

REVIVING DEMOCRACY: AN ANALYSIS OF RANKED CHOICE VOTING

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ABSTRACT:

The policy memo grapples with the persistent issue of low voter turnout and voter apathy in the United States, revealing that approximately one-third of eligible voters abstained in the 2020 Presidential Election. It underscores the global context, ranking the U.S. 31st out of 49 countries in voter turnout. This memo identifies barriers to voting, such as restrictive registration and the perception that individual votes lack impact, presenting them as challenges to be addressed through policy reforms. Proposing ranked choice voting (RCV) as a remedy, the memo explores its implementation in Alaska, Maine, and New York, showcasing data indicating increased voter satisfaction, diverse candidate representation, and a more civil electoral discourse. The recommended policy approach advocates for a phased introduction of RCV, starting at the local and state levels, with the aim of gradually addressing voter disillusionment and enhancing democratic engagement.

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HOW RANKED CHOICE VOTING WORKS

1

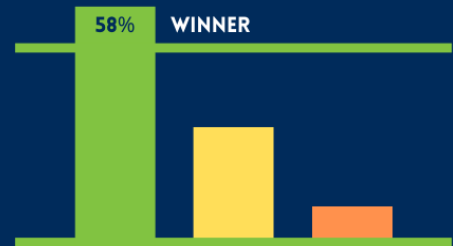
1

YOU RANK CANDIDATES
BASED ON ORDER OF
PREFERENCE.

	1	2	3	
	✓			 <i>W</i>
			✓	
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2

IF A CANDIDATE RECEIVED
OVER 50% OF THE VOTE,
THAT CANDIDATE WINS.



3

IF NO CANDIDATE RECEIVES
MAJORITY SUPPORT, THE
CANDIDATE WITH THE FEWEST
VOTES IS ELIMINATED.



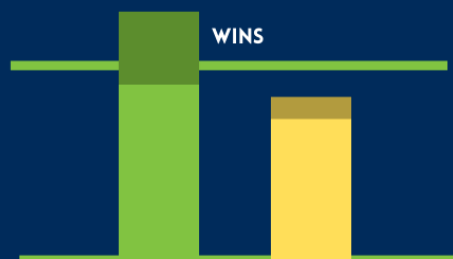
4

WHEN A VOTER'S FIRST CHOICE
IS ELIMINATED, THEIR VOTE IS
REDISTRIBUTED TO THEIR
SECOND CHOICE CANDIDATE.



5

THIS PROCESS REPEATS ITSELF
UNTIL ONE CANDIDATE
RECEIVES MAJORITY SUPPORT.



It is no secret in United States politics that millions of eligible voters choose not to participate in elections. In the 2020 Presidential Election, there were record rates of turnout with **66%** of the nation's voters turning out. However, this data also uncovers the unfortunate reality that **roughly one-third of eligible voters did not cast a vote** (Pew Research Center, 2023). Comparing recent U.S. elections to others around the globe, we learn that the United States ranked **31st out of 49 countries** in voter turnout (Desilver, 2022). There are various reasons why individuals choose not to participate in an election. These include barriers to casting a ballot and restriction of voter registration, as well as the **feeling that one's vote would not make a difference** (Hill et al., 2020). Some causes for a lack of engagement necessitate conveniently actionable lanes of policy reformation to address concerns of **equity** and **government failure** related to voter accessibility. However, concerns such as voter disillusionment, concealed by a recent spike in participation face an uphill battle to define feasible steps forward to strengthen the nation's electoral system, civic engagement, and sense of voter influence (Schraufnagel et al., 2022). Recognizing the challenge of implementing swift action to encounter the desires of an idealistic American Democracy, this policy memo engages the concept of **ranked choice voting (RCV)**, an electoral reform frequently brought into modern electoral conversations as an avenue to engage the disillusioned. Herein, we define the problem of **voter disillusionment and dissatisfaction** as a concern of equity and government failure, offering a path towards increased engagement and positive relationships with representation.



II. PROBLEM DEFINITION

Low voter turnout is an issue that has plagued modern United States elections, and voter apathy is a contributing factor to that issue (McDonald, 2023). **Voter apathy refers to the lack of interest or motivation to participate in the electoral process**, resulting in lower voter turnout, decreased civic engagement, and even an increase in fraudulent votes being cast (Moral, 2016). The strength of a democracy can be measured by **civic engagement**, of which voting is a necessity (Ingrams, 2016). In addition, voter apathy has been shown to be a compounding issue, meaning that as voter apathy increases, politicians are **less likely to take voters needs into account**. This is a vicious cycle that leads to even more voter apathy (Clark & Lee, 2016).

If there is to be an attempt to remedy voter's concerns as to whether casting a ballot is worth their time, preliminary research shows that **ranked choice voting is a strong potential solution**. RCV has been implemented in numerous cities and two states, Maine, and Alaska, with Nevada having voted to implement the system pending another state-wide vote in 2024 (Rodriguez, 2023). **In 2023, 14 more states have measures on ballots to switch their state voting systems to RCV**, and as advocates for the system have argued, the system leads to "...expanding the number of reasons for engagement to happen, for conversations to happen" (Edelman, 2023).

But what has the data shown in the elections that have utilized RCV? Already, data shows that **75% of voters in New York that participated in a RCV election said that they would do so again** and that candidates in the race were notably more diverse in political stance than elections prior (Otis & Aldrich, 2022). Voter turnout also increased in municipalities utilizing RCV, with some voting rates increasing by as much as **10%** (Fair Vote, 2023). Additionally, rather than voters reporting more issues with casting their ballot and displeasure with candidates, the campaigns that were conducted in RCV elections were noted to be more civil with voters more **satisfied with the election results** (Horton & Thomas, 2023). Lastly, candidates in RCV elections engaged with one another more than in traditional elections, and overall media coverage of the election was **85%** more positive than negative (Fair Vote, 2023). The implementation of RCV remains a new development in American politics, yet the benefits already analyzed are promising.

IV. ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT

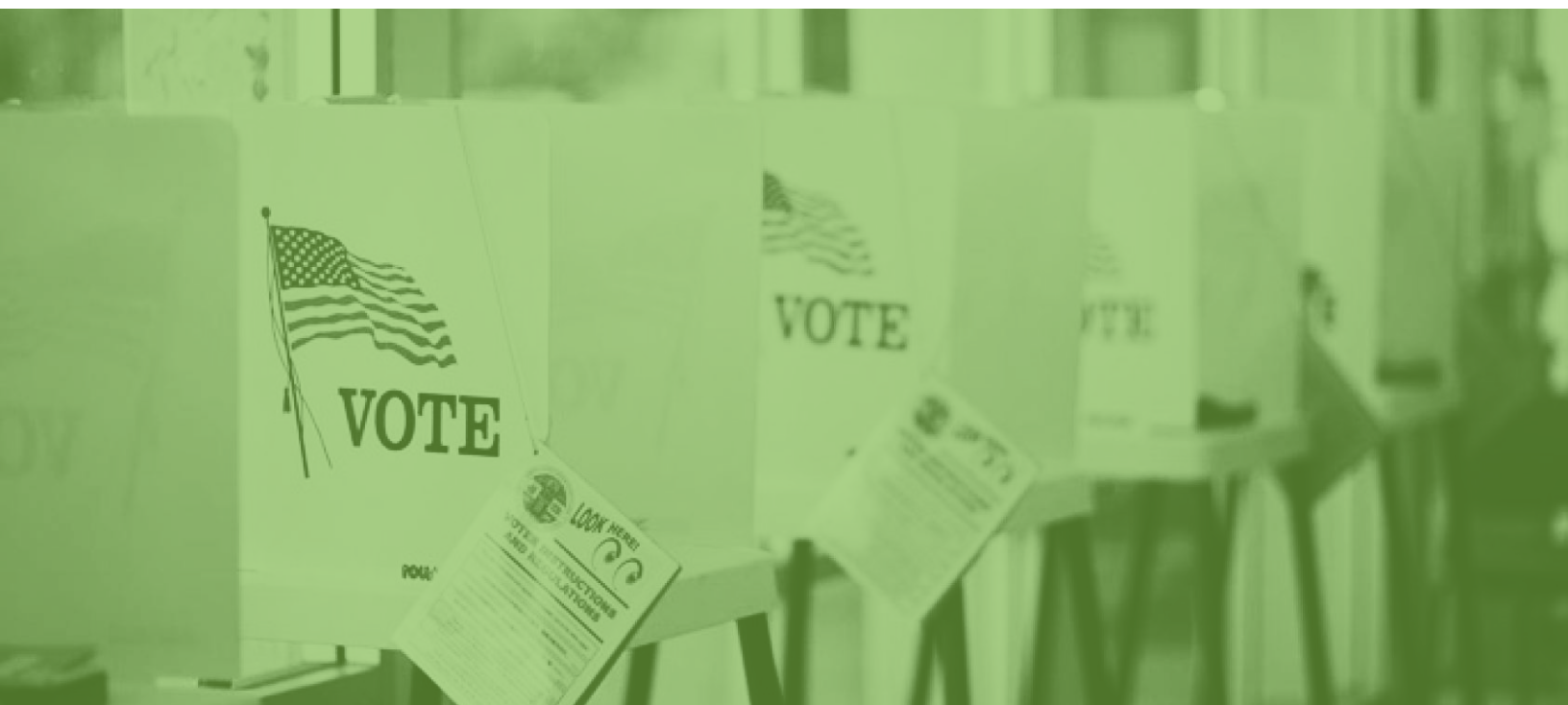
The issue of voter apathy in the United States underscores the need for government intervention from an **equity** perspective as it strikes at the heart of democratic ideals where every citizen's participation is valued. Voter apathy, often stemming from the pervasive perception that one's vote holds little significance in the outcome of elections, directly challenges the fundamental principles of democracy and **equitable civic engagement**. In a democracy, everyone's voice and vote should carry equal weight, irrespective of their background or circumstances. When voters become disillusioned and disengaged due to the feeling that their vote doesn't matter, it perpetuates a cycle of disinterest that disproportionately affects marginalized communities and hindering their ability to influence political decisions. Government action to address this issue is ethically rooted in ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their background, feel empowered and included in the democratic process, thus upholding the fundamental tenets of equity, representation, and collective participation in shaping the nation's future. In this way, government intervention is essential for **preserving** the essence of **democracy** itself, wherein every citizen has a meaningful role to play in the governance of their country. However, a call for government intervention necessitates a cognizant understanding of the primarily state wielded control over the electoral process in the nation's federalist system.



Approaching the issue of voter apathy through the adoption of RCV can be visualized as a **spectrum of reform**, ranging from maintaining the status quo to progressively implementing RCV at various tiers of government (Montjoy, 2008). At each level of this spectrum, unique challenges and opportunities emerge. The introduction of RCV requires careful planning, education of voters, and administrative adjustments to ensure a seamless transition, making each stage of reform a critical step towards addressing voter disillusionment and enhancing the democratic process. Herein, the following alternatives offer a series of approaches to reform, offering **tiered solutions** reflective of the levels of government wherein RCV could be considered.

1. STATUS QUO - MAINTAIN THE EXISTING ELECTORAL SYSTEM:

Maintaining the status quo would involve keeping the current first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system for all elections. While this maintains the familiarity of the existing system, it has the potential to exacerbate the present disillusionment of voters, especially among those who perceive their votes as wasted when supporting less mainstream candidates. The policy option would entail no changes to the current voting procedures, which often leads to vote-splitting, limited candidate diversity, and a sense of disempowerment among voters.



2. IMPLEMENT RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN LOCAL AND STATE ELECTIONS:

7

Implementing ranked choice voting at the local and state level would involve adopting RCV for local elections (such as city council and school board) and state-level elections (state legislatures and gubernatorial races). This approach would introduce RCV in a phased manner, starting at the grassroots level. It offers several advantages, including reducing the "wasted vote" phenomenon, promoting candidate diversity, and increasing civic engagement among voters (Fair Vote, 2023). Implementing RCV at the local and state levels could serve as a practical testing ground for the system, potentially building public confidence and demonstrating its viability prior to implementation for races involving nationwide positions. Steps to approach the adoption of RCV in local and state level elections would build upon the legislative actions currently instituted by states and local governments such as Alaska and the City of San Francisco, CA.



CITY COUNCIL CHAMBERS

3. IMPLEMENT RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN STATEWIDE ELECTIONS AND BEYOND:

Statewide adoption of ranked choice voting with national implications takes a more ambitious approach by implementing RCV not only in local and state elections but also in statewide elections, such as the U.S. Senate and gubernatorial elections. Furthermore, this reform would aim to explore the possibilities of RCV in determining national positions, such as the President and Congress. A comprehensive, cross-state adoption of RCV could serve to address voter disillusionment by introducing a more inclusive and representative electoral system at all levels of government. By extending RCV to statewide elections, this action would begin the process of demonstrating the viability and benefits of RCV on a larger scale, potentially paving the way for what could be a future nationwide amendment to governing documents should the reform prove fruitful.



The second alternative, which focuses on **implementing Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) in local and state elections**, offers an approachable and strategic approach to addressing voter apathy while ensuring the legislative and political feasibility of reform. Implementing RCV for the election of all national level positions is too swift an action, posing significant challenges in terms of educating the entire electorate about the new system and garnering sufficient political support for such a monumental change given its uncharted use in most U.S. states. Therefore, initiating the reform at the state and local levels provides an opportunity for a **grassroots effort** that not only enables **practical testing** but offers the chance to foster **public confidence and understanding** of the RCV system.

This approach leverages the fact that many states and local governments, such as **Alaska** and the **City of San Francisco**, have already adopted RCV (RCVRC, 2023). These ‘pioneer’ states have delineated **pathways** for other states and localities to follow, building a growing body of knowledge on the practicalities of implementing RCV. It allows for states to learn from one another's experiences and **adapt the system** to their specific needs. Furthermore, starting at the local level, with city council and school board elections, allows for easier management and local experimentation before scaling up to state-level contests. Over time, these successful implementations can serve as **models for broader RCV adoption** in the future, thus ensuring the sustainability and gradual acceptance of the reform. This policy alternative is politically **feasible** as it aligns with the trend of states and municipalities seeking electoral reform, which has garnered bipartisan support and proven success in increasing voter engagement. The combination of practical experience, growing political support, and demonstrated benefits makes implementing RCV in local and state elections a highly viable approach to address voter disillusionment without imposing a swift and overwhelming change on the national stage.

PHASED ADOPTION OF RCV



In response to a lack of complete voter engagement and growing voter apathy in the United States, the adoption of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) emerges as a compelling solution to reinvigorate civic participation and strengthen the democratic process. Data from states and localities using RCV elections highlights increased voter satisfaction, greater candidate diversity, and more civil campaign discourse, demonstrating the promise of RCV as an electoral reform. However, the path to implementation presents challenges that necessitate a strategic approach. The presented policy alternatives offer a spectrum of reform, from maintaining the status quo to gradually introducing RCV at various levels of government. With voters already at a point of dissatisfaction with a lack of trust in their elected leaders, a complete overhaul of the American electoral system can only serve as a goal to grow toward rather than a reform we can expect to see within the year. With imminent concerns of equity and the impact of voter apathy on various portions of the nation's population, **now is the time to act**, to test the viability of rank-choice voting in our state and local governments and respond to the concerns of the citizens. **Acting now, serves as a means of creating a more inclusive, representative, and participatory democracy, meeting the definition of democracy our nation idealizes.**



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