**Some on the Right Flirt With a Voting Method the Left Loves**

Ranked-choice voting could be on the November ballot in four states, a sign of the system’s rising popularity. Most conservatives have opposed it. But some say that could be changing.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/08/us/ranked-choice-voting-elections.html>

Long viewed as an intriguing, if somewhat wonky, approach to conducting elections, ranked-choice voting — allowing voters to list candidates in order of preference instead of selecting just one — appears to be having a moment.

Across the country, voters have adopted the system for municipal and county elections in each of the last 27 times the issue has been put to them. Nevada and Oregon — and [perhaps Colorado](https://coloradosun.com/2023/11/20/2024-ballot-measure-ranked-choice-voting/) and Idaho as well — will hold referendums on adopting the system this fall. Maine and Alaska already have adopted it.

Proponents say ranked choice reduces polarization by forcing candidates to seek broad support, and that it allows voters to support minor or protest candidates without them becoming spoilers. Critics call the system confusing and even undemocratic, since candidates who initially get the most first-place votes don’t always win in the end.

But just how popular ranked-choice voting is may depend on the group that has most often waged tooth-and-claw battles against it: conservatives, and in particular Republican political figures, who have ideological and practical reasons to oppose the system.

The Republican National Committee urged Congress and the states a year ago to oppose ranked-choice voting “in every locality and level of government.”

Republican-run legislatures in Kansas and Georgia are considering bills to outlaw it. When a coalition of advocacy groups began mobilizing last year to place a ranked-choice initiative on the ballot in Idaho, the G.O.P. supermajority in the Legislature preemptively banned it.

At least a few Republicans say they see cracks in that opposition. Whether they’re right could determine if ranked-choice voting, also known as instant runoffs, could have a future beyond largely Democratic states and municipalities.

A measure that would repeal the Idaho ban and institute a modified form of ranked-choice voting is within a few thousand signatures of reaching the November ballot, with the backing of scores of Republican political figures led by former Gov. Butch Otter. In solidly red Utah, 21 cities — including the capital, Salt Lake City — have held ranked-choice elections since 2021. Wisconsin’s Republican-controlled Legislature held a hearing on the system last month, with testimony from both Republican and Democratic supporters.

“A lot of it is guilt by association,” said John Pudner, a Wisconsin Republican and president of [Take Back Our Republic Action](https://www.takebackaction.org/), which describes itself as a center-right nonprofit focused on election rules. “When people say, ‘San Francisco did this, and Seattle did it, and New York did it,’ the assumption is that if the other side is doing something, it’s probably bad for you,” he said.

Mr. Pudner said that he opposed unlimited ranked-choice ballots, but that some conservatives, like him, favor a modified system that doesn’t ask voters to rank more than five candidates. “It’s picking up steam,” he said. “I hear more and more people talking about it at Republican meetings around the country.”

Indeed, Virginia Republicans used ranked-choice voting in 2021 to select Glenn Youngkin, who defeated six opponents and went on to become the first Republican governor in the state in more than a decade. The party [stuck with ranked-choice](https://www.virginiamercury.com/2022/12/14/virginia-republicans-are-using-ranked-choice-voting-again-democrats-still-arent/) the next year, saying that the method would elevate “the candidate with the broadest base of support.”

If an election can be compared to choosing where to go on vacation, voters typically get one choice, no matter how many options — mountains, seashore, resort, big city — are under consideration. With ranked choice, voters state their preferences in order: First, the seashore, and if not that, a resort, and if not that, then the city.

With ranked choice, the race is over if any candidate nets more than half of the first-place votes that are cast. If no candidate exceeds 50 percent, the candidate with the fewest first-place choices is discarded, and the votes for the others are tallied. The lowest-ranking candidate continues to be tossed out until one candidate gets more than half of all top preferences.

The system allows voters to support outsider candidates without worrying about using their vote on a candidate who can’t win. Candidates can win only with support — or at least tolerance — from a majority of the electorate, thus reducing polarization. And proponents say that ranked choice lessens the chance that minor candidates [become spoilers](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11127-023-01050-3) in close elections.

Deb Otis, the director of research and policy for the ranked-choice advocacy group [Fair Vote](https://fairvote.org/), called that aspect “the beauty of this system.”

“You have to have some people rank you first, to have some base of support,” she said. “But you may also need to pick up second and third choices to cross that 50 percent threshold.”

Critics — not all of them conservatives — call the system confusing and even undemocratic, given that the person who wins a plurality of the vote in a multicandidate contest may not end up the winner. In 2019, Gov. Gavin Newsom of California, a liberal Democrat, vetoed legislation that would have expanded the use of ranked-choice elections in the state.