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Why Conservatives Shouldn't Fear Ranked Choice Voting

By Walter Olson
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Ranked Choice Voting improves elections by letting voters communicate much richer data about their preferences. It probably also tends to help the sorts of candidates who appeal to many kinds of voters, not just a narrow, super-committed base.

If you believe some critics, ranked choice voting (RCV) is a partisan Democratic scheme cooked up to "rig" American elections and handicap conservative and Republican candidates. These claims are bunk. RCV is a modest procedural reform aimed at somewhat improving the match between voter preferences and electoral outcomes, with implications that are neutral as between left and right. It's part of a category of electoral reforms that have drawn interest for centuries from scholars, very much including free-market economists.

Since sore feelings about Sarah Palin's loss in Alaska's three-way House race have driven a lot of commentary, let's start there. It was very much a personal loss, resulting from many independents' and Republicans' reluctance to give her their votes. Some thought the former governor in pursuing a role on the national stage had neglected Alaska and its interests. Palin even told voters not to use their second-choice votes, making it less surprising when backers of rival Nick Begich took her at her word. At the same time Democrats had a candidate with unusual crossover appeal in Rep. Mary Peltola, who was respected on natural resource issues and had worked closely with the late Rep. Don Young (R), many of whose supporters backed her.

Meanwhile, in other races held under the new rules, Alaska Republicans were doing just fine – having one of their best statehouse showings ever, in fact. The same statewide electorate on the same day using the same rules elected conservative GOP governor Mike Dunleavy and moderate GOP senator Lisa Murkowski. "The evidence shows that Republicans saw no change in their ability to translate their support into seats in the state legislature," according to a recent evaluation of the Alaska election by Ryan Williamson of the R Street Institute. Williamson also finds evidence that races in the state became both more competitive (with fewer uncontested races) and more civil, as intended. "Importantly, Alaskans viewed the process favorably, largely describing it as 'simple' despite some arguments to the contrary."

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There's no real surprise here. Conservative parties have done fine in Australia and Ireland, where versions of RCV have been used for a century; both are among the world's most stable democracies. RCV is especially promising in the nomination process, where it figured in the Virginia GOP's nomination of Glenn Youngkin, who went on to win the state's governorship, and more recently in the Canadian Conservative Party's leadership choice of Pierre Poilievre, shaping up as a strong challenger to Justin Trudeau.

RCV is meant to head off the risk that an unpopular candidate will win with 40, 30 percent or even less against a crowded field. That's one reason it's making rapid strides in big cities where elections are either nonpartisan or effectively decided in the Democratic primary. (If municipal RCV in Minneapolis or Seattle were to be a plot against Republicans, there would first have to be some viable local Republicans.) Runoffs can achieve much of the same effect, but they are expensive, postpone certainty about who will hold an office, and risk drawing much lower turnout than did the preceding round.

The more you know about RCV, the less you are likely to mistake it for a left-wing plot. In New York City, where uber-progressive mayor Bill de Blasio had won under the old rules, the first election with ranking saw the election of relative moderate Eric Adams. In 2019 Gov. Gavin Newsom, no friend to Republicans, vetoed a Sacramento bill that would have widened use of RCV in local elections. Last year leading Nevada Democrats joined their Republican counterparts to oppose Question 3, which combined RCV with a nonpartisan final-five primary. (Voters narrowly approved it anyway.) Ask your local RCV advocates, and they may tell you that big-city political machines are *not* typically enthusiasts for ranking, perhaps because it tends to lessen the chance that a single well-disciplined faction – like the mayor's! – can go on winning elections whether or not it is in fact very popular.

Ranking does need attention to some practical points to work successfully, including making sure it does not delay reporting of results (a real but solvable problem). But many of the objections to it are mere quibbles on words. Take the claim that it's "coercive." In fact, no American city or state requires a voter to rank candidates; if you want to indicate your one favorite and stop there, just go right on doing that as before. But if you do, don't imagine (with Sen. Tom Cotton) that you're somehow left

“disenfranchised” if the top two candidates don’t include your favorite and your ballot is exhausted, as the jargon has it. In fact, you’re left in exactly the same position as you would be under the old system – the only difference being that RCV gave you a chance to make a difference that you didn’t take.

RCV improves elections by letting voters communicate much richer data about their preferences. It probably also tends to help the sorts of candidates who appeal to many kinds of voters, not just a narrow, super-committed base. That’s good news, not bad, for both Republicans and Democrats in search of high-quality candidates.

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