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# From Theory to Practice: The Impact of Ranked-Choice Voting in New York City

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<https://doi.org/10.4079/pp.v33i0.18>

*This previously appeared on Brief Policy Perspectives in December 2025 and was not subject to the same review process as our peer-reviewed journal articles.*

This November, the largest city in the United States elected a new mayor, but what has many New Yorkers talking is not just who won—it's how the candidates were chosen. Ranked-choice voting (RCV), the system used in the election, is becoming increasingly common across the country. As of October 2025, 52 jurisdictions in 23 states and Washington, DC—representing nearly 14 million voters—have adopted RCV, reflecting its growing momentum (FairVote 2025). Unlike traditional plurality voting, RCV allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference, giving them greater flexibility and reducing the pressure to choose only one.

As ranked-choice voting continues to gain traction, its impact is becoming increasingly evident, not only in the jurisdictions where it is implemented, but also in the ways campaigns are conducted and voters engage with the electoral process (University of Chicago n.d.). Across the United States, states are currently considering whether to authorize their counties to adopt RCV in local elections.

The 2025 New York City mayoral race provides a timely case study. Studying RCV in a city of this scale helps determine whether the system works in highly complex, diverse, high-turnout elections. If RCV can function smoothly in the nation's largest, most administratively-complex municipal election, then it likely is feasible elsewhere; expanding its use in both local and state elections could enhance voter empowerment and promote a more representative and

robust democratic system.

## The Ranked Choice Voting Process

In an RCV election, voters typically have the opportunity to rank three to five candidates in order of preference. Voters may use as few or as many of their slots as they want (Ballotpedia n.d.a). The first-choice votes are tallied, and if one candidate receives a majority of the first-preference votes, then that candidate is declared the winner. If, on the other hand, there is no majority winner, the eliminated candidate's votes are reallocated to the next preferred candidate on each voter's ballot. The ballots are reevaluated with the new candidate rankings, and a new tally is created. This process continues until a candidate gains a majority of the votes.

## Ranked Choice Voting Challenges and Drawbacks

Opponents of RCV argue that it complicates the voting process by requiring voters to spend more time researching multiple candidates and ranking their preferences, rather than simply choosing one (Britannica ProCon n.d.; ITR Foundation n.d.). However, this critique comes from the assumption that voters are not doing their research currently and that the popular vote system requires minimal voter involvement. However, democracy is most effective when citizens are trusted to actively engage in voter education efforts and choose who they believe will best represent them without being underestimated by the electoral college (IFES n.d.).

Hans von Spakovsky and J. Adams, in a 2019 Heritage Foundation report, contend that RCV undermines the principle of "one person, one vote" by discounting some votes through ballot exhaustion, which occurs when a voter's ranked choices are all eliminated, and potentially producing winners who do not truly represent the will of the voters (von Spakovsky and Adams 2019; Election Science n.d.). Critics further worry that the system's complexity could confuse voters, that strategic or incomplete rankings could distort outcomes, and that the administrative challenges of tabulating votes in a high-stakes election could undermine confidence in the results (Social Science Quarterly 2024; Ripon Society n.d.; Heartland Institute n.d.). In some critics' view, while RCV offers theoretical advantages, its practical application in a city as large and politically diverse as New York City may reveal significant limitations (Northeastern University n.d.). Ultimately, while these critiques underscore real concerns about voter comprehension and administrative complexity, they also reveal

that much of the opposition to RCV rests on assumptions about voter behavior and institutional capacity that may not reflect how voters actually engage with elections.

## Support for Ranked Choice Voting

Ranked-choice voting has transformed how some elections function by offering a meaningful alternative to the traditional plurality system. Support for RCV can be found across all party lines. Polling from *The Fulcrum* (2025) suggests greatest support among Democrats, meaningful backing from independents, and a minority of Republicans. Supporters of RCV argue that RCV empowers voters to express support for minor and third-party candidates without the fear of acting as spoilers, which can otherwise benefit less-preferred candidates (RCV Resources n.d.a). This freedom broadens democratic participation and reduces strategic voting (Science Direct 2024; University of Chicago n.d.).

Advocates also highlight RCV's potential to reduce polarization and encourage coalition-building, since candidates must appeal to voters beyond their core base to win second and third-choice ranking (Ballotpedia n.d.a). They argue that campaigns often become more consensus-driven and civil (RCV Resources n.d.b). Moreover, where RCV has been implemented successfully, it has offered a clearer picture of how voter preferences truly align with personal preference in comparison to the results from plurality elections by giving different results (American Bar Association 2025). While plurality elections may allow candidates to win with a narrow portion of the vote, RCV captures voters' full ranking of choices, offering a clearer and more comprehensive picture of community preferences.

The democratic process envisioned at the nation's founding was grounded in the idea that the government should reflect the will of the people and provide every individual with a genuine opportunity to be heard (American Heritage n.d.). However, the long-standing plurality voting system, originally intended to safeguard these principles, may no longer serve them effectively in an increasingly diverse and dynamic society. Adopting ranked-choice voting is not a departure from those democratic values but an effort to revitalize them, offering a system that more accurately captures and represents the full range of voter preferences.

## Ranked Choice Voting in Action

New York City provides one of the most relevant examples of RCV being used. NYC had 1.1 million people casting a ballot for the mayoral primary this year, far larger than any other American city using RCV (NYC Votes 2025; NYC Votes 2025). New York City voters first approved RCV for primary and special elections in 2019 (Federalist Society n.d.). Years later, RCV continues to be used for primary and special elections without any significant efforts to repeal the system, signaling that it has become a stable and accepted part of New York City's electoral process. This year's Democratic mayoral primary demonstrated just how transformative RCV can be for campaign strategies and voter engagement (Northeastern University n.d.).

In a crowded race of eleven candidates running for the Democratic nomination, the race truly came down to well-known centrist Andrew Cuomo versus up-and-coming democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani. Although progressives have traditionally been the strongest advocates of RCV, some worried that a Mamdani victory might alienate moderates and erode broader support for the system (The Fulcrum 2025; Federalist Society n.d.). Yet Mamdani's campaign showcased how RCV reshapes electoral dynamics by rewarding coalition-building and collaboration rather than division. Mamdani ran on a platform that consisted of free public bus rides, city-run grocery stores, and increased wealth taxes. These policies are typically seen as extreme and a quick way to kill a campaign. Instead, Mamdani gained traction not only with voters but with other candidates. Running mates such as Brad Lander and Adrienne Adams strategically cross-endorsed Mamdani, urging their supporters to rank him as a second choice (Politico 2025). Through these alliances, Mamdani's campaign illustrated how RCV encourages candidates to find common ground, broaden their appeal, and transform what might otherwise be a polarized contest into a more cooperative race.

Mamdani won the primary election and went on to win the general election, making him the city's first Muslim and South Asian mayor, and the youngest in more than a century (The City 2025). This invites deeper reflection on whether conventionally "electable" policies align with the majority's authentic preferences, or whether ranked-choice voting more accurately captures the electorate's genuine policy priorities.

## The Future of Ranked-Choice Voting

While the path to adoption may be complex, the growing support for RCV suggests a real opportunity to improve how Americans vote and how their voices are reflected in government. Zohran Mamdani's victory has become more than a singular electoral outcome; it has thrust ranked-choice voting into the center of a national debate about how to modernize American democracy. Recently there have been accelerated conversations within the Democratic National Committee about whether similar reforms should be adopted for 2028 primary elections (Washington Times 2025; Axios 2025). While no formal decision has been made, the fact that the DNC is seriously considering such a significant procedural change underscores the national relevance of RCV and how it may be the future of party reform.

At the same time, the long-term future of RCV is likely to unfold not through an immediate overhaul of national elections but through incremental authorization at the state level, that allows cities to implement the reform in local and municipal races (NCSL n.d.). Most RCV advocates typically target state and local elections, as most election rules (how ballots are cast, counted, and tabulated) are under state law and often state constitutions (Pew Research Center 2021). Advocates push for the state to authorize local jurisdictions to use RCV by passing a law or charter amendment (IVN 2025).

For RCV advocates, this moment represents a critical inflection point. The visibility and public conversation sparked by the New York City election provides an unprecedented opportunity to broaden understanding of the system, strengthen cross-party coalitions, and build pressure for enabling legislation statewide. Rather than being defined by any single race, the growing acceptance of RCV in major jurisdictions suggests its potential to drive more representative and responsive elections well into the future.

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