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The future of voting? The Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system explained

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Thesis

**THE FUTURE OF VOTING?
THE TOP FOUR PRIMARY PLUS RANKED CHOICE
VOTING SYSTEM EXPLAINED**

by

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B.A., Boston University, 2023

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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DEDICATION

*To my beloved parents, Esther Paulino and Elvis De Jesus,
and my wonderful siblings, Estheffy and Andrews De Jesus.*

Y para mi bisabuela, Luz María. Te amo, Mamá.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

As dissatisfaction with the single member district has grown in recent years, new electoral systems have gained popularity. In particular, the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system, enacted in 2020 and used in Alaska for the first time in 2022, has received considerable attention. Besides reducing partisanship, the system claims to increase voter turnout and encourage third-party candidates and candidates of color to run on election day. Given its novelty, however, a comprehensive overview of the system and the implementation process is currently lacking. As a result, the purpose of this study is to assess the history, passage, challenges, and current debate around the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system. Using popular opinion data, candidate campaign techniques, archives, and ballot data, I find that voter and candidate reactions to the system varied, that the incumbent advantage was not evident in the 2022 election cycle, and that voting patterns were associated with campaign strategies. States considering the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system can use this thesis as a guide to better understand the system's successes and drawbacks. The study could also serve as a starting point for researchers looking into how the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system can enhance democracy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... v

ABSTRACTvii

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....xi

Introduction 1

SMD 3

Why change the SMD? 4

Prior to the Top Four plus Ranked Choice Voting system..... 6

Passage 9

How the system works..... 14

Candidates’ reactions to the system..... 21

Alaskans’ reaction to the system 24

Ballot Data Analysis 28

A) Campaign strategies and the data 28

House 29

Senate..... 33

B) Incumbent advantage 36

C) Usage of the system and voter turnout in the U.S. Senate and House elections.... 43

Undervotes..... 43

Overvotes 44

Conclusion 47

Appendix A 50

Bibliography..... 53

CURRICULUM VITAE..... 65

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	39
Table 2.	40
Table 3	42
Table 4.	46

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.....	5
Figure 2.....	17
Figure 3.....	18
Figure 4.....	32
Figure 5.....	35
Figure 6.....	37
Figure 7.....	38
Figure 8.....	42

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A

Alaska Public Offices Commission
(APOC) · 14

P

Patinkin Research Strategies
(PRS) · 24

R

Ranked Choice Voting
(RCV) · 7

S

Single Member District
(SMD) · 3

Introduction

Most elections in the United States employ the single member district (SMD) system, where voters choose a single candidate to represent a specific state or geographic district. In recent years, scholars and officials have attempted to reform the SMD, claiming that it is ineffective at reflecting voters' preferences, has increased partisanship, and disadvantages third-party candidates. Alternative electoral methods include, but are not limited to, the Top Two Primary, jungle primaries, Borda count, ranked choice voting, and Condorcet. Among them, the Top Two Primary system has gained particular attention due to its perceived ability to address political extremism and partisanship. Nonetheless, it proved inefficient, as it not only failed to tackle the problems caused by the SMD in places like Washington and California but exacerbated them.

In 2012, the Top Two system's poor performance prompted FairVote, an organization advocating for electoral reform, to look for ways to improve the Top Two so that its goals of greater moderation could be met without the system's flaws. Consequently, the organization devised the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system. In this new system, there is an open primary election where the four candidates with the highest number of primary votes move on to the general election. In the general election, voters use ranked choice voting to select their preferred candidates. As a whole, the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system is supposed to lessen the influence of political extremists, promote substantive debate between candidates, and strengthen democracy. In 2020, the system was approved in Alaska and used for the first time in the Alaska 2022 election.

The purpose of this study is to assess the history, passage, challenges, and current debate around the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system. The first seven sections of this paper are devoted to explaining Alaska's specific grievances against the SMD, the process of getting the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting Initiative on the ballot, and how the new system works. Among other things, I find that many Alaskans are satisfied with the new system, while most candidates have expressed concern about it. Furthermore, opposition to the system is strongest within the Republican Party and seems to have gained traction in recent months, with a new initiative calling for the system's repeal currently being considered.

The following sections used ballot image data from the Alaska Election Division to add to the limited information on voting patterns and the incumbency advantage in the 2022 election. I find that campaign strategies were well reflected in the general election data, implying that voters tended to rank candidates based on how their preferred candidate asked them to. I also find that, while overvoting, undervoting, and lower voter turnout occurred during the U.S. House and Senate elections, these issues were not as serious as opponents feared. More importantly, they appeared to be linked to factors other than voter confusion. Finally, the incumbency advantage seemed to be reduced in the election. Overall, the voting patterns presented here provide valuable information that can help us better understand the system's benefits, drawbacks, performance, and potential success elsewhere. The research could also be used as a starting point for those who wish to investigate how the system might strengthen democracy.

SMD

Until recently, Alaska has used a single member district (SMD) system to elect members of Congress and determine the winners of local and state elections. The SMD is defined as an electoral system that sends a single candidate to a body.¹ Under this system, each voter receives one vote, which he or she may cast for any candidate, and the candidate with the most votes is elected.² Depending on the state, an open, partially open, partially closed, or closed primary is used.³ The latter was administered in Alaska. Closed primaries, sometimes referred to as partisan primaries, restrict primary election voting to only those voters who are registered with recognized political parties.⁴ Approximately thirty states exclusively rely on the SMD to decide elections, and almost all states use a combination of the SMD and other systems depending on the municipality, city, or town (see Figure 1).

Additionally, the SMD employs plurality elections, in which a candidate does not need a majority of votes to be elected as long as they receive more votes than any other candidate.⁵ For example, in 2016, Senator Murkowski won the Alaska Senate seat with 44.3% of the votes.⁶ In the 22nd District, Alaska's candidate Jason Green won with 46.33% of the votes, while his opponent had 43.91% of the votes.⁷ Likewise, in the 32nd District, Louise Stutes won with 43.20% of the votes, while her opponent, Duncan Fields, had 40.24%.⁸

¹ Spencer, "Where Are the Lines Drawn? - All About Redistricting."

² Shepsle, *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior, and Institutions*, 204.

³ Open primaries allow voters to select which party's primary they want to vote in without having to register with a party. Voters in states with partially open primaries can cross party lines, but depending on the state, they may need to change their party registration on Election Day. In contrast, in partially

Why change the SMD?

Despite the SMD's broad usage and entrenchment in American culture, some states have chosen to change or modify it over the years (see Figure 1). Many reasons have been advanced to explain the rise in dissatisfaction with the SMD, including the system's reliance on partisan primaries, plurality elections, strategic voting, disadvantages for minority candidates, and the fomenting of extremism. For Alaskans, however, the fight to change the SMD was particularly motivated by voters' concerns that their preferences would not be reflected on election day and that the system had hampered their ability to have their voices heard.⁹ For example, the state has a history of electing candidates who lack the support of the majority of voters- “in Alaskan Senate races, no winning candidate has received more than 50 percent of the vote in the general election since 2002.”¹⁰

Furthermore, for decades, Alaskans who were not registered voters with the Alaskan Independence Party, Alaska Democratic Party, or Alaska Republican Party were adversely affected by the SMD's closed primary elections.¹¹ According to the State of Alaska Election Division, in 2016, there were 515,912 registered voters, with 85,472 of

closed primaries, state parties can decide whether to allow unaffiliated voters to participate in the primary. Powell, “Understanding Primaries in Your State - All In Together.”

⁴ Powell, “Understanding Primaries in Your State - All In Together.”

⁵ FairVote, “Research and Data on RCV in Practice - FairVote.”

⁶ “Alaska Election Results 2016: Live Maps, Polling, Analysis, Schedule, Complete Updates.”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Alaskans for Better Elections, “Ranked Choice Voting – Alaskans for Better Elections.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

them registered as nonpartisan and 186,207 as undeclared (no party declared).¹² In addition, there were five political groups,¹³ with a combined total of 2,986 registered voters.¹⁴ Despite Alaska's diverse political landscape, only those registered to the three major parties—47 percent of all eligible voters—were able to vote in the election due to closed primary restrictions that excluded independent and unaffiliated voters, as well as those registered with political groups.¹⁵ This lack of representation prompted the Alaskans for Better Elections campaign to propose a new electoral mechanism, namely the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system.¹⁶

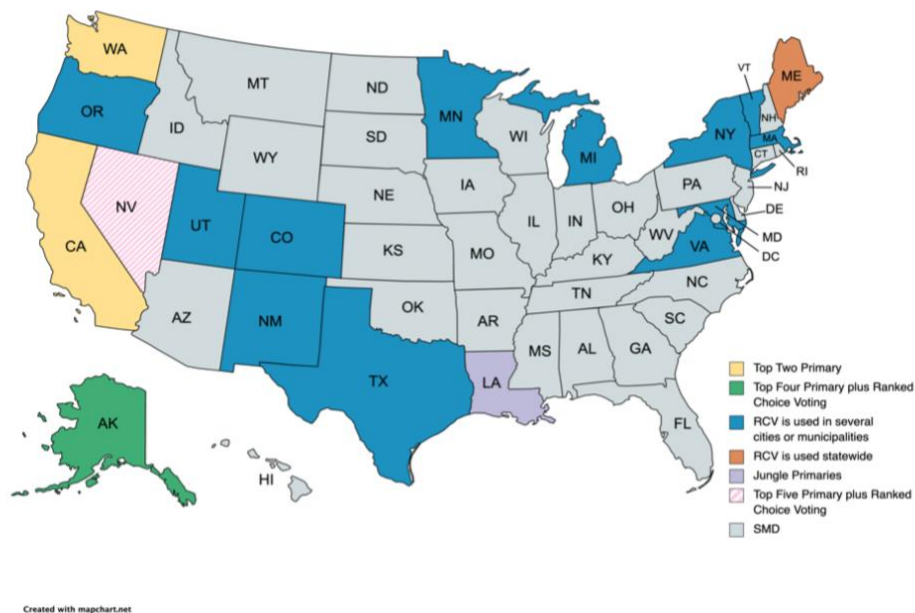


Figure 1: This map illustrates the different electoral systems used by each state. Source: FairVote, “Ranked Choice Voting Information - FairVote.”

¹²“Alaska Voter Registration by Party/Precinct.”

¹³ Today, there are 11 political groups in Alaska. Those groups include the Alaska Constitution Party, Moderate Party of Alaska, Freedom Reform Party, Green Party of Alaska, Owl Party, Alliance Party of Alaska, Alaska Libertarian Party, Progressive Party of Alaska, Patriot’s Party of Alaska, Veterans’ Party of Alaska, and UCES’ Clowns Party.

¹⁴ “Alaska Voter Registration by Party/Precinct.”

¹⁵ Lee, “Why Alaska’s Top-Four Open Primaries Are Better Than Top-Two.” Alaska has the highest percentage of registered undeclared and nonpartisan voters of any state in the country.

¹⁶ Alaskans for Better Elections, “Ranked Choice Voting – Alaskans for Better Elections.”

Prior to the Top Four plus Ranked Choice Voting system

The results of the 2000 presidential election left many voters confused and frustrated with the electoral system, as the election featured a close race, multiple candidates, unreliable voting equipment, and puzzling recount procedures.¹⁷ From 2000 to 2004, the race compelled many states to rethink their own electoral methods, particularly the first-past-the-post system or SMD. During this time, several voting processes, including Borda count, Condorcet, and approval voting, were proposed, but the instant runoff (ranked choice voting) was the most widely adopted.¹⁸ In August 2002, an initiative promoting the instant runoff system was placed on the Alaskan ballot. The ballot measure, known as the “Initiative Implementing Alternative Voting Electoral System,” read as follows:

“This bill enacts preferential voting for state and federal elections, except governor. Voters would rank one to five candidates choices per office. A candidate who receives a majority of first choice votes would be elected. If no candidate gets a majority vote, the candidate with the fewest first choice is defeated. Then, remaining candidates receive the next choice votes of voters whose first-choice candidate was defeated. This process continues until one candidate gets a majority of the combined votes.”¹⁹

On the whole, the initiative was intended to address three major issues. First, unpopular candidates' ability to win elections.²⁰ Second, candidates' failure to reach out to a diverse spectrum of Alaskan voters.²¹ Third, "expensive delayed runoff

¹⁷ Oliver, “Alternative Voting Systems: Facts and Issues, 1.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Alaska Division of Elections, “Initiative Implementing Alternative Voting. Electoral System.”

²⁰ Alaska Division of Elections, “Voter Election Guide. Primary Election.”

²¹ Ibid.

elections...[which typically only had about] 7% voter turnout and a cost of approximately \$100,000."²² Ultimately, despite receiving support from voters and parties such as the Republican Party of Alaska, Alaska Libertarian Party, and Alaskan Independence Party, the initiative failed to pass, garnering only 36% of the vote.²³ Opponents of the system claimed that the instant runoff would violate the Supreme Court's "one person, one vote" principle and that it could result in candidates with the fewest "one votes" winning.²⁴ Moreover, they argued that instant runoff elections were susceptible to partisan primaries. Until 2022, for example, Maine, which uses ranked choice voting (RCV) allowed "only those registered with one of the two parties to vote, even though all taxpayers are paying to hold elections."²⁵ As a result, in 2016, around 39.9% of Maine's Independent voters were unable to vote on election day.²⁶

In response to the defeat of the "Initiative Implementing Alternative Voting Electoral System," the state legislature redirected its focus towards exploring different voting methods that could address the SMD's challenges, including the concerns raised by opponents of the instant runoff. Among those proposed, the Top Two Primary and open primary emerged as popular options, with states like California and Washington already using them. The Top Two "lists all the candidates on the same ballot, regardless of their party ID. The two candidates that receive the most votes in the primary go on to the general election."²⁷ Open primaries, on the other hand, allow voters to vote without

²² Ibid.

²³ Alaska Division of Elections, "State of Alaska Division of Elections - Initiative History."

²⁴ Alaska Division of Elections, "Voter Election Guide. Primary Election."

²⁵ "Nonpartisan Primaries — Unite America."

²⁶ "Maine Voters by Town and Party Registration - Press Herald."

²⁷ Powell, "Understanding Primaries in Your State - All In Together."

registering with a specific party.²⁸

Although initially promising, both systems proved highly ineffective at addressing the issues caused by the SMD. For instance, under the Top Two, there are consistent “Democrat-Democrat and Republican-Republican contests”²⁹ where candidates are just facing their own party members and “many backers of other parties skip the contest.”³⁰ Contrary to popular belief, the system also appeared to promote gridlock³¹ while effectively excluding third-party candidates from federal and state legislative general elections.³² Under open primaries, on the other hand, candidates can win with a plurality of votes, resulting in poor mandates. Furthermore, open primaries permit cross-over voting, enabling voters affiliated with one political party to participate in the primary of another party, which can have the effect of skewing the nomination process and diluting the influence of the party's core constituency.³³

Following the disappointing results of the Top Two Primary and other existing systems, Drew Spencer and Rob Richie proposed the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system in 2012.³⁴ This system aimed to improve the Top Two's goals of greater moderation and higher voter turnout while addressing the previous system's shortcomings. Richie and Spencer envisioned the Top Four Primary to be nearly identical

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Penrose, “Fix the Top Two Primary: Admirable Goals Don’t Justify Indefensible Outcomes.”

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Goldberg, “Column: California’s Top-Two Primary System. How’s It Working out? - Los Angeles Times.”

³² Lee, “Why Alaska’s Top-Four Open Primaries Are Better Than Top-Two,” June 14, 2022.

³³ FairVote, “Open and Closed Primaries - FairVote.”

³⁴ Richie and Spencer work for FairVote, an organization that advocates for electoral reform. Richie is the organization's CEO, and Drew is an author.

to the Top Two. Yet under the Top Four, four candidates would advance to the general election, which would use a "ranked choice voting system designed to accommodate more candidates."³⁵ The system, as projected by FairVote, Richie, and Spencer, would prevent split votes, give third-party candidates better chances, increase voter turnout, and address voting rights issues.³⁶

Passage

In 2020, Alaska's Ballot Measure 2 was officially enacted, making Alaska the first state ever to adopt a Top Four Primary plus Top Ranked Choice Voting system. The "Better Elections Initiative" was proposed by Alaskans for Better Elections, "a nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to providing public education and research about how Alaska-style elections work."³⁷ In 2019, Alaskans for Better Elections used an indirectly initiated state statute that went first to the state legislature and then to the ballot.³⁸ Alaska requires that an initiative get 28,368 valid signatures in 365 days or "10 percent of those who voted in the preceding general election."³⁹ On October 23rd, 2019, the nonprofit began collecting signatures, and by January 15th, 2020, they had "turned in over 41,000 signatures exceeding the 28,368" required.⁴⁰

Once the signatures were gathered, the Division of Elections verified the signers. By March 9th, 2020, the Lt. Governor, Kevin Meyer, notified the Alaskan Initiative

³⁵ Spencer and Richie, "Fixing-Top-Two-in-California"

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Alaskans for Better Elections, "Ranked Choice Voting – Alaskans for Better Elections."

³⁸ "Indirect Initiated State Statute - Ballotpedia."

³⁹ Alaska Division of Elections, "The Initiative and Referendum Process."

⁴⁰ "Alaskans for Better Elections Turns in Signatures for Certification."

Committee that the petition was filed correctly.⁴¹ After this, the Lt. Governor, “with the assistance of the attorney general, prepared a ballot title and proposition.”⁴² The initiative known as "An Act Replacing the Political Party Primary with an Open Primary System and Ranked-Choice General Election, and Requiring Additional Campaign Finance Disclosures" illustrated the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system as follows:

“This act would get rid of the party primary system, and political parties would no longer select their candidates to appear on the general election ballot. Instead, this act would create an open nonpartisan primary where all candidates would appear on one ballot. Candidates could choose to have a political party preference listed next to their name or be listed as “undeclared” or “nonpartisan.” The four candidates with the most votes in the primary election would have their names placed on the general election ballot. This act would establish ranked choice voting for the general election. Voters would have the option to “rank” candidates in order of choice.”⁴³

Once the ballot title and proposition were approved in compliance with AS 15.80.005, the Division of Election was required to put the ballot on “whatever statewide election occurred 120 days after adjournment of the Legislature.”⁴⁴ Since the 2020 Legislative Session adjourned on May 19, 2020, the initiative was certified to appear on the ballot on November 3rd, 2020, where a simple majority was needed to enact the ballot measure. During this time, the House State Affairs Standing Committee held

⁴¹ Alaska Division of Elections, “Public Information Packet on Initiatives.”

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Alaska Division of Elections, “Petitions and Ballot Measures - Ballot Measure No. 2.”

⁴⁴ Alaska State Legislature Legislative Council, “Alaska State Legislature Legislative Council.”

several hearings and heard testimony from supporters, such as Shea Siegert, Campaign Manager & Spokesperson for Alaskans for Better Elections, and opponents, such as Glenn Clary, Chair of the Alaska Republican Party. The hearings allowed for presentations throughout the year and were aimed to "offer a forum [for the] initiative."⁴⁵

The Office of the Lieutenant Governor also held hearings in all four Alaska districts between September 21st and September 24th, 2020, per Alaska State Statute 15.45.195.⁴⁶ Each hearing included a statement of support, followed by a statement of opposition.⁴⁷ "The public [was] then allowed to call in for the remainder of the hearing to ask questions. Members from the support and opposition side of each ballot measure were available to field questions."⁴⁸

In November of 2020, Alaskans narrowly approved the change to their election rules, with 50.55 percent in favor and 49.95 against.⁴⁹ The Democratic Party and Alaskan legislators such as Cathy Giessel, Lesil McGuire, and Bruce Botelho, to name a few, were among those supporting the bill.⁵⁰ Opponents included the GOP and politicians like former US Senator Mark Begich and former Alaska Governor Sean Parnell.⁵¹ The Top Four Primary plus Top Ranked Choice Voting system was officially set to debut in 2022.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ FindLaw, "Alaska Statutes Title 15. Elections § 15.45.195 | FindLaw."

⁴⁷ State of Alaska Online Public Notices, "2020 General Election Ballot Measure #2 - Alaska's Better Elections Initiative - Initiative Hearing Information."

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Alaska Division of Elections."

⁵⁰ Alaskans for Better Elections, "Supporters – Alaskans for Better Elections."

⁵¹ Begich and Parnell, "Ballot Measure No. 2 Statement in Opposition."

As described by Alaskans for Better Elections, the system would not only guarantee that the winner had majority support (more than 50%). Over 300,000 voters in Alaska (more than half the state) who do not identify with the Democratic or Republican parties would also be able to vote in the primary elections.⁵² Moreover, “there would be more competition than in a two-candidate race,” giving third-party candidates better prospects while allowing voters to express their preferences.⁵³

During hearings, supporters also stated that the system would have unintended benefits, such as making voting by mail easier. “The Division of Elections has said the major barrier [to vote by mail] is sending two ballots to all unaffiliated, with RCV there would be just one ballot.”⁵⁴ Additionally, since the system gives voters four choices rather than just having candidates from the two major parties, partisan primaries would be a zero-sum game.⁵⁵ According to Scott Kendall, Attorney for Alaskans for Better Elections, this allows “redistricting [to revert] back to what it should be, which is simply a rebalancing of populations.”⁵⁶

Nevertheless, despite its benefits, the electoral system's ratification was not without its difficulties. Throughout their campaign, Alaskans for Better Elections faced “opposition from lawmakers.”⁵⁷ Particularly, Republican legislators who claim that “this initiative [was] a plan by progressives to take control of Alaska’s political system.”⁵⁸

⁵² Alaskans for Better Elections, “Ranked Choice Voting – Alaskans for Better Elections.”

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Unite America, “Alaskans for Better Elections.”

⁵⁸ Brown, “Ranked-Choice Ballot Initiative Would Destroy Alaska’s Voting System.”

Opponents contended that the system favored white, affluent voters, widened differences in voter turnout, did not diminish polarization, and that the initiative's funding was suspect as it was mostly supported by wealthy individuals from out of state.⁵⁹ The latter was especially controversial as Alaska's Ballot Measure 2 also addressed Dark Money. The initiative called for greater transparency by requiring that "both donors and recipients disclose contributions greater than \$2,000 within 24 hours and any group receiving more than 50% of its funding from outside Alaska include that information on a disclaimer on all communications."⁶⁰

At the House State Affairs Standing Committee hearings, detractors also briefly mentioned that the "initiative conflicts with the Alaska State Constitution."⁶¹ For instance, Kay Brown, an election expert, noted that the "initiative's requirement that the lieutenant governor must run as a team with the gubernatorial candidate in the primary directly conflicts" with the law.⁶² According to Brown, Article III, Section 8, stipulates that the lieutenant governor must be nominated in the same manner as other candidates for elective offices, which includes running "in a stand-alone party primary."⁶³ In addition to the potential constitutional issues, Brown claimed that the Initiative included several unjustified and unclear provisions. For example, Ballot Measure 2 creates changes in the "appointment procedures for poll watchers, precinct counting boards, and questioned ballot review boards, and the Alaska Public Offices Commission (APOC)."⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Defend Alaska Elections, "Defend Elections, Vote No on 2."

⁶⁰ Alaskans for Better Elections, "Dark Money – Alaskans for Better Elections," July 8, 2022.

⁶¹ Alaska State Legislature Legislative Council, "Alaska State Legislature Legislative Council."

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

In total, the initiative made “17 changes to existing state statutes and 75 section amendments to Alaska election laws,” most of which have been contested by opponents.⁶⁵

Overall, the Alaskans for Better Elections campaign was a success. Despite passing by a slim margin, it garnered bipartisan support and captured the attention of many Alaskans.⁶⁶ However, the campaign encountered several challenges both before and following its passage, which the campaign could have averted had voters and legislators been better informed.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, the campaign's educational efforts were limited, and Alaskans were unaware of the many changes brought forth by the system.

How the system works

The Top Four Primary plus Top Ranked Choice system was first used in the Alaska Open Primary in 2022. All candidates were listed on the same ballot as others competing in the same election cycle (see Figure 2). The only thing that differed for voters was the selection of candidates available for their district's State Senate and House races. In the general election, the ballot typically featured the top four candidates or in less competitive districts, sometimes three or two.

In the U.S. Senate race, for example, nineteen candidates were on the primary ballot, with the majority of them belonging to the Republican Party and the remainder to the Democratic Party, Alaska Libertarian Party and Alaskan Independence Party. Some

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Wilson, “What Is Ranked Choice Voting & Arguments for and Against.”

⁶⁷ Lee, “How Community Groups Can Shape Alaska’s Success on Ranked Choice Voting.”

nonpartisan candidates also appeared.⁶⁸ The top four vote-getters, in this case Republican Lisa Murkowski, Democrat Patricia Chesbro, Republican Kelly Tshibaka, and Republican Buzz Kelley, made it to the general election (see Figure 3).⁶⁹ Murkowski earned 45% of the votes, while Tshibaka received 38.6%, Chesbro received 6.8%, and Kelley received 2.2%, for a total of 92.5 percent of the votes cast.⁷⁰

On September 13th, 2022, a couple of weeks after the primary election, Buzz Kelley dropped out of the race.⁷¹ On November 23rd, the election results showed that Senator Murkowski had received the most first-place votes, but none of the candidates had received more than the 50 percent of votes required to win.⁷² Under ranked choice voting a winner must secure 50 percent of the vote.⁷³ If no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the first-choice votes, instant runoffs will be held in rounds. The contestant with the fewest votes will be eliminated at the end of each round.⁷⁴ If voters ranked that candidate first, their vote will be cast for the candidate who is ranked second on their ballot. This process will be repeated until only two candidates remain.⁷⁵

Accordingly, “15 days after Election Day — Alaskan election officials tabulated the next round of votes once all ballots were counted.”⁷⁶ Chesbro was eliminated in the instant runoff, and the majority of voters who ranked her first put Murkowski second —

⁶⁸ The Associated Press, “Murkowski and Her Trump-Backed Challenger Advance in Alaska Senate Race.”

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Vakil, “Alaska Senate Candidate Drops out of Race.”

⁷² Cochran, “Lisa Murkowski Wins Re-Election in Alaska, Beating a Trump-Backed Rival.”

⁷³ NYC Civic Engagement Commission, “Ranked Choice Voting.”

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Cochran, “Lisa Murkowski Wins Re-Election in Alaska, Beating a Trump-Backed Rival.”

"more than 20,500 ranked Ms. Murkowski [second], while just over 2,200 chose Ms. Tshibaka."⁷⁷ Subsequently, Murkowski won with 53.7% of the vote, while Tshibaka received 46.3%.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

SAMPLE BALLOT



State of Alaska Official Ballot
August 16, 2022
Primary Election

House District 1

590

PLEASE NOTE: A candidate's designated affiliation does not imply that the candidate is nominated or endorsed by the political party or group or that the party or group approves of or associates with that candidate, but only that the candidate is registered as affiliated with the party or group.

Primary Election - Voting Instructions


- To vote, completely fill in the oval to the right of your choice, like this:
- Vote for one candidate only.
- Use a blue or black ink pen to mark your ballot. NO RED INK.
- If you make a mistake, ask for a new ballot.

United States Senator (Vote for one)	United States Representative (Vote for one)	Governor / Lt. Governor (Vote for one)
Blachford, Edgar <small>(Registered Democrat)</small>	Armstrong, Jay R. <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	Dunleavy, Mike / Dahstrom, Nancy <small>(Registered Republican)</small>
Chesbro, Patricia R. <small>(Registered Democrat)</small>	Begich, Nick <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	Gara, Las / Cook, Jessica A. <small>(Registered Democrat)</small>
Darden, Dave H. <small>(Unaffiliated)</small>	Bretford, Gregg S. <small>(Unaffiliated)</small>	Haag, David S. / Coleman, S. Waynette <small>(Registered Republican)</small>
Darden, Dustin T. <small>(Registered AK Independence)</small>	Bye, Chris <small>(Registered Libertarian)</small>	Howe, John Wayne / Wyatt, Shellie <small>(Registered AK Independence)</small>
Gungurstein, Shoshana <small>(Nonpartisan)</small>	Dutchess, Lady Donna <small>(Nonpartisan)</small>	Kurka, Christopher / Husper, Paul <small>(Registered Republican)</small>
Hill, Sidney "Sid" <small>(Nonpartisan)</small>	Heintz, Ted <small>(Nonpartisan)</small>	Nemec, William J. II / Ostrom, Ronnie D. <small>(Unaffiliated)</small>
Keller, Jeremy <small>(Nonpartisan)</small>	Hughes, David <small>(Unaffiliated)</small>	Pierce, Charlie / Grunwald, Edie <small>(Registered Republican)</small>
Kelley, Buzz A. <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	LeBlanc, Davis L. Jr. <small>(Unaffiliated)</small>	Tolen, William S. "Billy" / Rainbolt, Shirley A. <small>(Registered Libertarian)</small>
Lee, Hahnke <small>(Unaffiliated)</small>	Lyons, Robert "Bob" <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	Walden, Bruce / Lange, Tanya <small>(Registered Republican)</small>
Merrill, Samuel A. "Al" <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	Mettler, Sherry M. <small>(Unaffiliated)</small>	Walker, Bill / Drygas, Heidi <small>(Nonpartisan)</small>
Munkowaki, Lisa <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	Myers, J.R. <small>(Registered Libertarian)</small>	
Nolin, Pat L. <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	Ornelas, Robert <small>(Registered AK Independence)</small>	
Schless, John <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	Palm, Sarah <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	
Shorky, Kendall L. <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	Pellegrini, Silvio E. <small>(Unaffiliated)</small>	
Speights, Karl W. <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	Peltola, Mary S. <small>(Registered Democrat)</small>	
Stephens, Joe T. <small>(Registered AK Independence)</small>	Phelps, Andrew H. <small>(Nonpartisan)</small>	
Taylor, Ivan R. <small>(Registered Democrat)</small>	Purham, Randy <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	
Thorne, Sean M. <small>(Registered Libertarian)</small>	Snowden, Brad <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	
Tahibaka, Kelly C. <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	Strizak, Sherry A. <small>(Unaffiliated)</small>	
	Sweeney, Tara M. <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	
	Williams, Denise A. <small>(Registered Republican)</small>	
	Wilson, Tremayne <small>(Nonpartisan)</small>	
		State Senator District A (Vote for one)
		Sheldon, Mike <small>(Registered Republican)</small>
		Stedman, Bert K. <small>(Registered Republican)</small>
		State Representative District 1 (Vote for one)
		Meggitt, Shevaun A. <small>(Nonpartisan)</small>
		Bynum, Jeremy T. <small>(Registered Republican)</small>
		Ortiz, Daniel H. "Dan" <small>(Nonpartisan)</small>

Continue Voting on Next Side

Figure 2: Sample Ballot for the 2022 Alaskan House District 1 Primary Election. Ballot from "Alaska Division of Elections - Sample Ballots."

SAMPLE BALLOT



State of Alaska Official Ballot
November 8, 2022
General Election


Federal Only

701

PLEASE NOTE: A candidate's designated affiliation does not imply that the candidate is nominated or endorsed by the political party or group or that the party or group approves of or associates with that candidate, but only that the candidate is registered as affiliated with the party or group.

Instructions:

- Do not use red ink or a pencil to mark your ballot.
- Rank as many or as few candidates as you like.
- Completely fill in no more than one oval for each candidate or column.
- For your 1st choice, fill in the oval in the 1st choice column.
- For your 2nd choice, fill in the oval in the 2nd choice column.
- For your 3rd choice, fill in the oval in the 3rd choice column, and so on.
- If you make a mistake, you can ask for a new ballot.



United States Senator					
	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
Chesbro, Patricia R. (Registered Democrat)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Kelley, Buzz A. (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Murkowski, Lisa (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tshibaka, Kelly C. (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>	<input 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"/>	<input type="radio"/>

United States Representative					
	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
Begich, Nick (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Bye, Chris (Registered Libertarian)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Palin, Sarah (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Peltola, Mary S. (Registered Democrat)	<input type="radio"/>	<input 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"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 3: Sample Ballot for the 2022 Alaskan Federal Election. Ballot from “Alaska Division of Elections - Sample Ballots.”

In the U.S. House primary, there were twenty-two candidates on the ballot. The top four vote-getters were Democrat Mary Peltola, Republican Sarah Palin, Republican Nick Begich, and Libertarian Chris Bye. During the primary, Peltola earned 37% of the votes, Palin received 30%, Begich earned 26%, and Bye received 0.6% for a total of 93.6% of the votes cast.⁷⁹ Similarly to the Senate race, an instant runoff was triggered during the House general election when no candidate obtained a majority of the votes by November 23rd, 15 days after Election Day.⁸⁰ Bye was defeated in the first round, while Begich was eliminated in the second. Despite Palin winning a majority of Begich's second-choice votes, Peltola won "with 136,893 votes after two rounds of tabulation, securing 54.9 percent of the vote."⁸¹

These results follow Peltola's victory in the August special election, in which Palin and Begich split the conservative vote, making Peltola the "first Alaska Native to serve in the House and the first woman to hold the seat."⁸² Al Gross was one of four candidates, along with Peltola, Begich, and Palin, who appeared on the August ballot but dropped out⁸³ before the general election.⁸⁴ Gross explained that, while the system was expected to benefit third-party candidates, it was "just too hard to run as a nonpartisan candidate" under ranked choice voting.⁸⁵ In the special election, Peltola earned 51.5

⁷⁹ New Times, "Alaska At-Large Congressional District Primary Election Results 2022."

⁸⁰ Cochrane, "Mary Peltola Wins Bid to Serve Full Term in the House for Alaska."

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Bohrer, "Peltola Beats Palin, Wins Alaska House Special Election."

⁸³ Rogers and Cohen, "Independent Candidate Al Gross Drops out of Alaska Special House Race." Under Alaska law, Republican Tara Sweeney could have replaced Al Gross, but his announcement came too late for the law to apply.

⁸⁴ "Alaska Division of Elections," n.d.

⁸⁵ Rogers and Cohen, "Independent Candidate Al Gross Drops out of Alaska Special House Race."

percent of the vote, while Palin received 48.5 percent.⁸⁶ Finally, Begich was eliminated in the runoff with 27.8 percent of the vote.⁸⁷

In 2022, the gubernatorial election also employed the Top Four plus Ranked Choice system. Republican Mike Dunleavy, Democrat Les Gara, Independent Bill Walker, and Republican Charlie Pierce were the four candidates who advanced to the general election.⁸⁸ Dunleavy won the first round with 50.3 percent of the vote, thereby avoiding an instant runoff.⁸⁹

Most legislative races featured only one or two candidates on the ballot, but voters were still required to use ranked choice voting and could rank a write-in candidate. The majority of the candidates in the State Senate general election won during the first round of voting. The only exceptions were Jesse Bjorkman, Cathy Giessel, and David Wilson, who won districts D, E, and N after two rounds of voting, respectively.⁹⁰ Similarly, the majority of the 40 candidates in the State House races were elected in the first round. Only Julie Coulombe of House District 11, Thomas McKay of House District 15, Cliff Groh of House District 18, Kevin McCabe of House District 30, Maxine Dibert of House District 31, and Frank Tomaszewski of House District 34 had to go through two rounds of voting to win.⁹¹ House District 28 candidate Jesse Sumner had to go through three rounds.⁹² Notable state legislative races included “those in 11th, 15th, and 18th

⁸⁶ Gedon, “Democrat Peltola Beats Palin in Alaska Special Election Upset.”

⁸⁷ Norwood, “Mary Peltola Wins Alaska Special Election to Become First Alaska Native in Congress,” September 1, 2022.

⁸⁸ “Alaska Governor Primary Election Results.”

⁸⁹ “Alaska Governor Election Results 2022: Live Map | Midterm Races by County.”

⁹⁰ Samii, “Alaska 2022 Ranked Choice Voting Results.”

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

State House Districts,” where candidates achieved come-from-behind victories or won despite trailing another candidate.⁹³ This often occurs when two similar candidates split the vote.

Candidates’ reactions to the system

Within and outside of political parties, Alaskan candidates' reactions to the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting have been varied, with some showing support for the system while others remained skeptical. Among those who have voiced their approval is Senator Lisa Murkowski. During her campaign, Murkowski expressed excitement for the system's potential to foster a more moderate approach to legislating and praised the flexibility it gave voters.⁹⁴ Chesbro and Peltola also showed comparable enthusiasm, emphasizing the system’s ability to empower voters and amplify their voices on election day.⁹⁵ After her victory, Peltola claimed that the method attracted "more middle-of-the-road candidates," which could lead to greater nonpartisanship in all offices, including the state legislature.⁹⁶ Peltola, who called herself a "big fan of ranked-choice voting," also frequently argued that the system was not as problematic as its detractors claimed and that voters made the correct decision in adopting it.⁹⁷

Despite the candidates' shared support for the system, it became clear during and after the elections that all three had strong incentives to endorse it. Inspired by Peltola's

⁹³ Otis, “Alaska’s Ranked Choice Voting Winners Earn Strong Mandates and Reflect the State’s Political Diversity.”

⁹⁴ Botello, “Murkowski Weighs in on Issues.”

⁹⁵ Brown, “OPINION: As Our State Melts and Burns, Murkowski Is Gung-Ho on Fossil Fuels.”

⁹⁶ “Mary Peltola (D) Wins Re-Election In Alaska House Race.”

⁹⁷ Ibid.

special election victory, for instance, Chesbro believed that ranked choice voting would make it easier for a Democrat like her to win.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Murkowski's support for the system appeared to be influenced by her 2021 vote to convict former President Donald Trump, which put her at risk of losing the Republican Party's primary. Despite facing a potential defeat,⁹⁹ Murkowski was able to advance to the general election thanks to the Top Four, which prompted her to appeal to a wide range of voters.¹⁰⁰ Her success in attracting more Democratic votes than her opponent Tshibaka underscores the incentives of the system for someone like her¹⁰¹ and Peltola, who also benefited from the system as the most moderate candidate on the general election ballot.¹⁰²

In contrast, candidates such as Mike Dunleavy and Les Gara expressed reservations about the system, primarily due to its complexity. "The people of Alaska will really have to understand it," Dunleavy said of the system.¹⁰³ The Top Four plus Ranked Choice Voting system, which includes a significant number of candidates on the ballot, has been criticized for being too complicated for Alaskans to understand. For example, on July 11, 2022, Les Gara went on a Twitter rant, releasing an email he made to the Division of Elections in which he expressed fear that in the August primary, "people will have their votes disqualified for voting for more than one candidate."¹⁰⁴ Because the

⁹⁸ "Voting | Chesbroforalaska."

⁹⁹ Ruskin, "Murkowski, Who Voted Against Trump, Is Likely Helped By Alaska's New Primary System."

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² R Street Institute, "Ranked Choice Voting Is Working in Alaska - R Street Institute."

¹⁰³ "Governor Dunleavy Talks PFD, Biden and Ranked-Choice Voting."

¹⁰⁴ Gara, "Gara Took to Twitter to Express His Concern That 'People Will Have Their Votes Disqualified for Voting for More than One Candidate' in the August Primary."

system demands that only one be chosen in the primary, Gara was concerned that numerous candidates might be selected if voters believed the primary also employed ranked choice voting. Despite several education programs being conducted both before and after the Alaska general election, Dunleavy and Gara remained skeptical of its effectiveness.¹⁰⁵ Their reluctance may have been influenced by the relatively limited scope and efficacy of the education initiatives at the time.¹⁰⁶

Overall, however, the most significant and vocal opposition to ranked choice voting came from those who viewed it as a potential threat to their interests rather than an issue for the voters themselves. For instance, after his defeat, gubernatorial candidate Charlie Pierce criticized the system and questioned the legitimacy of its passage¹⁰⁷ despite an "audit conducted by the Division of Elections [confirming] its passage."¹⁰⁸ Kelly Tshibaka also expressed her dissatisfaction with the system both during and after the 2022 Senate election. On multiple occasions, she referred to the system as an "incumbent-protection program."¹⁰⁹ She also backed up the claims made by journalists at Project Veritas, an American far-right activist group, that the Top Four Primary plus Top Ranked Choice Voting system was designed to make Murkowski win.¹¹⁰ Murkowski's campaign organizers allegedly indicated in a dubious video published by the activist group that when "working on Ballot Measure 2 and voting for Ballot Measure 2, [they

¹⁰⁵ "Governor Dunleavy Talks PFD, Biden and Ranked-Choice Voting," May 12, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Refer to page 16.

¹⁰⁷ Associated Press, "Dunleavy Defends Record in Governor Debate With Gara, Walker."

¹⁰⁸ Associated Press, "Dunleavy Defends Record in Governor Debate With Gara, Walker," October 20, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Tshibaka, "Kelly Tshibaka Statement on Ranked Choice Election Results."

¹¹⁰ Tshibaka, "CONFIRMED: Ranked Choice Voting Scheme Designed Specifically for Murkowski."

had] Sen. Murkowski in mind the whole time."¹¹¹

Similarly, candidate Palin argued that the system would benefit incumbents and that ranked choice voting would deny voters the right to vote because it was too complicated.¹¹² On repeated occasions, Palin advocated for the repeal of the system, for Alaska to return to the SMD, and for ballots to be hand-counted rather than machine-counted.¹¹³ Along with Palin, Begich also strongly criticized the system, stating that it resulted in many questions that should not have been asked by voters "going into the polling booths."¹¹⁴ Despite stressing the importance of adhering to the system's norms throughout much of his campaign, Begich's stance on the issue shifted during the November election.¹¹⁵

Alaskans' reaction to the system

After the November election, Patinkin Research Strategies (PRS), a premier public opinion research and strategic consulting firm, conducted a poll in Alaska. "The poll was commissioned by Alaskans for Better Elections and was in the field from November 9th-13th."¹¹⁶ The survey comprised 800 participants, all of whom were registered Alaska voters who participated in the general election. Of those surveyed

¹¹¹ Downing, "Project Veritas Blows Open Ballot Measure 2 Link to Lisa: 'We Had Sen. Murkowski in Mind the Whole Time'"

¹¹² Sarah for Alaska, "Sarah for Alaska."

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Vitali, Talbot, and Bowman, "Begich Says He Will Accept Results, but Criticizes Alaska's Ranked Choice 'Confusion.'"

¹¹⁵ According to Nick Begich, Palin's appeal to voters to refrain from ranking other candidates in the Special Election harmed the Republican Party.

¹¹⁶ Moser, "Polling Shows Alaskan Voters Received Clear Instructions on the System, Found Ranking to Be 'Simple,' and Saw More Competitive Races."

29.8% were Republicans, 16.2% Democrats, 16.8% were unaffiliated and 33.1% were undeclared.

According to the survey, approximately 92% of respondents received some form of education on how to use ranked choice voting, with the majority of voters getting their information from the mail, radio commercials, television ads, social media, and events.¹¹⁷ The survey also revealed that a majority of voters, 79%, thought that ranked choice voting was “simple.”¹¹⁸ Of those who found it simple, “59% said it was “very simple” and 20% said it was “somewhat simple.” Only 9% said it was “very difficult.”¹¹⁹ Outside of the booth, 60% of voters felt that “the state and local elections [in 2022] were more competitive compared to previous years.”¹²⁰ A separate survey also found that roughly 62% of Alaskans supported ranked choice voting.¹²¹

Despite these promising results some voters have recently expressed a desire to return to the SMD.¹²² For instance, Art Mathias, who founded Alaskans for Honest Elections, is pushing for an initiative to repeal ranked choice voting.¹²³ As written in the initiative:

“This act would get rid of the Open Primary system and Ranked Choice General Election. In place of that, this act would create a Political Party Primary and General Election process that is easily understood. The political parties of Alaska will select their candidate through a primary process. Voters would vote for their preferred candidate,

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Moser, “Polling Shows Alaskan Voters Understand Ranked Choice Voting.”

¹²² Moser, “Polling Shows Alaskan Voters Understand Ranked Choice Voting.”

¹²³ Palsha, ““They Experienced the Horrible Animosity That This Created’: New Group Looks to Get Rid of Ranked-Choice...”

and then each of the preferred candidates from each registered political party would appear on the general ballot.”¹²⁴

On January 20th, 2023, Lt Governor Nancy Dahlstrom approved an application for the initiative, granting the campaign a year to collect just under 36,200 signatures.¹²⁵ If successful, the state is expected to verify the signatures in the fall of 2023 and place the initiative on the 2024 general election ballot.¹²⁶ Palin, who Mathias describes as the national spokesperson for Alaskans for Honest Elections, is one of the ballot's most popular supporters.¹²⁷ She believes a repeal is possible and that the initiative will "lead the rest of the nation in getting back to fair, free, and clear elections."¹²⁸

In the same year, Tshibaka founded an organization called Preserve Democracy, which shares similar ideals and also seeks to promote transparent elections. According to the group, RCV results in negative campaigning, lower voter turnout, more extreme candidates winning, and distrust of the electoral process. In order to rectify these issues, Preserve Democracy seeks to “combat RCV in Alaska and other states considering implementing RCV state-wide by producing evidence showing the undemocratic effects of RCV.”¹²⁹ Additionally, it will target “Get Out the Vote and Voter Registration Efforts.”¹³⁰

The growing popularity of these groups is evidenced by a survey conducted by

¹²⁴ Alaska Public Media and Ruskin, “Signature Drive Begins to Rid Alaska of Ranked Choice Voting.”

¹²⁵ Alaskans for Honest Elections, “Help Us Repeal Ranked Choice Voting.”

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Samuels, “Palin First to Sign New Ballot Initiative to Repeal Ranked Choice Voting.”

¹²⁹ “Preserve Democracy.”

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Ivan Moore, a pollster at Alaska Survey Research, which revealed that many Alaskans might want the system repealed.¹³¹ The survey's results published on Twitter, showed that 53% of 1,397 registered voters polled would vote yes to repeal the system, while 47% would vote no.¹³²

Overall, despite the enthusiasm of Palin, Tshibaka, and Mathias, politicians like Begich have stated on numerous occasions that “a repeal of ranked choice will never pass the state Senate¹³³ under the current membership that exists.”¹³⁴ In January of 2022, for instance, the Alaska Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of ranked choice voting. This followed a lawsuit filed by Libertarian Scott A. Kohlhaas, the Alaskan Independence Party, Independent Bob Bird, and attorney Kenneth P. Jacobus against the “State of Alaska, the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, the Alaska Division of Elections, Lieutenant Governor Kevin Meyer, Elections Director Gail Fenumiai, and the organization Alaskans for Better Elections.”¹³⁵ The appellants claimed that the Top Four Primary “interfered with a political party’s freedom of association by holding an open primary, and allowing candidates to affiliate themselves with a party without that party’s consent.”¹³⁶ Furthermore, the plaintiffs claimed that the system made it difficult for voters to make informed choices and that the measure violated the state constitution on

¹³¹ “Alaska Survey Research - Alaska Survey Research.”

¹³² Moore, “According to Ivan Moore’s Survey, 53 percent of Alaskan Voters Polled Would Vote Yes to Repeal Ranked Choice Voting, While 47 Percent Would Vote No.”

¹³³ In Alaska, voters can place an initiative on the ballot through an Indirect Initiative, as Alaskans for Better Elections did. Conversely, the state legislature can do so through a constitutional amendment or statute.

¹³⁴ Samuels, “Palin First to Sign New Ballot Initiative to Repeal Ranked Choice Voting,” November 19, 2022.

¹³⁵ “Alaska Supreme Court Releases Opinion Upholding Constitutionality of Ranked-Choice Voting.”

¹³⁶ “Alaska Supreme Court Releases Opinion Upholding Constitutionality of Ranked-Choice Voting.”

multiple grounds.¹³⁷

Ultimately, the court found that the system did not place a huge burden on political parties' associational rights, it did not violate the "Alaska Constitution's Provision For Electing The Lieutenant Governor, [and did] not deny victory to the candidate receiving the greatest number of votes."¹³⁸ On the whole, decisions like this one have encouraged both state legislators and voters to shift their focus away from "repeal" efforts and toward the benefits of the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system.¹³⁹

Ballot Data Analysis

In order to provide a fuller picture of the usage and history of the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system in Alaska, I analyzed voting patterns from the 2022 election, and examined how different candidates' campaigning techniques were reflected in the election data.

A) Campaign strategies and the data

The Alaska Division of Elections made ballot image data public after the election was certified. Ballot image data shows the selections made on every individual ballot instead of the aggregate data made available in most jurisdictions. The data features nine contests: United States Senator, United States Representative, Constitutional Convention, Courts of Appeals, House Districts, Senate Districts, Superior Court, Governor, and

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ FindLaw, "Supreme Court of Alaska Case and Opinions."

¹³⁹ Sabbatini, "Pro-Ranked Choice Petition Launched | Juneau Empire."

District Courts. It also includes an identifying number for each ballot cast. This number maintains the anonymity of each voter (we do not know who cast each ballot) but allows us to examine how the voter filled out their ballot. For example, we can see how the voter ranked each candidate in a contest and how many candidates were ranked. We can also look across contests and assess, for example, how a single voter cast their votes for the U.S. Senate and U.S. House. The data also includes information about the precincts, candidates and political affiliations.

According to the data, most voters ranked fewer than four candidates, which conflicts with the system's goal.¹⁴⁰ Given this and recent allegations that ranked choice voting is ineffective, examining what factors influence voting patterns can help us understand the system's potential benefits and challenges. More specifically, it allows us to assess whether voters' failure to rank four candidates is due to the system's inherent confusion, as some claim, or whether other factors are at work.

House

During the U.S. House and Senate races, many candidates gave unique strategies for ranking candidates. Following the House special election, Sarah Palin and Nick Begich advocated for a "rank the red" plan to give Peltola as few second votes as possible. The strategy was most heavily emphasized during the months of October and November. "The Republicans in Alaska's U.S. House race [said] they want their

¹⁴⁰ FairVote, "Research and Data on RCV in Practice - FairVote."

supporters to rank the other Republican as their second choice.”¹⁴¹ Throughout much of the race, however, Begich maintained his anti-Palin campaign ads, which were thought to have undermined the "rank the red" message.¹⁴²

In order to examine how their campaign strategies were reflected on the data, I looked at voters who ranked Palin and Begich first and identified them as Palin and Begich's support base, respectively. Then I focused on whether these voters ranked two, three, or four candidates. 44% of voters who ranked Palin first ranked two candidates, with Begich being the most common second choice. Similarly, 51% of voters who ranked Begich first ranked two candidates, with Palin frequently being ranked second. Only 19% of Begich's supporters voted solely for him, while 30% of Palin's supporters only ranked her. Furthermore, among Begich's supporters, 16% ranked three candidates, while 15% ranked all four candidates. In Palin's case, 12% of her supporters ranked three candidates, while 14% ranked all four candidates (see Figure 4). In contrast, 22% and 19% of Peltola and Bye's supporters, respectively, ranked only two candidates.

While the data does not prove a causal relationship, it does lend credence to the notion that the "rank the red" campaign influenced how Palin and Begich's supporters ranked. According to the FairVote survey mentioned earlier, many voters learned about ranked choice voting through social media and advertisements.¹⁴³ When confronted with a new system, it is not uncommon for voters to turn to candidates to learn how to use it and maximize their votes, especially when given a blueprint like that of Palin and

¹⁴¹ Ruskin, "Palin and Begich Both Say 'Rank the Red' While Diverging in Style."

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Refer to page 25.

Begich.¹⁴⁴

Similarly, the impact of campaign strategies on voter behavior could be observed in Peltola's campaign albeit through a different lens. Throughout the majority of her campaign, Peltola avoided commenting on the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system. The only mention of the system on her official campaign website is a link to the Alaska Division Elections' explanation of ranked choice voting.¹⁴⁵ In fact, Peltola's comments about the system's effectiveness and her approval of it came mostly after her victory in November.¹⁴⁶ Instead, she spent the majority of the election focusing on gaining as many first-rank votes as possible by promoting her policies in the House and the policies she would work on if she won.¹⁴⁷ In Peltola's case, nearly 41 percent of her supporters ranked her first, making her the candidate with the most first-rank votes in the 2022 U.S. House election.

Peltola's lack of mention of ranked choice voting may also explain why more of her supporters ranked three or four candidates compared to her opponents, Begich and Palin, who had the lowest percentage of supporters ranking three or four candidates in the House (see Figure 4).¹⁴⁸ These findings can be interpreted as more evidence of how candidates' specific strategies—in this case, Palin and Begich's criticism of the system or Peltola's lack thereof—can influence pattern behavior among voters.

Finally, Chris Bye's results demonstrate how ranked choice voting allows voters

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ "Mary Peltola For Alaska," n.d.

¹⁴⁶ "Mary Peltola (D) Wins Re-Election In Alaska House Race."

¹⁴⁷ "Mary Peltola For Alaska," n.d.

¹⁴⁸ Samuels, "Palin First to Sign New Ballot Initiative to Repeal Ranked Choice Voting," November 19, 2022.

to support third-party candidates without wasting their votes.¹⁴⁹ Bye, who lost after the first runoff, still received 697 first-place votes on election day. I found that most of his supporters, 33 and 32 percent, ranked three and four candidates (see Figure 4). Although Bye did not advocate for a specific strategy for ranked choice voting because Bye was expected to lose early in the election, the majority of his supporters appeared to have maximized their vote by frequently ranking all candidates.¹⁵⁰

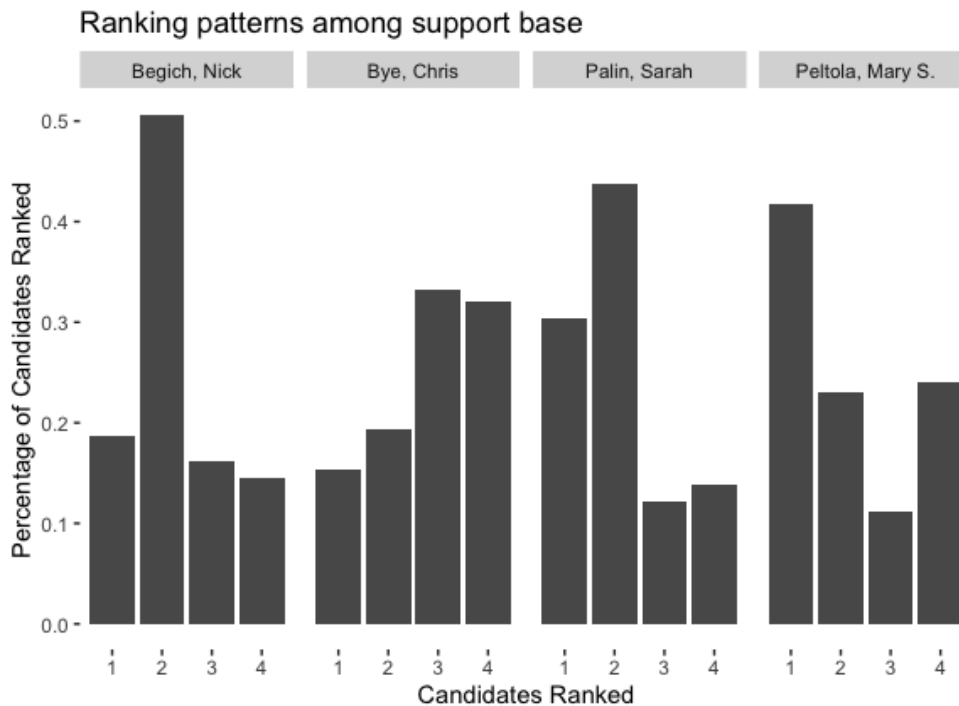


Figure 4: The graph shows the percentage of voters in each candidate's support base who ranked one, two, three, or four candidates in the 2022 US House general election.

¹⁴⁹ NYC Civic Engagement Commission, "Ranked Choice Voting," n.d.

¹⁵⁰ Bye, "On Bye's Facebook Page, There Is No Mention of How Voters Should Rank on Election Day."

Senate

I conducted a similar analysis in the Senate in order to assess whether these patterns are consistent across contests or unique to the House. Overall, I find that the Senate data also reflects some of the candidates' ranking strategies, specifically Tshibaka's campaign. Tshibaka criticized ranked choice voting and encouraged her supporters to sabotage it.¹⁵¹ According to the data, Tshibaka received the most first-rank votes in the Senate, which could be explained by her strong focus on obtaining as many first-rank votes as possible.¹⁵² Furthermore, she had the lowest percentage of three and four ranked candidates among her supporters, which could be attributed to her “repeal” campaign (see Figure 5).

Likewise, Kelley's promoted strategy after dropping out of the election was somewhat consistent with what I saw in the data. Kelley asked his supporters to rally behind Tshibaka either by only voting for her or ranking her second.¹⁵³ For the former, the nature of this study does not allow me to confirm whether voters who voted for Kelley in the primary went on to vote only for Tshibaka. Nonetheless, for the latter, while most of Kelley's supporters ranked all four candidates rather than just two, they often ranked Tshibaka second. Despite this, it is important to note that a large portion of his support base went on to only rank him, which did not reflect his previously described campaign strategy (see Figure 5).

In contrast, during most of her campaign, Chesbro supported ranked choice voting

¹⁵¹ Refer to 23.

¹⁵² “News | Kelly for Alaska.”

¹⁵³ Phu, “Fourth-Place Finisher Buzz Kelley Suspends Campaign for U.S. Senate, Backs Tshibaka.”

and even asked her voters to vote according to the following pattern: "in November, Rank Pat Chesbro 1st, Lisa Murkowski 2nd, and Kelly Tshibaka Last."¹⁵⁴ Chesbro asked that voters choose only three candidates after Buzz Kelley stepped out of the contest following his performance in the primary. However, 52 percent of her support base ranked two candidates, the second most common candidate being Murkowski.¹⁵⁵ Only 7 percent of her base ranked three candidates, as advocated by Chesbro. In comparison, 23 percent of her support base ranked all four candidates despite Kelley dropping out of the race. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Chesbro repeatedly advised candidates not to rank only one candidate, and she saw a small number of her supporters do so.¹⁵⁶ On the whole, however, Chesbro's supporters' voting patterns did not align with the strategy she promoted for much of her campaign (see Figure 5).

Similarly, Murkowski's strategy was poorly reflected in the data. While campaigning, Murkowski encouraged voters to rank all candidates and strongly emphasized securing as many first-place votes as possible.¹⁵⁷ Despite this, her supporters overwhelmingly ranked just two candidates (see Figure 5). It is unclear why the data differs from Murkowski's campaign strategy, but two possibilities exist. To begin with, some of Murkowski's supporters may have voted early, which often happens before candidates can publicize their campaign strategies.¹⁵⁸ Two, while Murkowski encouraged voters to rank correctly, some voters may have avoided ranking Kelley because he

¹⁵⁴ "VOTING | Chesbroforalaska."

¹⁵⁵ Refer to page 17.

¹⁵⁶ "IN THE NEWS | Chesbroforalaska."

¹⁵⁷ Lisa Murkowski for US Senate, "Lisa Murkowski for U.S. Senate - Lisa Murkowski for US Senate."

¹⁵⁸ In Alaska, some early voting locations close before Election Day.

dropped out and preferred not to rank Tshibaka because of her anti-Murkowski rhetoric.¹⁵⁹ Although these two reasons are speculative and not comprehensive, they may provide some explanations for the disparity between the data and Murkowski’s tactics.

Overall, strategies in the U.S. House and Senate races appeared to be reflected in the data. With a few exceptions, voters seemed to do what candidates asked them to do. Although I did not examine how the state legislature and gubernatorial campaigns reflected on the data in this study, this could be an interesting aspect for future research. Especially as discussions about the adoption and potential confusion of ranked choice voting continue to take place in numerous states.¹⁶⁰

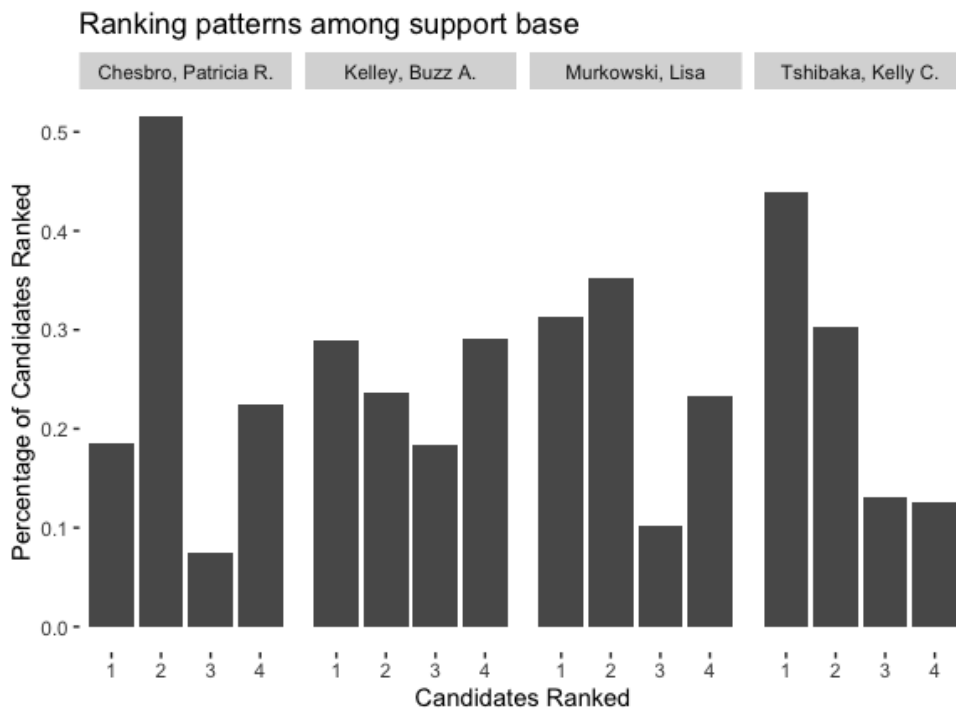


Figure 5: The graph shows the percentage of voters in each candidate's support base who ranked one, two, three, or four candidates in the 2022 US Senate general election.

¹⁵⁹ Refer to page 24.

¹⁶⁰ Edelman, “Following a Big Year, More States Push Ranked-Choice Voting.”

B) Incumbent advantage

Many candidates, especially those belonging to the Republican Party, have accused ranked choice voting of being an incumbent protection program. The phenomenon of the incumbency advantage is well known. According to numerous studies, incumbents "exhibit an extraordinary degree of success when seeking re-election," particularly members of Congress.¹⁶¹ Looking at the Alaska 2022 election data, 15 of the 19 state incumbent senators up for re-election won.¹⁶² James Kaufman of Senate F, Jesse Bjorkman from District D, Loki Tobin from District I and Forrest Dunbar from District J are the only exceptions. In the House District races, 27 incumbents won re-election.¹⁶³ Moreover, Murkowski, an incumbent, won the U.S. Senate race. As previously mentioned, Tshibaka dedicated a great part of her campaign to denouncing the system for helping Murkowski win. Although she and Palin are perhaps the most popular figures holding this view, news sources and voters alike have vocalized similar opinions.¹⁶⁴

Additionally, some scholars have speculated that ranked choice voting might allow incumbents to "receive a higher percentage of second and third ranked votes on each ballot, if not receiving the first-place vote."¹⁶⁵ Such conjectures are extremely relevant today as more and more campaigns like that of Tshibaka, who accused ranked choice voting of benefiting incumbents, are gaining notoriety. Despite this, however, incumbent re-election rates appear to tell a different story. In the Alaska House of

¹⁶¹ Ashworth and Bueno De Mesquita, "Electoral Selection and the Incumbency Advantage."

¹⁶² "Alaska State Legislature."

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Adams, "Restoring America."

¹⁶⁵ Hemmert and Yonk, "Impact of Ranked-Choice Voting on Incumbents."

Representatives, incumbents were re-elected in greater numbers in 2018 and 2020 than in 2022. For example, 31 of 40 incumbents were re-elected in 2020, but only 27 were in 2022.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, in the Senate, 82% of incumbents were re-elected in 2020, while 79% were re-elected in 2022.¹⁶⁷ Overall, given that re-election rates in the last three elections have not differed drastically, we cannot draw any valid conclusions about incumbency advantage in the 2022 general election.

Percentage of incumbents re-elected to the Alaska House of Representatives by year

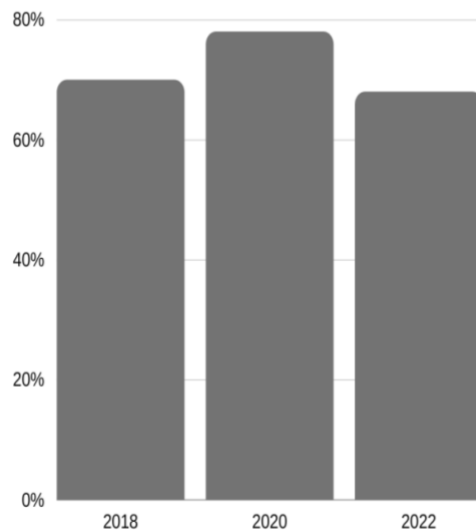


Figure 6: This figure depicts the percentage of incumbents who ran for and won re-election to the Alaska House of Representatives in 2018, 2020, and 2022, respectively. Source: *The Alaska State Legislature, “Committee/Member Information.”*

¹⁶⁶ The Alaska State Legislature, “Committee/Member Information.”

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

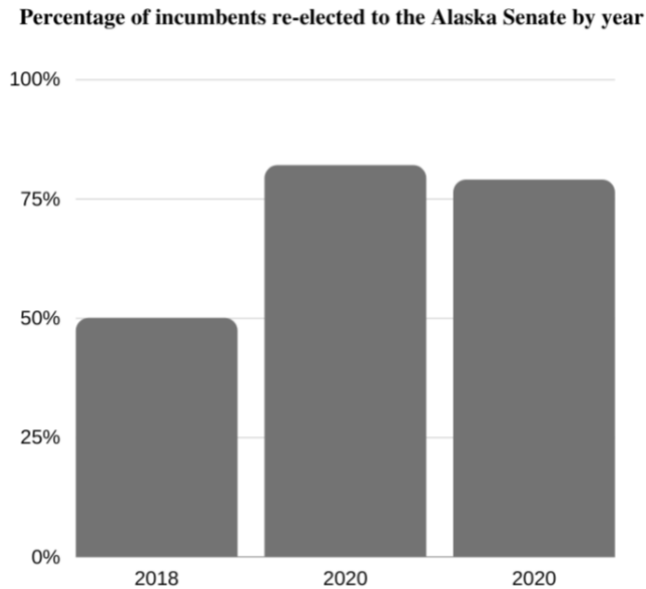


Figure 7: This figure depicts the percentage of incumbents who ran for and won re-election to the Alaska State Senate in 2018, 2020, and 2022, respectively. Source: *The Alaska State Legislature, “Committee/Member Information.”*

Furthermore, a research study conducted by Logan Hemmert, Majority Strategies Program Manager, a full-service data firm, found that ranked choice voting is not more likely to advantage incumbents than other systems like the SMD.¹⁶⁸ The study examined “whether or not incumbents in Minneapolis’ 2013 elections were afforded any sort of protection due to ranked choice voting.” In order to conduct this study, data was taken from the Minneapolis’ 2013 elections results. Hemmert “looked to see where each candidate’s second and third ranked votes went, expecting to see the incumbent candidate receive many of those”¹⁶⁹ (see Table 1). He found that nine incumbents sought reelection, and that three out of those nine lost their races. From this, Hemmert concluded that in the 2013 Minneapolis election, ranked choice voting did not provide protection to

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

incumbents.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, he suggested that ranked choice voting as a whole may not benefit officeholders.¹⁷¹

2013 Minneapolis Municipal Elections

Ward	Incumbent Won	Incumbent Lost	Open Race	Multiple Rounds
Mayor			✓	✓
1	✓			
2	✓			
3		✓		
4	✓			
5			✓	✓
6		✓		
7	✓			
8	✓			
9			✓	✓
10		✓		
11	✓			
12			✓	
13			✓	✓
Total	6	3	5	4

Table 1: The table displays the outcomes of the 2013 Minneapolis ward elections, including whether the incumbent was re-elected or defeated, whether the race was for an open seat, and if multiple rounds of voting were required. Source: Hemmert and Yonk, “Impact of Ranked-Choice Voting on Incumbents.”

Likewise, a report by FairVote, “saw no change in incumbent success rate before and after they switched to RCV.”¹⁷² FairVote's report was conducted in 2021, and it

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² FairVote, “RCV Is Not a Significant Factor in Determining Incumbent Success.”

included eight cities that used ranked choice voting in their mayor and by-district city council elections, as well as 12 cities that were demographically, politically, and population wise similar but did not use ranked choice voting for those elections (Table 2).¹⁷³ The former cities were assigned to the treatment group, and the latter to the control group.

Control group	Treatment group
Anaheim, CA	Berkeley, CA
Boston, MA	Las Cruces, NM
Cedar Rapids, IA	San Francisco, CA
Des Moines, IA	San Leandro, CA
San Jose, CA	Santa Fe, NM
Santa Ana, CA	St. Paul, MN
Santa Clara, CA	Minneapolis, MN
Seattle, WA	Oakland, CA
Stockton, CA	
Rio Rancho, NM	
Roswell, NM	
Tulsa, OK	

Table 2: This table depicts the cities used in the FairVote study. Cities in the control group do not have ranked choice voting, while cities in the treatment group do.

214 elections were studied, and incumbents ran for reelection in 98.¹⁷⁴ The study employed regression analysis and accounted for other variables that could influence incumbent reelection such as midterm year (see Table 3). According to the study,

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

incumbents won 76 percent of the elections in which they ran.¹⁷⁵ Candidates won 71% of the time in cities with ranked choice voting, while incumbents won 79% of the time in cities without ranked choice voting (see Figure 8).¹⁷⁶ Given these numbers, FairVote concluded that ranked choice voting had no significant influence on incumbents' chances of winning.

The study also revealed that the number of candidates running on election day can impact an incumbent's success. In fact, it appears that incumbents face more competition in races with more candidates, which is why the percentage of incumbents who won in cities with ranked choice voting is lower (see Table 3).¹⁷⁷ Overall, FairVote's report seems to show that the "RCV can increase the number of candidates in each race, potentially creating a more competitive environment for an incumbent. The mechanics of RCV itself do not create meaningfully different outcomes for incumbents."¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the data provided by FairVote cannot support a causal claim. More research is needed to determine whether the number of candidates running affects incumbent success or if there are other underlying confounding mechanisms driving that relationship.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

Coefficient-Level Estimates of Incumbent Reelection Rate

Incumbent Success		
Predictors	Estimate	Std. Error
Intercept	.70	1.23
RCV	-.89	.65
Number of Candidates	.58**	.20
Midterm Year	-.5	.71
Odd Year	1.54	.82
Turnout	3.06	1.61
Percentage White	1.18	1.81
Mayoral	5.98	2.54

Observations 98. *p<.05 **p<.1 ***p<.001

Table 3: This table shows the results of FairVote's logistic regression model, which accounts for factors that might have had an impact on incumbents' success rates in the units of study. Source: FairVote, "RCV Is Not a Significant Factor in Determining Incumbent Success."

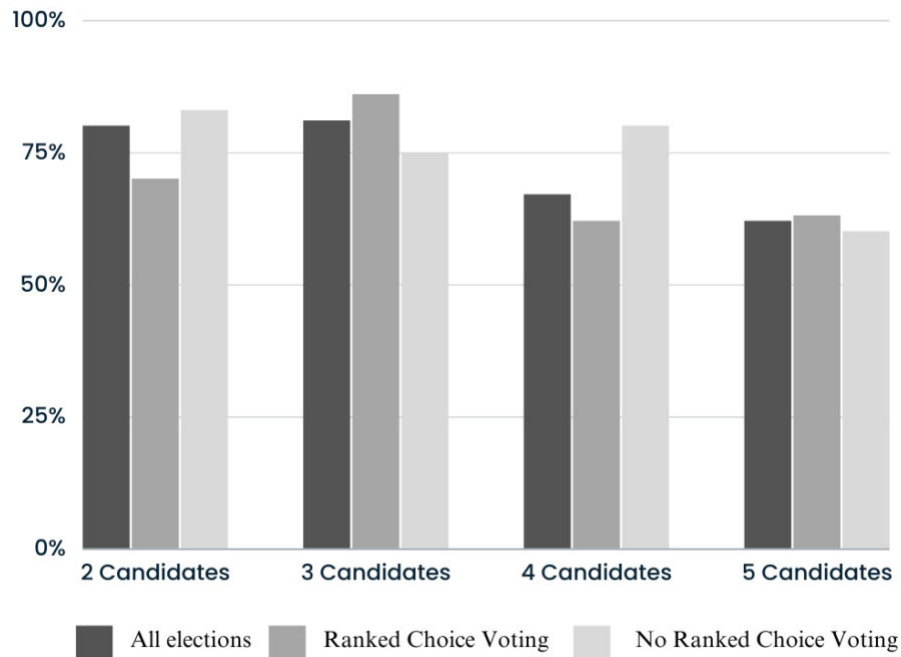


Figure 8: The graph illustrates the success rates of incumbents in elections with two, three, four, and five candidates, with each bar representing the success rates for all elections, elections that utilized the RCV system, and those that did not. Source: FairVote, "RCV Is Not a Significant Factor in Determining Incumbent Success."

C) Usage of the system and voter turnout in the U.S. Senate and House elections

Undervotes

Given the limited data available and the scope of this paper, this section will focus on the usage of ranked choice voting during the 2022 U.S. House and Senate races.

Notably, these elections saw a voter turnout of 44.38 percent, the lowest since 2012.¹⁷⁹

Over time, several explanations have been proposed to account for this trend, including

Tshibaka, Palin, and Mathias' claim that ranked choice voting leads to both

disenfranchisement and confusion amongst voters.¹⁸⁰ Although this explanation has

gained increasing prominence in mainstream media, others have been equally

compelling. For example, in 2016, a ballot initiative approved automatic voter

registration when people applied for the Permanent Fund Dividend, causing voter

registration to increase by more than 70,000.¹⁸¹ In that way, low voter turnout may have

resulted from an increase in the number of registered voters rather than a decrease in the

number of people who voted. Additional explanations include gerrymandering, mail and

geographical issues, language barriers, and polling place closures, all of which impeded

voters' equitable access to the polls.¹⁸²

Similarly, despite candidates' repeated claims that undervotes and overvotes

reflected voters' lack of understanding of the system, there is little evidence supporting

these claims. As stated by the FairVote survey, for example, 79% of Alaskan voters

¹⁷⁹ Alaska Division of Elections, "2022 General Election."

¹⁸⁰ Refer to page 26.

¹⁸¹ Davidson, "Alaska's Ranked-Choice Election Marred by Record-Low Turnout, Mass Confusion."

¹⁸² Cataudella, "'A Perfect Storm of Confusion:' Voting Faces Systemic Challenges in Alaska."

polled thought ranked choice voting was "simple."¹⁸³ Furthermore, as mentioned earlier in this essay, the campaign strategies used by politicians such as Palin may explain why some people undervoted or ranked fewer than four candidates.¹⁸⁴ In those instances, it appears that voters are not undervoting because they are confused. Instead, they are following the strategies of their preferred candidates, even if that means ranking fewer than three or four candidates.

In some cases, undervoting may have also occurred because only three viable candidates were on the ballot.¹⁸⁵ For example, when Kelley dropped out of the race, certain voters ranked the three remaining candidates rather than all four. In these instances, one can argue that they undervoted because the fourth candidate was no longer a feasible choice. This is not to say that ranking four candidates is inefficient or wrong. On the contrary, voters also maximized their vote by ranking all four candidates, as ranking candidates who have dropped out of the race still allows them to rank all candidates on the ballot while having their voices heard on election day.¹⁸⁶

Overvotes

A small number of voters engaged in overvoting in the 2022 U.S. House and Senate races, which can indicate ignorance about how the system works or carelessness on the part of the voter.¹⁸⁷ Overvoting occurs when a voter votes for more candidates than

¹⁸³ Refer to page 25.

¹⁸⁴ Refer to page 30.

¹⁸⁵ Refer to page 34.

¹⁸⁶ NYC Civic Engagement Commission, "Ranked Choice Voting," n.d.

¹⁸⁷ Sinclair and Alvarez, "Who Overvotes, Who Undervotes, Using Punchcards?"

allowed in a given contest.¹⁸⁸ In this paper, however, overvoting also takes other forms.¹⁸⁹ For example, it can include ranking both Peltola and Begich first. Or ranking Chesbro 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. During the Alaskan election, overvoters typically ranked five candidates and overvoting was most common in the Senate (see Table 4).

Different from undervoting, which could be "due to a host of subjective reasons," overvoting is often the result of a voting error.¹⁹⁰ There were 1,114 overvotes in the U.S. House and Senate elections, with 210 of those taking place across multiple contests (see Table 4). Interestingly, the candidates who received the most overvotes—Tshibaka, Murkowski, and Peltola—were those whose campaign strategies were most focused on obtaining number one votes. Overvoting across multiple contests may suggest that voter confusion was to blame. For example, ballot design can be complex for some voters, leading them to unintentionally rank more than four candidates. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, "voter education and getting voters up to speed" before the election was difficult, which could have contributed to confusion and, consequently, overvoting.¹⁹¹

However, as the data shows, most overvotes occurred in a single race, accounting for 85 percent of all overvotes. While this paper does not examine this phenomenon in detail, different campaign strategies used by various candidates may explain why voters overvoted in one contest but not in others, especially when most races had the same

¹⁸⁸ Bacon, "Overvotes and Undervotes, What Do They Mean?"

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Fried and El-Najjar, "The Voting Process, Including Ranked Choice Voting for Local Offices in the City and County of San Francisco."

¹⁹¹ Cataudella, "'A Perfect Storm of Confusion:' Voting Faces Systemic Challenges in Alaska.

number of candidates on the general ballot. It would be useful if future research could examine the extent to which candidates provided education on overvoting and how this correlates with voting patterns.

Candidate	Number of Overvotes within their support base
Begich	151
Bye	21
Palin	185
Peltola	354
Chesbro	114
Kelley	71
Murkowski	393
Tshibaka	304

Table 4: This table lists the candidates in the United States House of Representatives and the United States Senate in alphabetical order, along with the number of voters who overvoted within their support base.

All in all, the incidence of overvoting was relatively low in Alaska's 2022 election. In fact, according to Chris Hughes, policy director of the Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center, Alaska had the lowest rate of overvoting among states that use ranked choice voting.¹⁹² Furthermore, per Alaska law, overvoting did not typically result in residual voting, indicating that "overvotes [were] not skipped, but [rather] invalidated subsequent rankings."¹⁹³ In 2022, "only 295 people cast ballots couldn't be counted for at least one candidate, including write-ins. That's less than 0.2% of all votes."¹⁹⁴

While opponents have expressed concern about the prevalence of undervotes and

¹⁹² Brooks, "Five Takeaway Lessons from Alaska's First Ranked Choice Election."

¹⁹³ Alaska Division of Elections 2021, "RCV Detailed Report," 1.

¹⁹⁴ Brooks, "Five Takeaway Lessons from Alaska's First Ranked Choice Election."

overvotes in the U.S. House and Senate elections, these issues do not appear to be as serious as previously thought. Undervotes seem to be caused by underlying factors unrelated to voter confusion while overvoting was relatively uncommon and, for the most part, did not result in residual voting. In addition, while lower voter turnout was an issue in the 2022 election, it is unclear from the information available that such outcomes were caused by ranked choice voting.

Conclusion

In recent years, Alaskan scholars and officials have attempted to reform the single member district, claiming that it is ineffective at reflecting voters' preferences, has increased partisanship, and disadvantages third-party candidates. In response to these concerns, an initiative endorsing the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system was placed on the Alaskan ballot in 2020 and used for the first time in the 2022 Alaska election. Under this new system, the top four candidates advance to the general election, which is decided by ranked choice voting. According to experts, this approach would not only prevent split votes but also encourage competition, leading to more democratic elections.

Given the novelty of the system and growing interest in understanding it, this paper aims to evaluate the passage, challenges, current debate, implementation, and usage of the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system. These findings not only shed light on the history of this system in Alaska but also on voter behavior and campaign tactics that merit further investigation.

Using ballot data, I find that campaign strategies were well reflected in the U.S.

Senate and House general elections, implying that voters tended to rank based on how their preferred candidate asked them to. Although there were some disparities between voters' voting patterns and the campaign tactics of candidates like Chesbro and Murkowski, most candidates' strategies were consistent with the data gathered and differed even within the same party. Future research would benefit from looking at voting patterns across contests and within the state legislature races to provide a more comprehensive examination of this relationship.

Building upon these findings, the study also explored whether there was an incumbency advantage during the election. As demonstrated in this paper, reelection rates in the last three state legislature races do not allow us to draw meaningful conclusions about the incumbency advantage. In fact, the likelihood of incumbents winning seemed to be unaffected by ranked choice voting in Alaska and other states such as Minnesota and New York.

I also find that undervoting and overvoting during the U.S. House and Senate elections appeared less concerning than previously believed. Evidence suggests that campaign strategies or strategies voters pursue to maximize their votes can account for undervotes. Overvoting, on the other hand, was infrequent and did not result in residual voting. Although this paper did not explore the potential causes of overvotes, it is worth considering the role that campaign strategies may play in these events, especially when assessing overvoting within single or multiple contests.

Similarly, more research will be needed to understand the potential causes of the low voter turnout in the 2022 U.S. Senate and House elections. Based on the data

available, it remains unclear whether this phenomenon was primarily due to voter confusion or other factors such as language barriers. Exploring turnout rates within the gubernatorial and state legislature would provide an essential point of comparison.

Overall, this essay provides a general framework for comprehending the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system. Ultimately, I hope that future voters, researchers, and officials alike can use this work to make informed decisions about whether to oppose, promote or vote for this mechanism on election day. Whatever their stance, however, it is clear that the Top Four Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting system has transformed the US electoral landscape, ushering in a new era of voting strategies, campaigning techniques, and voting incentives.

Appendix A

<i>State</i>	<i>Electoral system</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Date of adoption</i>
Alaska	Top Four Primary + Top Ranked Choice	“Under this system, all candidates for office run on a single primary ballot regardless of party affiliation. The top four vote getters from this process advance to the general election. In the general election, ranked-choice voting is used to select the candidates if a single candidate does not get a majority of the votes in the first round.” ¹⁹⁵	November 3rd, 2020
California	Top Two Primary	“The top two lists all the candidates on the same ballot, regardless of their party ID. The two candidates that receive the most votes in the primary go on to the general election.” ¹⁹⁶	June 8th, 2010
Colorado	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. Colorado uses this system at the local level in several cities. ¹⁹⁷	It varies depending on the city.
Louisiana	Jungle Primary/ Majority run-off system ¹⁹⁸	There is no primary in this system. Instead, in the general election, all candidates appear on the same ballot. If no candidate receives 50% of the vote, the top two vote-getters advance to a runoff. ¹⁹⁹	1977
Maine	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. Maine uses this system for president, governor, U.S. Senate, U.S. House and state legislature elections. ²⁰⁰	2016
Maryland	Ranked Choice	The system ranks candidates in	2005

¹⁹⁵ Powell, “Understanding Primaries in Your State - All In Together.”

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ FairVote, “Ranked Choice Voting Information - FairVote.”

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

	Voting	order of preference. Takoma Park uses the system for city council and municipal elections. ²⁰¹	
Massachusetts	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. MA uses this system at the local level in some towns. ²⁰²	It varies depending on the town.
Michigan	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. Michigan uses this system at the local level in some cities. ²⁰³	It varies depending on the city.
Minnesota	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. Minnesota uses RCV “in five Minnesota cities: Minneapolis, St. Paul, Bloomington, Minnetonka and St. Louis Park.” ²⁰⁴	It varies depending on the city.
Nevada	Top Five Primary plus Ranked Choice Voting	In the Top Five Primary, the Top Five candidates advance to the general election. ²⁰⁵	November 8th, 2022 (approved*).
New Mexico	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. New Mexico uses this system at the local level in some towns. ²⁰⁶	It varies depending on the town. It varies depending on the town.
New York	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. The system is only used in New York City. ²⁰⁷	2019
Oregon	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. The system is only used in Benton County. ²⁰⁸	2016

²⁰¹ Otis, “Assessing Instant Runoff Voting in Takoma Park (MD) - FairVote.”

²⁰² FairVote, “Ranked Choice Voting Information - FairVote.”

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Hubbard, “House Elections Committee Approves Expanded Use of Ranked-Choice Voting - Session Daily - Minnesota House of Representatives.”

²⁰⁵ State of Nevada, “Statewide Ballot Questions.”

²⁰⁶ FairVote, “Ranked Choice Voting Information - FairVote.”

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Merzbach, “More Choices and Power’ for Voters: Ranked-Choice Voting Implemented in Oregon County.”

Texas	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. The system is only used in Austin. ²⁰⁹	2021
Utah	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. In 23 cities, the system is used for municipal elections. ²¹⁰	It varies depending on the city.
Vermont	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. The system is only used in Burlington. ²¹¹	2021
Virginia	Ranked Choice Voting	The system ranks candidates in order of preference. Virginia allows cities to adopt RCV for local elections. ²¹²	2020
Washington	Top Two Primary	“The top two lists all the candidates on the same ballot, regardless of their party ID. The two candidates that receive the most votes in the primary go on to the general election.” ²¹³	November 2nd, 2004

Appendix A. The table describes electoral systems being currently used in the US and their dates of enactment in states that do not or only partially use the SMD.

²⁰⁹ FairVote, “Ranked Choice Voting Information - FairVote.”

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Huntley, “Voters Approve All Burlington Ballot Issues.”

²¹² “Ranked Choice Voting | FairVote Virginia | United States.”

²¹³ Powell, “Understanding Primaries in Your State - All In Together.”

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