

This single-winner version is also called instant-runoff voting. A multi-winner version, used to fill several seats at once, is called single transferable vote.

Where it's used

- **New York City** uses ranked-choice voting in primary and special elections for city offices, approved by voters in 2019 and first used in 2021.
- **Maine** and **Alaska** use it for some state and federal elections.
- A number of other cities and counties across the country use it for local elections.

What supporters say

- Winners need broader support, not just the largest single bloc.
- It reduces the "spoiler" problem, so voters can back a favorite without helping a candidate they oppose.
- Candidates have reason to appeal to rivals' supporters, which may reduce negative campaigning.
- It can replace a separate, costly runoff election.

What critics say

- Ballots are more complex, which may confuse some voters and lead to more errors.
- Results can take longer to finalize.
- Voters who rank only one or two candidates may have their ballots "exhausted" before the final round.
- The candidate with the most first-choice votes doesn't always win.

What the evidence says

Research is mixed. Some studies find modest improvements in voter satisfaction and campaign tone. Others find little effect on turnout or representation. Results depend heavily on voter education and how well elections are administered.

Civest Sphere's view

Civest Sphere takes no position on whether ranked-choice voting is right for any jurisdiction. We believe voters deserve clear, balanced information so they can decide for themselves.

Last reviewed November 2026. This guide is general information, not legal advice. Laws, deadlines and procedures change, so confirm details with the official source before you act.

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