



# PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

## AMERICANS ON RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN FEDERAL ELECTIONS

**A National Survey of Registered Voters**

**2022**

**APRIL**

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# OVERVIEW

The current method used to elect Members of Congress in most states has faced criticism for allowing candidates to win with less than half of the votes in races with three or more candidates. Critics of this 'first-past-the-post' method have proposed alternative election methods that would ensure candidates can only win if they receive more than half of the votes. The most popular alternative has been ranked-choice voting (RCV), also known as instant run-off voting.

RCV works by allowing voters to select not only their most preferred candidate, but also their second choice, third choice and so on. The winner is then selected by first counting all the first-choice votes and if any candidate gets the majority, he or she is the winner. But if no candidate gets a majority, the candidate with the lowest number of votes is removed from the race and those who gave that candidate their first-choice vote have their votes redirected to their second choice. This process repeats until a candidate has a majority.

This method is currently used in 43 jurisdictions across the US, including Maine and Alaska for congressional and presidential elections. An additional 50 jurisdictions have voted to start using RCV in 2022.

RCV is also used by governments overseas, from London to Australia to Pakistan, as well as by numerous private organizations, including the Academy of Motion Pictures when deciding Oscar winners.

Members of Congress have put forward a bill to require that RCV be used in all Congressional elections: the Fair Representation Act (H.R. 3863) with the lead sponsor being Rep. Don Beyer (D). Bills have also been put forward that would require states that receive federal election grants to make their election systems RCV-compatible.

To bring the American people a voice at the table of the current debate over using RCV, the Program for Public Consultation (PPC) conducted an in-depth on-line survey.

Unlike standard polls that rely on respondents' existing impressions and information, PPC took respondents through a process called a 'policymaking simulation' that seeks to put respondents in the shoes of a policymaker. Respondents:

- are given a briefing on policy options under consideration,
- evaluate strongly stated arguments both for and against each proposal, and
- make their final recommendation.

The content of the process was thoroughly reviewed by experts across the spectrum of opinion on the policy proposals to ensure that the briefing is accurate and balanced and that the arguments are the strongest ones being made by proponents and opponents.

## Fielding of Survey

The survey was conducted online from July 13- September 15, 2021 with a national probability-based sample provided by Nielsen Scarborough from its sample of respondents, who were recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of households. The full sample consisted of 1,296 respondents (margin of error 2.7%).

Responses were weighted by age, income, gender, education, race and geographic region. Benchmarks for weights were obtained from the US Census' Current Populations Survey of Registered Voters. The sample was also weighted by partisan affiliation. Democrats and Republicans identified below include those who lean toward one or the other party.

A further analysis was conducted by dividing the sample six ways, depending on the PVI Cook rating of the respondent's Congressional district. This enabled comparison of respondents who live in very red, somewhat red, leaning red, leaning blue, somewhat blue, and very blue districts.

### KEY FINDINGS

#### **Response to Pro and Con Arguments**

All the pro arguments were found convincing by large and bipartisan majorities. The con arguments were found convincing by less than half overall, but small majorities of Republicans. Among Republicans, substantially larger majorities found the pro arguments convincing than the cons.

#### **Final Recommendation**

A majority of six-in-ten favored using ranked-choice voting in all general federal elections, including a large majority of Democrats and a more modest majority of independents. Republicans were divided, interestingly, though larger majorities found the pro arguments convincing than the con arguments.

## AMERICANS ON RANKED CHOICE VOTING

Respondents were first presented a detailed description of ranked choice voting (RCV). To give respondents an understanding of the context in which RCV has been proposed, they were provided an overview of the problems that proponents say this method is intended to solve, as follows:

***In an election with three candidates or more, the winner may not have anywhere near a majority of votes and might even be opposed by the majority of voters. For example, say Candidate 1 gets 40% of the vote, Candidate 2 gets 30% and Candidate 3 gets 30%. Candidate 1 would win even though 60% voted for someone else.***

***In the current system a third candidate can have a “spoiler effect.” This creates two problems:***

- *Say a voter prefers a third candidate that is an independent or from a third party, but strongly prefers Candidate A from one major party over Candidate B from the other major party. If that voter votes for the third candidate, they will take a vote away from Candidate A. If enough voters do this, it is possible that Candidate A could lose even when the majority would prefer them over Candidate B.*
  
- *Because voters are often afraid that this “spoiler effect” will happen, they do not vote for independent or third-party candidates even if they would like to. This makes it difficult for independent or third-party candidates to get traction.*

They were informed that some states have dealt with these issues by having run-off elections, in which the top two vote-getters compete in another election. They were told a common criticism of run-off elections is that they, “cost a substantial amount of money and tend to have lower voter turnout.”

RCV was then introduced to respondents as an alternative to run-off elections. How RCV works was explained as follows:

*Voters not only select their first choice but can also select their second choice of candidates. Then, if none of the candidates get a majority--like in a runoff--the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated. Voters who favored the eliminated candidate have their votes switched to their second choice (if they made one). The tally is then recalculated and the candidate with a majority of votes is the winner.*

*If there are more than three candidates, the process is repeated until there is one candidate with a majority of votes counted.*

The proposal, they were told, is to use, “this method of ranked choice voting in federal elections with three or more candidates.”

★★★ RANKED CHOICE VOTING BALLOT ★★★				
RANK UP TO 4 CANDIDATES	1 <sup>ST</sup>	2 <sup>ND</sup>	3 <sup>RD</sup>	4 <sup>TH</sup>
MARK NO MORE THAN 1 OVAL IN EACH COLUMN	CHOICE	CHOICE	CHOICE	CHOICE
CANDIDATE <b>1</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
CANDIDATE <b>2</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
CANDIDATE <b>3</b>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
_____ WRITE-IN	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Response to Pro and Con Arguments

Respondents evaluated three pairs of arguments for and against the proposal. All the pro arguments were found convincing by large and bipartisan majorities. The con arguments were found convincing by less than half overall, but small majorities of Republicans.

The first pro argument emphasized how the current system allows for candidates with substantially less than a majority of votes to win and was found convincing by a large bipartisan majority of around seven-in-ten (Republicans 59%, Democrats 80%, independents 64%).

The first con argument stated that this new system would be confusing and could call into doubt the accuracy of the election. Less than half found this convincing (47%), including just 42% of Democrats and 45% of independents, and a majority of Republicans (55%).

The second pro argument rebutted the previous con by noting that RCV has been used in many states and cities, and it has worked perfectly fine. A large bipartisan majority found this convincing (73%, Republicans 65%, Democrats 82%, independents 67%).

The second con argument asserted that it disadvantages voters who have less time to study all the candidates and so only rank their top one or two, thus giving them less say than those who ranked all of the candidates. Under half (45%) found this convincing, including roughly four-in-ten Democrats and independents, and a bare majority of Republicans (52%).

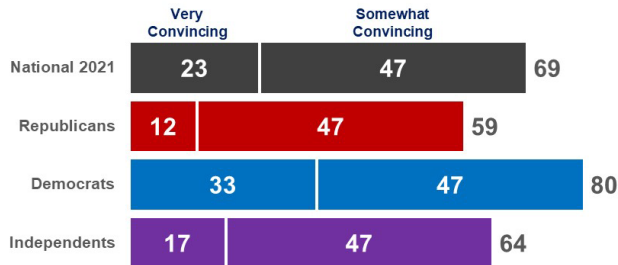
The last pro argument proclaimed that RCV will create more opportunities for a diverse array of candidates who are not career politicians. A bipartisan 72% found this convincing (Republicans 63%, Democrats 79%, independents 71%).

The last con argument stressed that our current system has worked for more than two centuries and even if RCV is implemented it won't really change anything. Just 42% found this convincing, including 39% of Democrats, just 32% of independents, and a slight majority of Republicans (52%).



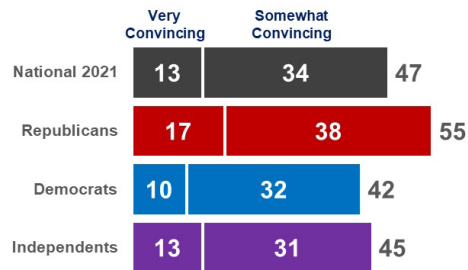
## Argument in Favor

In the current system, when there are three or more candidates, a candidate can win even with substantially less than a majority of votes. In fact, a majority might actually strongly oppose that candidate. Ranked choice voting would ensure that the candidate elected is, in fact, the candidate favored by the largest number of voters. This is consistent with the principles of democracy.



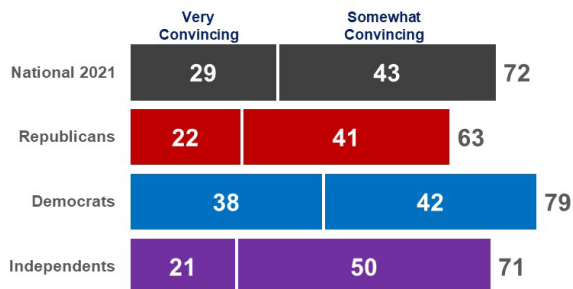
## Argument Against

Explaining this new method to voters will be very challenging. People may get confused, and this might discourage them from voting. There will be more doubts about the accuracy of the outcomes, leading to more demands for recounts. This may weaken the legitimacy of our democratic system. The hardest part of elections should be voters' learning about the candidates, not trying to understand how to cast their ballot and how their votes will be counted.



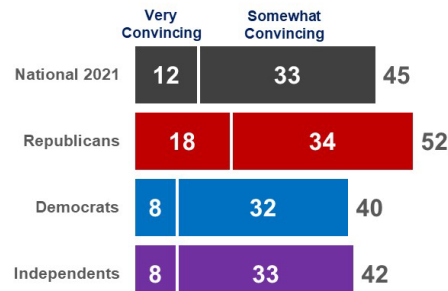
## Argument in Favor

If voters do not want to participate by ranking all the candidates that is their choice, just as people can choose to not participate in any election. Ranked choice voting makes it possible for voters to vote for the candidate they most support, without worrying they'll be throwing away their vote. Voters can feel free to vote for a first-time candidate who is not a career politician committed to a long line of special interests and campaign donors. This enables a more diverse array of candidates to have a chance at winning. This will help revitalize our democracy.



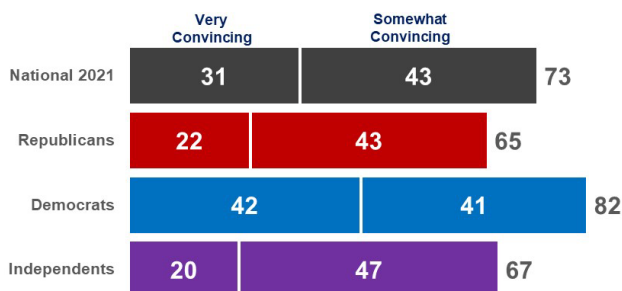
## Argument Against

Ranked choice voting is not really fair to the person who does not have the time to study up on all of the candidates. Maybe they only know their first choice. The person who has the time to study up can rank multiple candidates, effectively voting multiple times. If all of a voter's ranked choices are eliminated before the final round, then they end up having no say in the final vote count. This has been shown to happen about 7% of the time, which is a lot of people. We should stick with the principle that one person gets one vote.



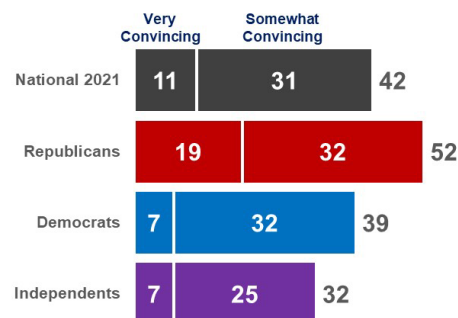
## Argument in Favor

Ranked choice voting has been tried in a number of states and cities. They have found that people are no more likely to make mistakes with RCV as with current elections. Also, polls show that a large majority of people say they understand how it works and support keeping it. Ranking candidates from first to last is simple. The idea that Americans would not be able to understand that is insulting. Furthermore, if someone doesn't want to rank the candidates they don't have to: they can just select their first choice and stop.



## Argument Against

Our system of elections has worked for more than two centuries. This new method will cost the taxpayers extra money and strain our vote counting system. Some cities that put in place ranked choice voting repealed it only a few years later. While in principle this system could help a third party or independent candidate, it is so unlikely that they could actually win that it is really not worth all the trouble.

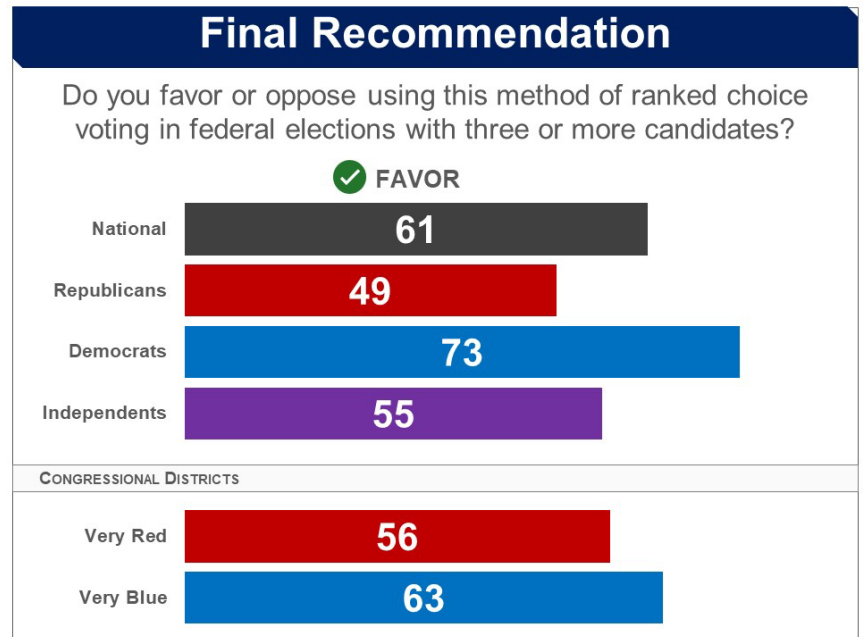


## Final Recommendation

Asked to make their final recommendation, 61% were in favor of using RCV in all general federal elections with three or more candidates, including 73% of Democrats and 55% of independents. Interestingly, despite more Republicans finding the pro arguments convincing than the con arguments, they were statistically divided, with 49% in favor and 50% opposed. Although, if looking only at the numbers who found the arguments very convincing, Republicans are more evenly divided.

Respondents were also asked how acceptable they would find the proposal on a 0-to-10 scale, with “just tolerable” in the middle (5). Sixty percent found it at least tolerable (5-10), including 69% of Democrats. Among Republicans, 51% said it would be at least tolerable, including 39% who rated it acceptable (6-10).

An analysis of voters by type of Congressional district, from very red to very blue districts depending on their recent federal voting behavior. Majorities in all types of districts were in favor (very red 56%, very blue 63%).



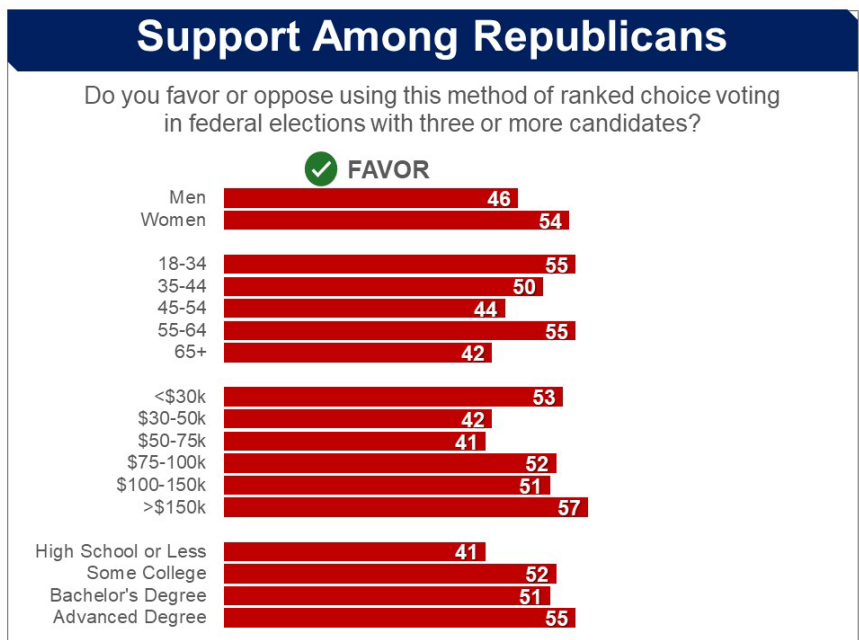
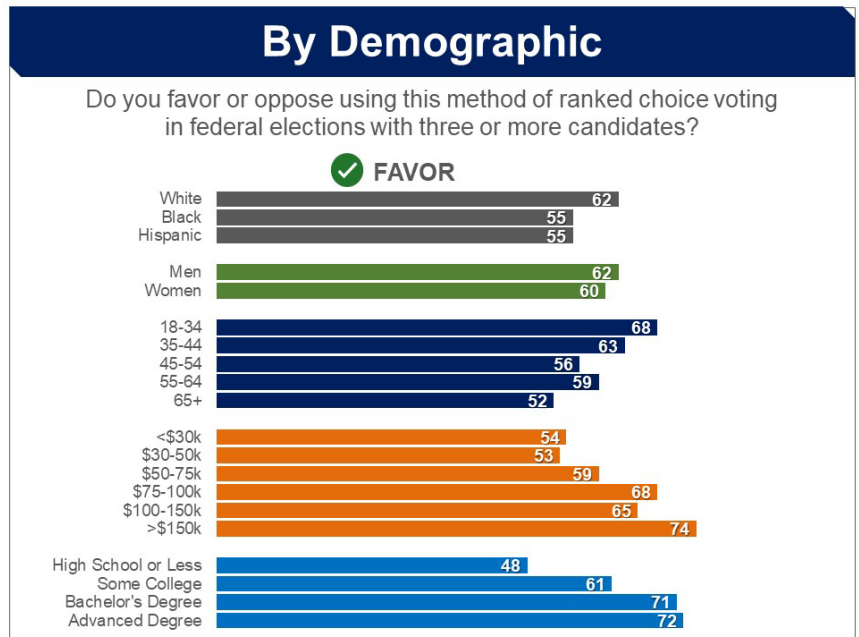
## Demographic Variations

A few variations between demographic groups stood out. The largest difference was between educational attainment groups, with support increasing with educational attainment: those with a high school education were statistically divided (48%), and among those with a college or postgraduate degree a very large majority were in favor (71 and 72%, respectively). Support also decreased with age: Among those aged 18-34, a large majority were in support (68%), while those aged 65 or older were statistically divided (52%).

Because Republicans as a whole were divided, it is useful to see if there are variations between demographic groups.

Three prominent differences stood out: between genders, educational attainment groups and age groups. While less than half of Republican men were in favor (46%), a modest majority of women were (54%).

Support also increased with educational attainment: just four-in-ten Republicans with a high school education were in favor (41%), those with a college degree were divided, and among those with a postgraduate degree a majority favored (55%). Among Republicans 65 or older, just over four-in-ten (42%) favored the proposal, while among those 18-34 a majority of 55% were in favor.





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**A Survey of American Voters**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION**

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

The Program for Public Consultation seeks to improve democratic governance by consulting the citizenry on key public policy issues governments face. It has developed innovative survey methods that simulate the process that policymakers go through— getting a briefing, hearing arguments, dealing with tradeoffs— before coming to their conclusion. It also uses surveys to help find common ground between conflicting parties. The Program for Public Consultation is part of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland.

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