



All in Favor ...

Ranked choice ballots could change the way we vote

By Dale Brumfield • Illustration by Tim Cook

"Abraham Lincoln was not his party's No. 1 nominee," says Richmond City Councilor Andreas Addison, relating one of his favorite historical anecdotes. "In a race where there were three big rival candidates jockeying for the nomination, he positioned himself as everyone's second choice, so when nobody could decide between their favorites or wanted to support the opposing party's favorite, they had a negotiated second-best option. ... [The strategy] put Lincoln in an electable position so he became the nominee and eventually our president. And that is kind of how ranked choice voting can work." >



Virginians traditionally have had a hard time letting things go. Whether it's statues, institutions or state songs, some might say we cling stubbornly to legacies that have far outlived their usefulness.

Depending on your point of view, one of those legacies might be the way we vote — but there may be changes on the horizon even in that time-honored institution, pioneered in May 2021 by the Republican Party of Virginia. To nominate their ticket for the most recent gubernatorial election — Glenn Youngkin for governor, Winsome Sears for lieutenant governor and Jason Miyares for attorney general — Republicans used a process known as ranked choice voting. The result was Virginia Republicans' biggest statewide win since 2009, leading some to claim that ranked choice voting may have saved the Republican Party in an increasingly blue state.

Ranked choice voting is a simple concept. Rather than voting for a single candidate, citizens can “rank” as many or as few as they choose in order of preference: first choice, second choice, third choice and so on. When voting closes, ballots are counted in rounds. First, all first-choice votes are counted. If no candidate has the required number of votes to win, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. In the second round of counting, voters whose first-choice candidate was eliminated will have their second-choice votes counted instead. Once again, the least successful candidate is eliminated, and then their supporters' third-choice votes are counted. The process continues until a candidate meets the required threshold to win.

In 2021, seven candidates vied for the Republican gubernatorial nomination. After the first round, Youngkin led runner-up Pete Snyder with 33% to 26% of the vote, and then-Sen. Amanda Chase was third with 21%. Former Speaker of the House of Delegates Kirk Cox was fourth with 13%, and Sergio de la Peña was fifth with 6%, followed by Peter Doran at 0.34% and Octavia Johnson at 0.27%.



Over the next five rounds, the worst-performing candidate was eliminated until round six, when Youngkin — who was polling at almost zero name recognition prior to the voting — finally bested Snyder, 55% to 45%, making him the surprise nominee and the eventual general election winner.

A traditional electoral process would have either allowed a candidate to win with a simple majority or required six rounds of voting as well as counting — possible at the convention level but expensive in a general election setting. Instead, ranked choice created a consensus vote with just one round of voting, despite the lack of a clear leading candidate.

However, the experience was not without its detractors. Prior to the convention, Chase claimed that ranked choice voting was instituted solely to keep her and her firebrand populism from winning the nomination. Youngkin expressed sympathy for her.

An Election Experiment

While ranked choice voting is a relatively recent development in Virginia, there have been over 500 ranked choice elections nationwide since 2004, with about 20 million ranked ballots cast. In 2020, perhaps influenced by successful ranked choice elections elsewhere, the Virginia General Assembly passed HB 1103 to implement ranked choice in elections of members of a



“Ranked choice voting just makes sense.”

—City of Fairfax Mayor Catherine Read

county board of supervisors or a city council.

Arlington County was the first locality in Virginia to use ranked choice, testing and polling voters in a Democratic primary for its County Board in June. There were challenges: The county’s outdated voting machines limited the number of voter choices to just three in a field of six, and it was a “weighted” primary with two winners (Maureen Coffey and Susan Cunningham), which added a layer of complexity. County officials still considered the experiment a success, with no technological problems and only limited uncertainty among voters on the tabulation process. Seventy percent of Arlington voters, as well as a majority of board members, clearly stated in a county survey that they would use the method again.

However, Arlington County officials chose not to use ranked choice in the November general election. “It’s pretty clear that we didn’t necessarily get all pockets of our community to view this in the same way,” County Board Chair Christian Dorsey told The Washington Post in July. “While I don’t really see [ranked choice voting] as proper and appropriate for the general election, I do hope everyone will agree for later this year or as soon as possible to this again for next primary season.”

According to Arlington Registrar and Elections Director Gretchen Reinemeyer, any decisions about ranked choice voting will be made solely by the board.

Support for Change

Ranked choice has support from The League of Women Voters of Virginia. Joan Porte, president of the Virginia league, writes in an email that “[ranked choice voting] allows the voter to study all the candidates, not just those put up by the parties. It gets the voter more engaged and cuts down on apathy because people don’t have to choose between ‘the same old candidates.’”

She also states other advantages, including that it reduces negative interparty campaigning. “I have no reason to bash my opponent if I want to get their supporters to make me their second choice,” she says. More importantly, she says, the method “opens the process to minority candidates and women. ... It >

ABOVE: COURTESY CATHERINE READ

Take Your Pick(s)

Ranked choice voting FAQs

Are we using ranked choice voting in the November election?

No, although ranked choice voting is legal in Virginia for use in local elections, Richmond is not using the method in 2023 or 2024.

Where is ranked choice voting used?

In the U.S., 28 states have used ranked choice voting in at least one jurisdiction, and Maine and Alaska use ranked choice voting statewide. In Virginia, electoral boards in Fredericksburg, Charlottesville and Albemarle County are considering using ranked choice voting in elections.

On a ranked choice ballot, do I have to rank all candidates, or can I just vote for a single candidate?

Voters can rank as few or as many candidates as they would like.

Can I vote for the same candidate more than once?

Yes, but your vote will only count once for that candidate. Ranking one candidate as your first, second and third choice is the same as leaving the second and third choices blank. You do not improve a candidate’s chances of winning by voting for the candidate more than once.

Can I give multiple candidates the same ranking?

No. Each candidate can only be ranked once to reflect your order of preference (i.e., first choice, second choice and so on).

Do my votes get thrown out if I don’t vote for the winner?

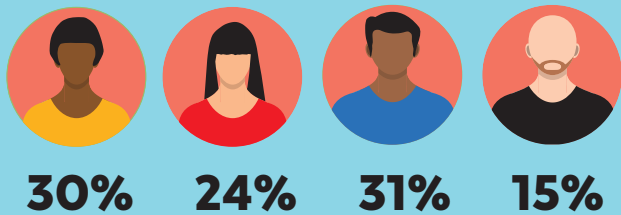
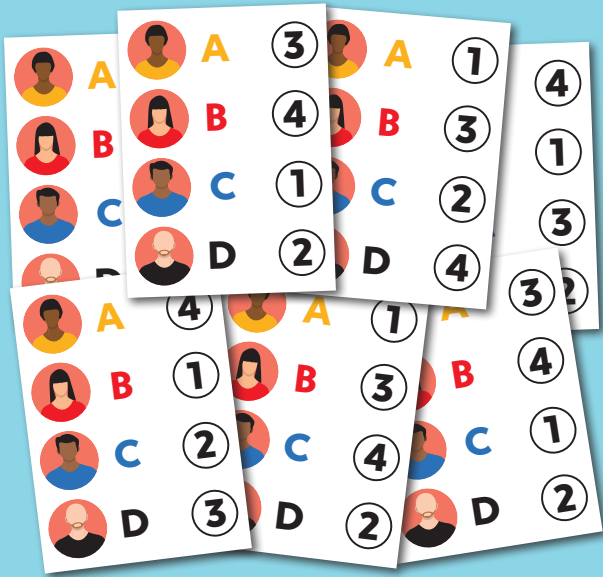
No. If your first-choice candidate has the fewest votes, they are removed from the running and your second-place votes are counted instead. Ranked choice voting ensures that the ultimate winner will be broadly acceptable to the highest number of voters by requiring a candidate to receive at least some support from a majority of voters.

How long does it take to tabulate the results?

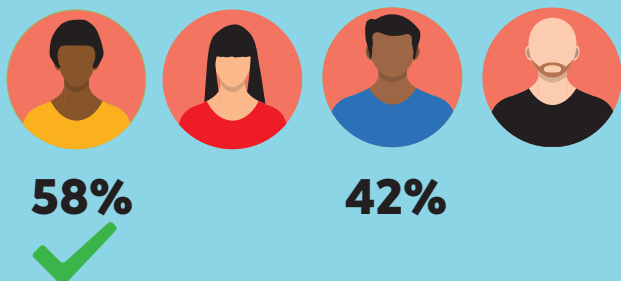
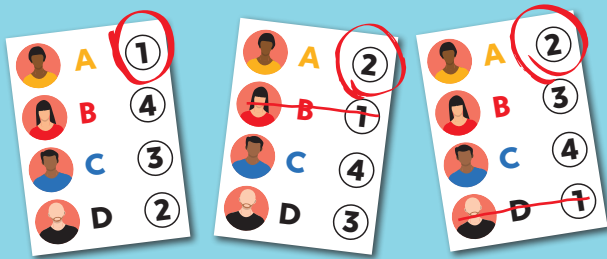
Ranked choice voting election results will not be known on Election Day. Results can only be determined after all ballots cast have been received and all provisional ballots considered. Due to the initial delay in vote counting to determine the total universe of ballots cast, confirming the winner (or winners) of ranked choice voting elections may take up to seven days.

Sources: campaignlegal.com elections.virginia.gov

How It Works:



If no candidate receives 50% of the votes, those with the lowest totals are eliminated and their supporters' second-choice votes are tallied for the remaining candidates. The process continues until one candidate has more than 50% of the votes.



eliminates the 'incumbent advantage.' Again, because people can vote their true choice and not worry about just having to cast one vote."

Catherine Read, recently elected mayor of the city of Fairfax, is also a fan of ranked choice. "It just makes sense," she said in a recent interview. "I hope the [Democratic Party of Virginia] will consider it for the gubernatorial primary" in 2025. She noted also that ranked choice was an excellent choice for local races, such as Fairfax City Council, "where we have six people running at large every two years."

Here in Richmond, 1st District councilor Andreas Addison agrees, noting that we also tend to have multiple candidates in elections for mayor, city council and school board. "Being that we have a plurality of

"[Ranked voting] creates the potential for more civil and positive and supportive campaigning across all candidates."

—City Councilor Andreas Addison



different candidates, it seems that we're not just deciding between the left and right, the Democrat and Republican. We're deciding between candidates that might collectively have a lot of good commonalities, similarities, etc." With ranked choice, he says, voters can choose not only their favorite candidate, but others whose views they also like, "as far down the list as they want to go." And in a close election, "ranked choice voting is an interesting option to me because it protects us against the need for a runoff."

Addison also likes the civility inherent in ranked choice elections. "It creates the potential for more civil and positive and supportive campaigning across all candidates, because there's a chance they could be the second choice across all districts [like Abraham Lincoln] and they could win through that route, too."

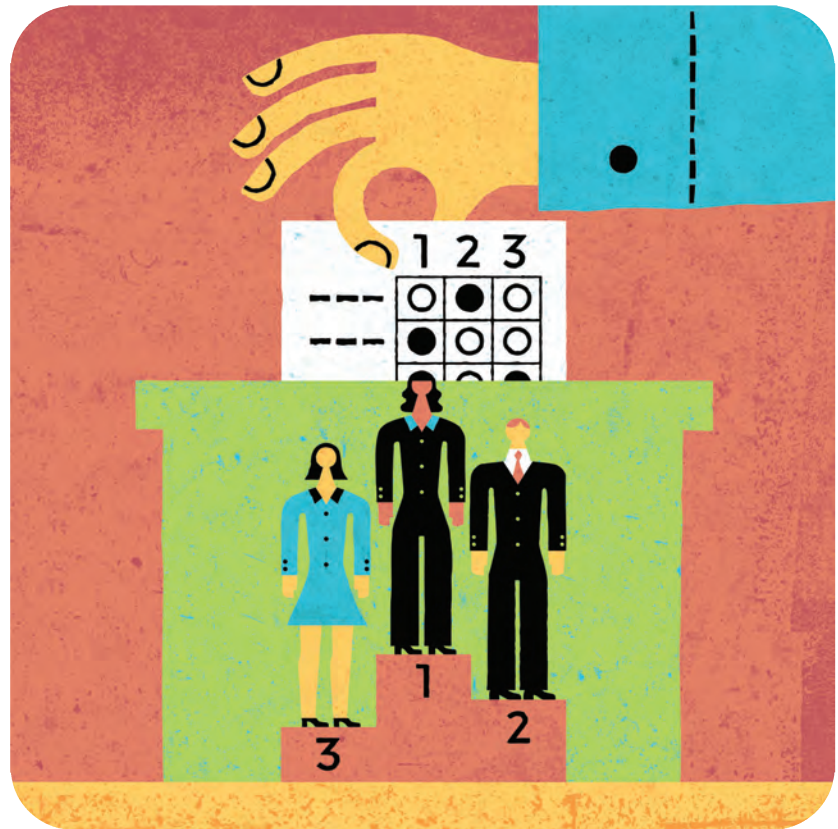
Supporters also say that ranked choice empowers voters more than traditional voting in that it makes every ballot affect the outcome of the election, even if that voter's first choice did not win. It also reduces or eliminates wasted votes, such as when someone votes early or by mail for a candidate who later drops out of the race. Instead of that ballot being discarded, it would count toward the second-choice candidate.

Skeptical Opposition

Opponents of ranked choice cite voter misunderstandings and a complex tabulation procedure as the top reasons for not implementing the method statewide. On Sept. 6, 2022, Richmond City Council voted 6-3 not to implement ranked choice in 2024, citing that, by law, it could only be used for city council races and not in city school board elections or higher-profile races such as a mayoral election, leading to possible confusion at polling stations.

Around the same time, the Virginia Mercury reported the Richmond NAACP is skeptical of ranked choice, citing higher priorities such as restoration of voting rights for former felons. Chapter President James "JJ" Minor was quoted as saying, "I don't think Richmond is ready for it."

Porte of the League of Women Voters of Virginia finds this reasoning spurious, however. "Is it confusing?" she writes. "Actually, no. We did several training seminars in Arlington and found people grasped



the concept and liked it." Indeed, that county survey showed that 57% of Arlington voters rated the experience "exceptional" or "positive," with 13% rating it "fair" and 29% rating their experience "negative."

Deb Otis, director of research and policy at the non-partisan organization FairVote, noted that party opposition to ranked choice could be rooted in career politicians who have mastered winning in the old voting system and are not ready to "throw that system out yet." Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin in fact blamed her 2022 congressional midterm loss on ranked choice, which had been approved across that state in a 2020 ballot initiative. After Palin's loss, former President Donald Trump called ranked choice "a totally rigged deal, just like a lot of other things in this country."

Bipartisan support and opposition notwithstanding, many still praise ranked choice voting as the best solution among nationwide voting reforms. "The reasons for ranked choice's growth are clear," Otis stated on DividedWeFall.org, "Voters are ready for more democratic elections, and ranked choice is providing results."

"It gives us results that better represent voter preferences," Porte writes. "The people who win have broader support, have a stronger mandate and better represent their communities." ■

BELOW: JAY PAUL; RIGHT: TIM COOK

