

Ranked Choice Voting & Nonpartisan Primaries Study Materials [\(link to full study\)](#)

1. Proposed Position Statement on Ranked Choice Voting (RCV)

- The League of Women Voters of New York State supports the use of ranked-choice voting (a.k.a., instant runoff voting), in primary, general and/or special elections to elect federal, state, and/or local officials.
- With the adoption of any electoral system, the League believes that education of the voting public is important and funding for startup and voter education should be allocated.

2. Proposed Position Statement on Primary Systems that allow all registered voters to participate in the primary process, including the use of nonpartisan primaries

- The League of Women Voters of New York State supports changing from a closed partisan primary system to a primary system, including a nonpartisan primary system, that allows all registered voters to participate, regardless of party affiliation or lack thereof.
- We support the use of nonpartisan primaries to elect federal, state and local officials.

Desirability of Majority Requirement to Win

Under plurality voting (our current system), a candidate can win an election with less than a majority of votes cast whenever there are more than two candidates. In elections with three or more candidates, the candidate with the most votes might have lost to one or more of their opponents in a two-way race (known as the third-party disrupter effect). This is undesirable, and preventing it is the reason some jurisdictions use run-off elections. RCV is a less costly alternative that allows all voters to cast a vote that reflects the full complexity of their preferences without having to show up at the polls on multiple occasions.

Using plurality voting, any election with more than two candidates is subject to the third-party disrupter effect, so voters may be afraid to vote their true preferences, which can cause voters to feel cynical and disaffected. Fear of a spoiler can also cause parties to lean hard on challengers not to run. The result may be barriers to relatively unknown candidates entering electoral politics, and that contributes to the power of incumbency, which is not generally fair nor desirable.

Nonpartisan primaries enfranchise every registered voter

LWVUS supports electoral methods that encourage voter participation and voter engagement. The League encourages electoral methods that provide the broadest voter representation possible and are expressive of voter choices. Increasing numbers of voters decline to choose a party when they register to vote, meaning that they lose the power to vote in a primary election in New York. This trend is particularly pronounced among younger voters. Among voters aged 18-25, 44% do not choose a party.

Furthermore, in many jurisdictions, one party has a substantial registration advantage and excluding members of other parties or those not registered with a party may significantly limit the choice of candidate in the general election as the election may effectively occur at the primary. Additionally, primaries currently attract a small minority of voters registered with a party, often party activists, and these voters may hold the most doctrinaire positions in their parties. Closed partisan primaries give disproportionate power to the small number of voters who turn out to vote in primaries which may be contributing to polarization.

While any change to the voting system carries a risk of misunderstanding by voters accustomed to the previous electoral methods, the risks in this transition are low. Many voters do not currently understand the role of parties or the party primary system. Many school districts in New York already use nonpartisan primaries in school board elections, so the system is known to voters.

Potential Benefits of the Combination of RCV and Nonpartisan Primaries

Improve Voter Choice and Participation While Shifting Important Elections to November

Many jurisdictions in New York are dominated by one party, so that offices such as mayor, congressperson, state senator, or assemblymember are effectively decided in primaries where only one party's members are eligible to vote and only the most party-savvy and engaged voters do so. If general elections accommodate four or more candidates by using RCV, many primaries will become unnecessary. In the absence of primaries, the November election will be where the contest will be decided, with everyone eligible to vote. Voters are far more used to the idea of elections in November, so the system would not result in serious misunderstanding among voters who are not savvy to all the details of our electoral system. Reducing the number of primaries should save money, and if done in this way would not result in less choice for voters.

Combining RCV and Nonpartisan Primaries May Lead to More Collaborative Governance

A candidate can only win a party primary by appealing to voters of their own party. Hence New York's existing closed system may tend to support the selection of candidates from the more extreme wings of the parties.

With plurality voting, negative campaigning is often effective. However, when a candidate needs to work to attract voters' second or third choice, they are less likely to engage in shrill negative campaigning. If candidates can attract voters from any party, they will have less incentive to villainize other candidates and parties. The result may be that campaigns will contain less character assassination and more policy discussion, and legislative bodies will engage in more problem-solving and less ideologically driven brinkmanship.

Opposing Arguments

Ranked Choice Voting

RCV's effects on voter turnout are limited.

Research is inconclusive as to whether RCV has a strong impact on voter turnout as compared to plurality voting in elections other than runoff elections. There is little, if any, empirical data to support increased voter participation in RCV versus a traditional plurality system for general elections.

Implementing RCV would increase initial costs and could be confusing for voters.

Converting to RCV would require initial funding for new equipment and/or software and voter education. There would be a learning curve, both for voters and for election workers.

Understanding the tabulation of votes using RCV is less intuitive than plurality voting and could support claims of "stolen" elections.

People accustomed to plurality voting, in which the person with the most votes wins, could perceive ranked choice as unfair because the initial top vote-getter may not win after candidates with lower voter tallies votes are reallocated in successive rounds.

Nonpartisan Primaries

With nonpartisan primaries, the power of party committees to control who runs and the advantage the party-anointed candidates have would diminish. Those used to wielding such power are likely to find that disturbing. Nonpartisan primaries may diminish the power of the smaller parties in New York depending on whether candidates are allowed to claim multiple party affiliations.

Glossary of Terms

Crossover Voting: When voters cast ballots for candidates of a party they are not affiliated with. Nonpartisan primaries allow this naturally since all candidates compete together.

Independent Voters: Voters who do not register with a political party. Nonpartisan primaries often aim to include these voters fully in the electoral process.

Majority Requirement: Some systems require that the winning candidate in the general election secures a majority (more than 50% of the vote), which is not always necessary in a nonpartisan primary.

Multi-Winner System: An election with multiple winners, commonly used for legislative bodies with at large districts.

Nonpartisan Primary: An electoral system where all candidates appear on the same primary ballot, regardless of political party. All voters can participate, and the top candidates advance to the general election.

Open Primary: A primary election that allows voters from any party, or no party, to participate. Nonpartisan primaries are a specific type of open primary.

Closed Partisan Primaries: Voters are limited to voting in the primary of the party in which they are registered. New York employs a closed primary system.

Plurality Voting: A system in which the candidate with the most votes wins, even if they receive less than a majority. Runoffs eliminate this, either instantly via RCV or in a later election.

Runoff Election: A secondary election held when no candidate achieves the required threshold in the first election. Ranked choice voting eliminates this by using voters' second and later choices to reallocate votes for the least popular candidates to achieve an instant runoff.

Single-Winner System: A race to select one candidate, commonly used for executive offices such as mayor or governor.

Spoiler Effect: The influence of a minor-party or independent candidate in a plurality election who splits the vote and changes the outcome.

Top-Two Primary: A system in which the two candidates receiving the most votes in a nonpartisan primary proceed to the general election, regardless of their party affiliation.

Top-Four or Top-Five Primary: Variations of the nonpartisan primary where the top four or five candidates move forward to the general election, often paired with Ranked Choice Voting (RCV).