

Eric Buhler: Ranked Choice Voting: Keep Montana independent

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Ranked choice voting is as easy as one, two, three.

In a recent op-ed making its way around the state, the author says that ranked choice voting “can lead to second-preference votes counted as first-preference votes when a ballot’s first-preference candidate comes in last place in the first round of counting and is therefore excluded in the second round of counting. Overall, even if a candidate received the most votes but did not eclipse 50%, that candidate may not win.”

I’ll admit, this characterization of ranked-choice voting (RCV) is absolutely true. This is the whole point of RCV: to determine the most-preferred candidate among voters by eliminating the least-preferred candidate. It is this very simple point that detractors are trying to confuse you with when they say, “the winner didn’t get the most first-place votes.” Again, that is the point of ranking our choices: the most preferred candidate will not always equal the most first-place votes.

Representative Nikolakakos (R) from Great Falls said on the House floor, “It’s not complicated...It’s very simple. It’s very easy...and we should not override local control for a type of voting that is basically just an instant runoff.”

The purpose of RCV is to ensure that the winning candidate has broad support among voters. By allowing voters to rank their candidates, RCV can reduce the impact of candidates splitting the vote, promote positive campaigning and it has been shown to reduce the amount of wasted votes by three times.

Perhaps, you've never heard of this voting system that allows you to rank your candidates in order of preference, but that doesn't mean it's confusing or untested. Nikolakakos reminds the House, "It's passed in Maine. It's passed in Alaska. It's passed in states where people still have an independent mind like we do in Montana...independent people like ranked choice voting."

Besides statewide use in Maine and Alaska, RCV is used in several countries around the world, including Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand. In the United States, seven states use RCV for military and overseas voting and several cities have adopted RCV for local elections, including San Francisco, Oakland, Austin, New York City, Minneapolis and twenty-three cities in Utah.

However, in Montana, even though no jurisdiction currently uses RCV, HB 598 seeks to preemptively ban RCV from being used or even considered in Montana.

Representative Paul Green (R) from Columbus, representing the southeast area of Lame Deer stated on the House floor, "I don't believe that I have the capacity to tell another local community how they go about their elections. For that I'm gonna be a No."

Ryan Williamson from R Street Institute recently reviewed Alaska's first run with RCV and Final Four Open Primaries. "A review of initial evidence found that races in the state became more civil and competitive overall," writes Williamson. "Importantly, Alaskans viewed the process favorably, largely describing it as 'simple' despite some arguments to the contrary." In addition, Walter Olson from the Cato Institute states, "Alaska's new election system appears to have made races more competitive and voters found it easy to use. Candidates with crossover appeal may have benefited, but contrary to some chatter, Republicans overall did just fine."