

# Support Political Reform in Iowa

According to polling, less than one-third of Americans are remotely satisfied with our politics, a record low. Trust in government, including executive branches, legislative bodies, and the courts, is also at an all-time low. More Americans than ever before have unfavorable views of both the Republican and Democratic parties. Furthermore, more Americans than in years past wish they had more options, including better candidates and additional political parties.

Not surprisingly, Americans are increasingly supportive of a wide variety of political reforms. Term and age limits, along with efforts to reduce the influence of money in politics, are particularly popular. Additionally, more Americans are looking at reforms in how we select our political candidates and eventual elected representatives. They understand that these more fundamental reforms may be necessary before any other objectives can be achieved.

Two reforms focused on candidate selection and election include open primaries and ranked-choice voting (RCV). I am a fan of both of these reforms and, for the past couple of years, have been supporting a new group, Better Ballot Iowa, which seeks to offer RCV as an option to interested counties and municipalities in Iowa.

Currently, RCV is not permitted in any Iowa jurisdiction per legislative statute. Given this, it's interesting that the recently introduced House Study Bill 697 includes Division III, which reiterates that "an election in this state shall not be conducted using ranked choice voting". If something is already not permitted, is it necessary to make it impermissible again?

Perhaps the supporters of this section of House Study Bill 697 subconsciously wished to raise the profile of RCV in Iowa beyond what we supporters could accomplish on our own? Even if not, we'll take advantage of that exposure, so thanks!

Here are some truths regarding RCV to counteract what may be presented by the anti-RCV crowd:

- RCV is not more susceptible to fraud or outside manipulation.
- While there is a small upfront cost for implementing RCV, such as voter education, the long-term costs are unchanged.
- RCV will eliminate costly and poorly attended runoff elections.
- While there can be a short learning curve, RCV is easy to understand for voters, simply involving ranking candidates as they might rank movies watched or books

read.

- RCV tends to lead to less negative campaigning, greater voter participation, and improved voter satisfaction.
- While currently elected officials may be wary, there is no evidence that the implementation of RCV benefits one party over another.

RCV is not a panacea for all of our political ills, but it is one reform among many worth considering. Allowing Iowa counties and municipalities to experiment with political reforms, including RCV, may lead to better outcomes. This is the essence of the “laboratories of democracy” ideal, the foundation of our federalism. State overreach, undermining the sovereignty of Iowa counties and municipalities, as exemplified by Division III of House Study Bill 697, should be opposed.

In my opinion, the ones most resistant to change are those who are already in power. We, the people, demand better than the status quo. We wish to make our state and country better for everyone. We are entitled to make changes in our existing political order, to experiment and tinker, always hopeful for a better future. As part of that, we should be free to have conversations about all political reforms, including RCV, with nothing left off the table.

To our state legislators: please remove Division III from House Study Bill 697. To all Iowans reading this, please contact your state legislators to do just this.

Pew Research, 2023: Americans’ Dismal Views of the Nation’s Politics

Gallup, 2024: Record Low in U.S. Satisfied With Way Democracy Is Working

Despite what critics might say, RCV frequently does not change the result of elections compared to what would happen in our current plurality voting system. Any time there is a candidate with 50% or more support among voters, regardless of how many other candidates are on the ballot, that candidate would win with either RCV or plurality voting. Most elections in America fall into this category, and many have candidates who are running unopposed.

Only when there are three or more candidates on the ballot, each of which enjoys a good-sized base of support, will RCV sometimes (but far from always) yield a different result than plurality voting. Consider a nearly even three-way split of support, with Candidate A having 35% support, Candidate B having 33% support, and Candidate C having 32% support. With plurality voting, Candidate A would win, even with far from a majority (50% or more) of support among the electorate. With RCV, Candidate C would be eliminated, and the second-choice votes for that candidate would be reallocated to the two remaining candidates. Candidate A still has a good chance of winning, as would have been the case with plurality voting, but there is also a chance that Candidate B would win.

So, with plurality voting, Candidate A would win, but with only 34% in overall support. With RCV, Candidate B might win, with 50% or more of overall support, despite having a slightly smaller share of the initial vote. Which outcome is best depends largely on personal preferences, I think. I can understand people wishing to stick with plurality voting, as that is the system we are used to, even if the winning candidate may not have broad support. I personally prefer RCV, which guarantees a broader base of support for the ultimate winner. I wouldn't view supporters of either side as wrong; but just recognize that they have slightly different preferences.

As a result of all of the above, RCV is not a particularly powerful force regarding the outcomes of the majority of elections. Its real potential is what it can do in the background during the campaign season, long before election day. Candidates have an incentive to appeal to a broader swath of voters, rather than only their customary political base, which encourages less negative campaigning. While they might not have much chance of winning a given election, minor party and independent candidates have a greater potential to get new ideas out in the public square. Some of what they promote will be valuable, will attract some support among voters, and the major party candidates will at least have to pay attention to these new ideas. Voters will appreciate not simply being fed partisan political boilerplate and feel they can have a meaningful voice in the political process beyond simply voting.

RCV will not change many electoral outcomes, but it might help to change the state of our politics. More candidates with different ideas. Less negative campaigning by all candidates. More engaged and satisfied voters. That, I think, is RCV's real value.