Article

Lessons from the Use of Ranked Choice Voting in American Presidential Primaries

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Abstract
Grounded in experience in 2020, both major political parties have reasons to expand use of ranked choice voting (RCV) in their 2024 presidential primaries. RCV may offer a 'win-win' solution benefiting both the parties and their voters. RCV would build on both the pre-1968 American tradition of parties determining a coalitional presidential nominee through multiple ballots at party conventions and the modern practice of allowing voters to effectively choose their nominees in primaries. Increasingly used by parties around the world in picking their leaders, RCV may allow voters to crowd-source a coalitional nominee. Most published research about RCV focuses on state and local elections. In contrast, this article analyzes the impact on voters, candidates, and parties from five state Democratic parties using RCV in party-run presidential nomination contests in 2020. First, it uses polls and results to examine how more widespread use of RCV might have affected the trajectory of contests for the 2016 Republican nomination. Second, it contrasts how more than three million voters in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries backed withdrawn candidates with the low rate of such wasted votes for withdrawn candidates in the states with RCV ballots. Finally, it concludes with an examination of how RCV might best interact with the parties' current rules and potential changes to those rules.

Issue
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1. Introduction

Many view America's election of its president as one of the most important choices that the country makes. Every four years, there is intense interest in the major parties' presidential nomination process rules—both as written and as they might be reformed—from the media, political activists, and the public.

On the one hand, the current process is creating surprises for the parties—as evidenced by the strength of outsider candidates like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders—and generating interest in how to ensure any such candidate earns majority support within the party before becoming its nominee. On the other, reforms that seem to symbolize a return to the 'smoke-filled rooms' of the pre-1968 nominations—like giving more power to superdelegates and increasing the odds of a brokered convention—are unpopular among party voters. To address the goals of (1) choosing strong nominees who unite the party and help shape its future and (2) giving more voters a meaningful vote, the major parties could consider expanding the use of a reform that has been used in party and general election contests: ranked choice voting (RCV) ballots. Specifically, this article analyzes applications of the most common form of RCV widely known as instant runoff voting (IRV), which can be adjusted to fit party rules and thresholds.

Addressing the first objective of choosing a strong nominee, the modern presidential primary process gives more power to voters than the pre-1968 process, but it can still neglect their will and divide parties. Most dramatically, candidates can win the majority of pledged delegates without winning a majority of primary votes, especially in early contests that often effectively decide the nomination. Many scholars have noted that the spirit of compromise that was forced by majority thresholds in past nominating conventions has dissipated with the end of brokered conventions (Aldrich, 1980; Busch, 1992). The winner of a narrow plurality of the vote in a handful of states that begin the process each year can gain momentum that alters the course of a race before most voters have had a say.

RCV, recommended in *Robert's Rules of Order* (Robert, Honemann, & Balch, 2011, pp. 425–428) and widely used in governmental and party elections, including by all five national parties in Canada when choosing their party leaders for prime minister and for most party leadership elections in the United Kingdom, could directly address this problem (Oberstaedt, 2020). In an election with RCV, voters rank their preferred candidate first and can also rank other candidates in order of preference as backups. Votes count for your first choice unless that candidate is eliminated, which then means your vote counts for your next ranked choice among the continuing candidates.

In 'winner-take-all' primaries, votes would be redistributed from the last place candidate round-by-round until a candidate attains a majority. RCV primaries with proportional allocation and delegate thresholds—as was the case in five Democratic caucuses and primaries in 2020 that used RCV with thresholds of 15% to earn delegates—would redistribute voter preferences until every remaining candidate is above the threshold. At that point, delegates would be allocated. In addition to releasing results used to determine delegate allocation, states and parties could run the tally down to the final two candidates. Doing so could allow the momentum for winning the state to go to a candidate not benefiting from a fractured majority vote—recognizing that this would require a shift in media attention from 'plurality thinking' (that is, the candidate with the most delegates in a state 'wins,' even if less than a majority) to 'majority thinking' (that is, the goal of a nomination process is to identify the candidate who best unites the party).

The RCV ballot has many potential benefits for representing the will of primary voters. Those voting early or by mail for candidates that dropped out of the race prior to election day would have their preference heard rather than their vote wasted. In a more wide-ranging manner, parties could be more likely to unite around coalitional candidates that are more palatable to a broader group of its delegates and voters than polarizing candidates that not only might be weak nominees, but also vehicles for changing the party's platform and identity. For purposes of this article, a coalitional candidate is one who achieves the most support within their party by earning both first choice support and backup support from party convention delegates or primary voters who prefer a different candidate, as measured by later ballots at contested conventions or backup rankings on RCV ballots.

In this sense, RCV may help alter voter and candidate strategies. Voters could express their true preferences at the ballot box rather than engaging in 'strategic' voting based on trying to make the most of a single choice. Candidates would have to work harder to earn voters' backup preferences, encouraging them to form broader electoral coalitions within their parties.

RCV could be used in the current presidential primary system to ensure that the winners of early states that help establish the 'momentum' that today typically decides nomination contests are better able to unite groups of voters in their first and later choices. RCV could also be used as part of more fundamental changes to the presidential nominating process, such as a replacement for caucuses or the mechanism for a growing number of states voting on a single day after early contests define the field.

The first part of this article conducts a review of literature related to how presidential primaries balance the interests of different stakeholders and how momentum affects the process. The second part examines RCV ballots in presidential primaries from a historical perspective, first by examining the history of brokered conventions and then by describing how RCV could have altered the course of the 2016 Republican primary process. The third part of the article discusses RCV in practice, including the impact of RCV's use in five states in the 2020 Democratic nomination contest. The fourth part of this article looks at RCV in the context of different party and state rules and potential changes to those rules.

2. Academic Literature on the Dynamics of Presidential Nomination Contests

2.1. Balancing the Interests of Party Elites and Party Voters in Presidential Primaries

There is a significant amount of political science literature that examines presidential primaries in the United States. One focus of scholarly research on presidential primaries is determining the relative influence of party elites vis-à-vis presidential primary voters in deciding the major party's presidential nominations. In "One Party Decided," Cohen (2018) evaluates *The Party Decides* (Cohen, Karol, Noel, & Zaller, 2008) in light of the 2016 Democratic and Republican presidential primaries. Cohen (2018, p. 256) summarizes the book as a "study of the 'invisible primary,' the process by which party elites agree upon a nominee before the presidential primaries have concluded." Revisiting the "four invisible primary fundamentals" that can be predictive of presidential primary performance—"polls, money, media coverage, and endorsements"—Cohen concludes that Democratic

party elites effectively decided on Hillary Clinton as the 2016 nominee, while Republican Party elites were too slow and fractured in making endorsements to prevent Donald Trump's nomination (Cohen, 2018, pp. 261, 272).

Steger (2016) adds similar caveats to *The Party Decides*, arguing that while party elites may influence presidential primary outcomes, this role is conditional and depends on how many elected officials make endorsements, when they do so, and the extent to which they coalesce.

Norrander (1996, p. 876) conducts a comprehensive literature review regarding presidential nomination politics and concludes that "rules matter." Norrander (1996) finds that numerous studies have demonstrated how various primary rules affect both the type of candidates that succeed and the way they campaign.

Aldrich (1980, p. 10) studies the evolution of the presidential primary system and finds that reforms in the 1970s, as well as other factors (such as the influence of mass media, public opinion polling, and the weakening of party organization), create a situation where "delegates to the convention play an ever-shrinking role in the decisions about which presidential nominees are chosen." Steger (2018) then applies the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index to presidential primaries, finding that presidential primary voters have had meaningful choices in most elections since the 1970s reforms were implemented.

While this increase in presidential primary voters' influence may have an intuitive appeal that parallels how most states conduct congressional primaries, scholars have noted downsides to this 'democratization' of the process. Busch (1992) laments the reforms of the presidential nominating system, including the decline of the 'mixed' nominating system where voters had some say at select primaries but delegates had the power to determine the nominee at the convention. He argues that political parties could be better served if the process required movements to build support among party leaders, helping their nominees win elections and ensuring that they can consolidate the party over the long term (Busch, 1992).

The outcomes of presidential primaries can have long-lasting consequences on parties' ideological composition and governance, so while some partisans may be entirely focused on 'electability,' many party elites and primary voters also have an interest in choosing an ideologically representative nominee. As Steger (2018, p. 278) notes, "presidential nominations are consequential because the presidential nominee of a party plays an outsized role in shaping public perceptions of what a party stands for and setting expectations about what it will do if it wins the election." Scala (2018) makes the case for the importance of ideology in voter decision making during primaries, arguing that even though many voters do not have definitive self-identified ideologies nor fully understand candidates' ideologies, they have a rough estimation of presidential primary candidate ideology that is an important cue for the way they vote.

There is still the question of whose ideology and preferences should be represented: party elites or primary voters? No matter the stance one takes on this question, RCV is one potential reform to help parties more efficiently balance elites' and voters' influence over the process. If party elites are fractured in their endorsements but clearly opposed to one candidate (e.g., Donald Trump in 2016), RCV ballots can be a way for primary voters to reflect party elite preferences and consolidate support around a candidate that elites find acceptable.

Crucially, voters still have the choice of whether they will follow party elites' signals or not. However, RCV ballots could help avoid playing a game of 'plurality roulette'—both major party's current nomination rules risk a 'hostile takeover' from a plurality faction, while RCV ballots can help shift to a more majoritarian nomination system.

2.2. The Influence of Momentum in Presidential Primaries and Caucuses

Another focus of scholarly research is on momentum and the way that the sequential nature of presidential primaries and caucuses plays a dynamic role in the decisions of candidates and voters. Examples abound of early contests elevating a candidate out of a crowded field and becoming the inevitable nominee before most states vote.

Bartels' (1988, p. 5) systematic study of momentum in presidential primaries evaluates "the complex interactions among initial primary results, expectations, and subsequent primary results that make it possible for [presidential primary candidates] to emerge from relative obscurity into political prominence in a matter of days or weeks" and provides a framework for more recent scholarship.

One way to examine momentum is in shaping voters' perceptions of candidate viability (how likely a candidate is to win the party nomination) and electability (how likely a candidate is to win the general election). Abramowitz (1989, p 988) evaluates responses to a 1988 DeKalb County presidential primary exit poll and finds that, while respondents do not necessarily distinguish between viability and electability, they act "to a considerable extent... as rational utility maximizers" in weighing viability and electability over their evaluation of the candidates. Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Donovan (2010) argue that the sequential nature of presidential nomination contests, starting with the Iowa caucuses, allows for candidates to gain 'momentum' from wins in earlier states that shape voters' perception of candidate viability and electability which ultimately influences the outcome of later nominating contests.

Redlawsk et al. (2010, p. 10) find evidence of these dynamics from the 2008 Iowa caucuses, writing that:

> Our national survey data show that winning (mostly white Iowa) was critical to perceptions that Obama

could win the nomination (what is called 'viability'), and that viability was in turn the most important factor for predicting a vote for Obama in subsequent primaries and caucuses.

The central importance of momentum in the presidential primary process means that very few votes in early states that often have crowded fields of candidates can allow a candidate lacking in broad support across their party to be propelled towards their nomination. These dynamics may strengthen the importance of ranked choice ballots, as RCV could be an important component of early primaries and caucuses to ensure the winner who garners momentum from winning such contests reflects the broad support of the electorate.

3. The Historical Perspective on RCV in Presidential Primaries

3.1. Historical Context: Pre-1968 Multiple-Ballot Party Conventions Resulting in Coalitional Nominees

In order to understand how presidential primaries have shifted from being an elite-driven process to one that includes a larger role for primary voters, it is useful to review the history of these nomination rules. For much of American history, the presidential primary process did not involve any primaries at all, nor any participation from rank-and-file party members. Until the late 1820s, congressmen met behind closed doors in what was known as a 'King Caucus' to determine party platforms and nominees (Roberts, Hammond, & Sulfaro, 2004). As criticism of the King Caucus system grew louder, conventions opened up greater access to the presidential nominating process in the 1830s, but these conventions were still dominated by party elites who selected delegates by secretive means (Cowan, 2016).

Voters steadily gained more power at the end of the twentieth century, when a progressive-era movement for 'small-d democracy' pushed states to institute primary elections whereby ordinary party members could cast votes for their preferred candidate (Cowan, 2016). However, these conventions still empowered delegates who were typically not bound to vote for the winner of their primaries, and by 1968, 20 states still had no open selection process for delegates (McGovern–Fraser Commission, n.d.).

The foundations for the modern presidential primary process were created in the wake of the 1968 McGovern–Fraser Commission's recommendations for reform of the Democratic Party rules, after Hubert Humphrey's controversial nomination and subsequent loss that permanently disrupted the New Deal Coalition (Atkeson & Maestas, 2009). These changes included binding delegates to the results of their state primaries and encouraging more state legislatures to mandate primaries in states that previously had non-public methods for selecting delegates (Atkeson & Maestas, 2009). These reforms,

which eventually found a permanent place in both parties, were critical to democratizing the presidential primary process, but they also ensured that conventions would be even less likely to require multiple rounds of balloting as the presumptive nominee could be established well before the convention.

Indeed, no major-party presidential nominating convention has required more than one ballot since 1952 (DeSilver, 2016). Prior to that, though, 18 such multiple-ballot (or brokered) conventions occurred among the 60 conventions after the end of the Civil War (DeSilver, 2016). At these brokered conventions, party insiders selected as delegates were often forced to compromise among themselves over the course of multiple rounds of voting, providing modern-day lessons about how parties can field coalitional nominees. That said, there may be some instances in which the goal of fielding coalitional candidates is not shared by all party elites who may favor a particular faction or candidate.

3.1.1. Brokered Conventions Can Produce Coalitional Nominees

Most notably, because the party's nominee was required to win the votes of a majority (or supermajority, as in the case of the early Democratic Party) of delegates, brokered conventions often led to the selection of coalitional candidates who appealed to broader ranges of geographic and partisan interests. One example that illustrates this consensus-building process was the 1860 Republican Convention in which Abraham Lincoln triumphed in three ballots after initially finishing well-behind William Seward in the first round (Ecelbarger, 2008).

The convention showcased Lincoln's political acumen and ability to appeal to multiple factions and state delegations, including those of his political rivals, as Lincoln's support grew from one-fifth of delegates in the first ballot to three-fourths in the third (Ecelbarger, 2008). Lincoln was also able to grow his support on successive ballots based on the greater appeal of his ideological stances, as some saw Seward as too closely aligned with the party's radical wing (Ecelbarger, 2008). Conversely, Lincoln's stances on issues of the economy and slavery were better aligned with the general electorate, enabling him to ultimately carry Western states and win the presidency—a breakthrough for his recently formed party (Ecelbarger, 2008). These attempts to field a more electable nominee at contested conventions appear successful, as FairVote's review of major-party nominating conventions since 1844 shows that 57% of come-from-behind winners at contested conventions went on to win the general election (FairVote, 2020a).

3.1.2. RCV Crowd-Sources a Coalitional Nominee

RCV may build upon the virtues of brokered conventions in an era where these conventions have become a thing

of the past. RCV simulates the use of multiple rounds of balloting to earn a majority, but these rounds occur efficiently and instantly rather than producing long and protracted fights that once occurred at brokered conventions. In 1924, for example, it took 103 ballots for Democratic Party delegates to agree on a nominee, with the convention's fights overshadowing the nomination (McVeigh, 2001).

Presidential primaries using RCV may also enable a public, crowd-sourcing selection of coalitional nominees without the undemocratic nature of party elites choosing on behalf of party voters. In past conventions, candidates could even bypass the primary process entirely, as Adlai Stevenson and Hubert Humphrey did in 1952 and 1968 respectively, and still win the nomination by shoring up support with party bosses rather than party members (Whitney, 2004). A primary process with RCV, on the other hand, allows voters, rather than only party elites, to express the full scope of their choices to potentially determine a consensus among themselves, increasing the likelihood that the nominee is representative of their will. In this way, RCV has the power to combine the democratic elements of the party primary process post-1968 with the compromise politics of prior conventions.

3.2. RCV Counterfactual in 2016 GOP Presidential Nomination

To understand how RCV could affect the modern presidential primary process, the 2016 Republican primaries can provide an interesting counterfactual example. On 26 May 2016, Donald Trump clinched the Republican presidential nomination after a long and divisive campaign season that started with 17 candidates (Sides, Tesler, & Vavreck, 2018). Trump polarized the party and ultimately earned nearly 60% of pledged delegates with just under 45% of the primary vote and with a favorability rating in his party that at times was just barely more positive than negative (Berg-Andersson, 2016; Silver, 2016). Several of his issue preferences broke with long traditions of the party in areas like foreign policy, trade, and immigration.

This result may have been made possible by the momentum gained from early wins with low pluralities of the vote. Trump benefited from Republican nomination rules which enabled 28 states to hold primaries in 2016 that used the winner-take-all system to allocate at least some delegates from that state or its congressional districts to the plurality winner (Putnam, 2016). Trump did not earn a majority of the votes cast in any of the first 33 states to vote. Of those 33 states, Trump earned 38% of the vote but 47% of delegates. By the time Trump began earning majorities after more than two months of plurality wins, all but three of the candidates had withdrawn from the race (Berg-Andersson, 2016).

As a result, Trump did not need to break out of his proverbial ceiling to rack up delegates and instead could let his base carry him, winning eight of the last 11

winner-take-all primaries (King, 2018). Conversely, RCV may encourage candidates to appeal to voters other than their base by incentivizing candidates to compete for first and later choice votes to attain majority support.

3.2.1. Trump May Have Needed to Gain Support Outside of His Base with RCV Primaries

A poll of Republican voters conducted by FairVote in partnership with the College of William and Mary and YouGov in February 2016 at the time of the Iowa caucuses mirrored the effect of RCV in the Republican primary process by asking respondents for not only their first-choice candidate but also their later rankings (FairVote, 2016). The survey included more than 1,000 respondents, with more than 90% choosing to rank all 11 candidates (FairVote, 2016). FairVote's poll found that while Trump led the field with the most first choice rankings at 37%, he also had the most (22%) last choice rankings of any candidate (FairVote, 2016). In a full RCV simulation with these nationally representative voters, Sen. Ted Cruz attained a narrow majority, beating Trump head-to-head when later choices were redistributed (FairVote, 2016).

More than a dozen other national and other polls provided second choice data and head-to-head comparisons that allowed FairVote to simulate RCV primaries. While Donald Trump consistently was the plurality leader in these polls, he frequently was not the winner after a simulated instant runoff (Richie, 2016). While some believe such polling has misjudged support for Trump in the past, there is no evidence of any systematic polling error in polls of the 2016 Republican primary (Kennedy et al., 2018).

FairVote's analysis in 2016 showed how the use of RCV by Republican voters may have resulted in different outcomes in most early primaries. While Trump won seven of nine regular primaries on Super Tuesday, for example, cementing his status as the Republican frontrunner, FairVote's simulation found Trump could have won as few as two primaries that day if the tally were run down to two candidates with RCV (Douglas, Richie, & Louthen, 2016; "Super Tuesday results 2016," 2016). Trump also likely would have lost to Sen. Marco Rubio in the crucial winner-take-all South Carolina primary that created momentum for him going into the March contests (Douglas et al., 2016). Polls suggest Cruz and Rubio could have won six of the Super Tuesday states, and Gov. John Kasich one (Douglas et al., 2016). As an example, Table 1 below shows the results of a RCV simulation in Georgia that suggests Rubio would have been favored after earning backup support from supporters of Cruz and other eliminated candidates. In actuality, Trump earned a majority of Georgia's delegates with less than 39% of the vote.

These findings indicate that Trump would have had to change his strategy in the 2016 primaries to have won the nomination under RCV rules. Specifically, Trump

Table 1. RCV simulation, Georgia Republican primary, 2016.

Candidate	First round	Second round	Third round
Donald Trump	38.8%	42.6%	48.9%
Marco Rubio	24.4%	30.5%	51.0%
Ted Cruz	23.6%	26.8%	—
All Other Candidates	13.1%	—	—

would have had to campaign outside of his base to consolidate support, even among those who did not rank him first.

While Trump did go on to win the 2016 presidential election in a narrow Electoral College victory while losing the popular vote, Cohen (2018) has noted that other Republican contenders may have been just as successful given the low favorability ratings of Hillary Clinton in 2016. Additionally, winning presidential elections may not be the only focus of a party. A presidential nominee can have an enduring impact on the party through their effect on down-ballot races and its future direction. As a result, RCV may be a way for parties to allow for evolution and change while ensuring a majority of primary voters, rather than a narrow plurality, drive that change.

4. Presidential Primary Reform in Practice

The effect of RCV in presidential primaries is not just a thought experiment. Five state Democratic parties used RCV ballots in presidential primary elections and caucuses in 2020, including Nevada for early voters and Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas, and Wyoming for all voters (Otis, 2020b). Ultimately, over 280,000 voters used RCV ballots for presidential primaries and caucuses in 2020 (Ginsburg, 2020b; McDonald, 2020).

All five RCV states were caucus states prior to 2020, and they added RCV to their nominating contests in response to new rules from the Democratic National Committee and an ongoing desire to create a smooth process for participants. Nina Herbert, the Wyoming Democratic Party communications director, says: "We began working backwards from, 'how can we make it easy for people to vote?' and built the logistics around that" (Otis, 2020b). Notably, the DNC Rules and Bylaws Committee unanimously approved these states' uses of RCV for that reason (Ginsburg, 2019).

Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas, and Wyoming implemented party-run primary elections with RCV ballots instead of caucuses (Otis, 2020b). RCV allowed them to preserve some elements of caucuses, such as allowing voters to 'realign' with a different candidate if their first choice is not viable, while creating a more modern and accessible experience for voters—one that was a particularly fortuitous choice after the onset of COVID-19. Nevada chose to keep traditional caucuses, but turned to RCV to enable early voters, which made up 70% of participants, to have their voices heard with RCV ballots incorporated with the traditional realignments of in-person caucus-goers (Otis,

2020b). Iowa, the nation's first contest, would have done a similar approach if the DNC had allowed voting by telephone (Hunnicutt & Brice, 2019).

4.1. How RCV Reduces 'Wasted Votes'

The results from these first five states to use RCV in presidential primaries and caucuses demonstrate the potential of RCV to engage voters and allocate convention delegates in a democratic, fair, and transparent manner that can make more votes count.

The crowded field of candidates in the 2020 Democratic primary led to 'wasted votes' in non-RCV states in two ways. First, more than three million votes were cast for candidates who had withdrawn from the race prior to Election Day in that state (FairVote, 2020c). Many of these votes came from early and mail voters, who cast their ballot days or weeks ahead of primary day. In Washington, FairVote demonstrated that more than 33% of the primary votes that were cast early went to withdrawn candidates—a rate fully five times higher than the rest of the ballots cast closer to the primary (Otis, 2020a).

Additionally, votes can be wasted when a voter's first choice candidate fails to achieve the 15% threshold required to earn convention delegates from a given jurisdiction. Caucus-goers have the option to realign with a viable campaign, but primary voters simply lose the opportunity to influence delegate allocation. More than 1.4 million voters cast ballots for an active candidate who did not earn a share of their state's delegates (FairVote, 2020c). The combined wasted votes from these two sources represent more than four million votes, as shown in Table 2 below, or 12% of all Democratic primary voters in 2020 (FairVote, 2020c).

In the states that used RCV for all voters, no ballots went to withdrawn candidates or active candidates below the 15% threshold. In Alaska, for example, the only two candidates to earn delegates were Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders. Eleven percent of voters chose a different candidate as their first choice, but over 99% of Alaska Democrats ranked at least one of the two delegate-earners on their ballots. Even voters whose vote did not count for their first choice ultimately had a voice in the delegate allocation between the two finalists (see Table 3 below).

In an RCV election, the only votes that do not count towards the outcome are ballots that do not rank any delegate-earning candidates and the small number that

Table 2. Wasted votes, 2020 Democratic primaries and caucuses.

Category	Votes	Percent of total votes cast
Votes for withdrawn candidates	3,010,892	8.2%
Votes for non-delegate-earning candidates	1,448,695	3.9%
Total Democratic primary and caucus votes cast	36,917,179	—

contain a disqualifying error. It is likely that, with RCV, the vast majority of 'wasted votes' in other states would have counted for delegates.

4.2. Voters' Use of Ranked Choice Ballots

Voters in RCV states overwhelmingly took advantage of the option to rank candidates on their ballots, demonstrating their understanding of RCV and their willingness to engage with a ranked ballot. Even though Joe Biden had become the presumptive nominee prior to the first fully ranked-choice primary election, nearly three out of every four voters ranked multiple candidates (Otis, 2020b).

Ballot use varied slightly between states based on the date of the election. However, a vast majority of voters in each RCV state opted to rank more than one candidate, even when only Joe Biden was actively campaigning, as was the case for Kansas and Hawaii (Otis, 2020b). In addition, the ballot error rate was very low, in line with error rates in other RCV contests. In Nevada, 99.7% of in-person early voters used at least three rankings, and an even higher percentage in the four RCV primary states cast a valid ballot (Ginsburg, 2020c; Otis, 2020b).

5. RCV and the Broader Primary Reform Landscape

5.1. Integrating RCV with Current Party Rules

The Democratic and Republican parties have significant differences in the way that delegates are allocated and, thus, the way that RCV would determine delegate allocation.

5.1.1. Integrating RCV with Democratic Primary Rules

The Democratic Party implemented rules in 1992 to award delegates proportionally to only the candidates that clear a threshold of 15% of the vote (Putnam, 2019). With RCV, all ballots are first counted for the candidate marked as the first choice. If all candidates have crossed

the vote threshold (15% per Democratic Party rules), the count is complete and delegates are awarded proportionally. If the tally for any candidate is below the threshold, the candidate with the fewest votes is dropped and that candidate's ballots are added to the totals of each voter's next ranked choice. The process continues until all remaining candidates have crossed the threshold and delegates are awarded proportionally among the remaining candidates. As a result, the millions of voters who cast ballots for candidates that do not reach this threshold could still have their voice heard with RCV as their vote could be redistributed to their later choices if they used such rankings.

5.1.2. Integrating RCV with Republican Primary Rules

The Republican Party allows states more leeway for setting their own delegate allocation rules, which leads to a patchwork of different systems to award delegates. The nomination process begins with states that use more proportional methods (often with thresholds) and later shifts to states that primarily use winner-take-all methods to allocate all delegates to the winner of the plurality of the primary vote (Uhrmacher, Schaul, & Mellnik, 2016).

For delegates awarded with a threshold, RCV would operate in the same manner that it would in Democratic primary contests. For delegates awarded with winner-take-all methods, an 'instant runoff' would occur if no candidate attains a majority of first choices. Candidates in last place would have their ballots counted for their next choices until two candidates are left. In this way, RCV may allow winner-take-all states to award their delegates to the candidate with the deepest and broadest support among the electorate.

5.2. Voter Confidence in Early and Mail-In Voting with RCV

RCV could allow party officials to continue to expand voter access with early and mail-in voting without fear

Table 3. RCV results in Alaska by final-round preference.

Category	Votes	Percent of total votes cast
Joe Biden as first choice	9,862	49.9%
Bernie Sanders as first choice	7,764	39.3%
Counted for Biden as a later choice	972	4.9%
Counted for Sanders as a later choice	991	5.0%
Did not rank either finalist	170	0.9%
Total ballots cast	19,759	—

of 'wasted votes.' Ballots cast before primary day often end up as 'wasted votes' as presidential candidates may drop out after a voter cast their ballot for them, as was the case with more than three million Democratic votes in 2020 and more than 600,000 Republican votes in 2016 (FairVote, 2020c; Ginsburg, 2020a). With RCV, on the other hand, voters' backup choices could be considered, giving voters confidence that their voice will be heard even if they cast a ballot early. RCV has not been adopted on a wide enough scale to empirically test interactions with early voting, mail voting, or other reforms.

5.3. RCV as a Strong Alternative to Caucuses

Seven states and most territories did not hold state-run primaries in 2020. These states had traditionally held in-person caucuses with Democrats usually allowing participants to 'vote with their feet' and 're-align' to another candidates' group if their preferred candidate is not viable in their precinct.

However, such caucuses are time-intensive for participants, leading to an electorate that is not representative of the overall party and depressed rates of turnout that can be only a third as large as primaries (Unite America Institute, 2020). As a result, many states are moving away from traditional in-person caucuses. Notably, Nevada is already seriously considering converting its early caucus into a primary to allow more voters to participate, while Iowa's first-in-the-nation caucus is facing increasing scrutiny, especially on the Democratic side, given concerns with the messiness of reporting results in 2020 and Iowa's disproportionately white demographics (Appleton, 2021; McCormick, 2021). Both parties are beginning to think about restructuring their nomination calendars for 2024 with a formal review underway by the Democratic National Committee (McCormick, 2021).

While the results of this potential restructuring are far from certain, the rising criticism of caucuses offers an opportunity for the expansion of RCV ballots. As demonstrated in five Democratic contests in 2020, RCV may allow such state parties to hold more accessible contests, including early voting and vote by mail that enable voters to express their alternative preferences through a simpler and more efficient process than in-person caucusing (Otis, 2020b). Additionally, while an RCV primary may not be able to simulate all elements of caucuses, such as the discussion and lobbying that occurs, it can modernize the process and help states avoid the caucus-specific issues that plagued Iowa and Nevada in 2020 (Culliford & Reid, 2020).

6. Conclusion

The modern presidential primary process has evolved over time, and RCV ballots represent a logical next step in the reform process, with potential benefits for both parties and voters. Before the McGovern-Fraser reforms in 1968, the presidential primary process was dominated by party elites and forced compromise between them through conventions that required multiple rounds of balloting. Such brokered conventions often produced coalitional nominees who had majority support across party delegates. These coalitional candidates had desirable attributes for the party and its voters as they were less likely to be polarizing, could unite multiple party factions, and were often more electable. This process was untenable in the modern era, however, as it allowed party delegates to choose their nominee in proverbial 'smoke-filled rooms' without the say of ordinary voters.

While the democratization of the presidential primary process has ensured that all modern party conventions have required only one ballot, RCV may allow for the selection of coalitional candidates by voters. This crowdsourcing of a coalitional nominee occurs through requiring the winning candidate to have broad appeal to voters in both first and later choice preferences. In this sense, RCV may combine the consensus-building of pre-1968 conventions with the modern practice of empowering voters to choose their party's nominees.

Recent presidential primaries illustrate the value of RCV. The 2016 Republican presidential primary process demonstrated that, without RCV, a candidate can win many Republican primaries and capture the nomination with only narrow pluralities. Polling data indicates that with RCV, conversely, Trump may have had to adjust his approach or other Republican candidates with wider appeal could have better competed for second and later choice votes.

In 2020, more than 280,000 Democratic primary voters cast ranked choice ballots in five states, demonstrating how RCV may improve the voting process. In these states, RCV eliminated 'wasted votes' for candidates that dropped out after the voter cast their ballot or did not clear the delegate threshold. Voters also demonstrated enthusiasm for RCV, with most voters utilizing multiple rankings.

While 2020 was a watershed year for RCV in presidential primaries, 2024 offers the opportunity for its further expansion. FairVote anticipates that most, if not all, of the five state Democratic parties that implemented RCV in the 2020 Democratic primaries (Nevada, Alaska, Wyoming, Kansas, and Hawaii) will continue to use RCV ballots in 2024 given their 2020 successes. In addition, Maine will join these states using RCV in presidential primaries as its 2020 law requires the implementation of RCV ballots in both parties' primaries beginning in 2024— although the parties will have to decide whether to make use of the RCV ballot data to be generated by voters (FairVote, 2020b).

Beyond these states, it is quite possible that other state parties, recognizing the efficacy of RCV in 2020 primary contests, will also implement RCV ballots in some form for their primaries or caucuses in 2024.

Should RCV be expanded in presidential primaries, it could both complement existing party rules and work well with other potential future reforms. As one example,

Ethics and Public Policy Center fellow Henry Olsen proposed in the *Washington Post* a de facto national primary two months after several opening contests, with RCV used in that final vote (Olsen, 2020). Democrats concerned about their proportional allocation rules leading to a brokered convention might consider using RCV to enable raising the delegate threshold after the early contests without resulting in more wasted votes. In all of these applications, RCV would positively affect voter and candidate decision-making by eliminating the need for 'strategic' voting while encouraging candidates to campaign to broader coalitions.

RCV ballots indeed could successfully be implemented with all forms of delegate allocation, ensuring more candidates reach the threshold to attain delegates or ensuring more representative nominees in states with winner-take-all rules. RCV could also enable greater confidence in vote-by-mail and early voting that otherwise leads to 'wasted votes' for candidates that drop out before election day. Responding to the need to make caucuses accessible, RCV ballots may allow voters to realign their preferences in a more time-efficient manner with higher turnout. While the days of 'smoke-filled rooms' may be in the past, parties that value consensus have a path available to them in the form of RCV.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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