

Does Partisanship Matter? Adoption and Implementation of RCV in Red and Blue jurisdictions

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Abstract

Over the past two decades the United States has seen a resurgence of interest in electoral reform, specifically ranked choice voting [RCV]. RCV is seen as an electoral reform in which democracy is expanded; it gives voters a pathway to better communicate their true preferences by allowing them to rank the candidates in the race rather than just choosing one. Recently, research into RCV has increased substantially as scholars, reformers, and practitioners try to understand the impacts, benefits, and drawbacks of adopting RCV. There are several studies that find evidence that RCV increases voter turnout, however there is some evidence that says these results should be taken cautiously. On top of this, much research has been conducted that examines the impact of RCV on various demographic groups. Younger voters seem to be engaging with RCV more than older voters. Racial and gender representation also seem to be buoyed by RCV. What is less clear is the impact of political parties on RCV. This paper aims to fill this gap by investigating whether partisanship impacts feelings about RCV and whether or not partisanship impacts a jurisdiction's likelihood of adopting RCV. We have seen RCV adopted in deep blue areas (e.g. Minneapolis, New York City, San Francisco), bright red areas (e.g. several cities in Utah, Alaska), and more purple areas (e.g. Maine). Thus, RCV adoption seems to cut across partisanship. To further explore the intersection of partisanship and RCV, I will combine both qualitative and quantitative data. By conducting interviews with various RCV stakeholders in Alaska, Minneapolis, New York City, and San Francisco I will get a better understanding of how RCV came to be adopted in each of these areas, in addition to which groups were actively involved in adopting this reform and those who were actively in opposition. In addition to this qualitative data, I will use a uniquely compiled dataset to then better understand how partisanship may be impacting adoption of RCV. By combining qualitative and quantitative data, we will get a much clearer picture of the intersection of partisanship and support for RCV.

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American voters are generally unhappy with the state of the current political system. Any look at polling over the last decade or so signals a deep dissatisfaction among the American public. This dissatisfaction can be seen when pollsters ask voters if they think the country is on the right track - they don't. Looking at the Gallup trends in response to the question of whether the respondent is satisfied or dissatisfied with how things are going in the United States, the last time we saw a net positive result was January 2004 when 55 percent of respondents were satisfied compared with the 43 percent who were dissatisfied (Gallup 2022a). Similarly, when pollsters ask respondents if they approve of the job Congress is doing, we get very similar results - they don't. According to the Gallup trends on Congressional job approval, we have not seen approval overcome disapproval since January 2004 when 48 percent of the public approved of Congress's work compared with 45 percent who disapproved (Gallup 2022b). Even in this case, Congress did not have approval from 50 percent of the country—the last time that happened was in June 2003. Even more bleak is Gallup's measure of economic pessimism, which shows that a majority of Americans have been pessimistic about the U.S. economy since August 2000, when 52 percent of Americans were optimistic about the economic outlook—no doubt coinciding with the last time a budget surplus was reported (Jones 2022). Importantly, none of this is new. Writing in the 1990s, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) referred to this deep dissatisfaction among the American people as democratic malaise. So even if we see short bursts of support from the American public, it is likely not to last long.

These poll numbers are important because they demonstrate the amount of angst and dissatisfaction American voters feel at this moment. This dissatisfaction comes from voters regularly feeling unrepresented by their elected leaders. A 2015 Gallup poll found that 79 percent of voters believe most members of Congress are out of touch with the needs of American society (Dugan 2015). In a very similar finding, a Pew Research Report found that only 19 percent of the public trusts the government to do the right thing most of the time, with 55 percent of respondents saying average Americans would do a better job of solving national problems than Congress (Doherty et al 2015). All of this signals that voters do not believe that Congress understands their needs or how to solve “everyday” problems. Part of the

problem here is, no doubt, the increase in partisan polarization and ideological sorting (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Fiorina et al 2011). This means that American partisans have better aligned their ideological and party preferences; liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats have declined in number and migrated to the “appropriate” party (e.g. any liberal Republican now identifies as a Democrat). This has been especially noticeable in Congress, with Democrats and Republicans drifting further and further apart ideologically over the past several decades (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). As the two parties drift further and further apart, this raises deep concerns about representation and how voters feel about members of the opposite party representing them in Congress, or in any legislative capacity for that matter.

These feelings about representation are, at least in part, due to the election systems used throughout the country. Plurality voting in single member districts largely gives us the same types of politicians every election cycle: usually male, usually White, usually wealthy, and usually older. Obviously this is not always the case, as we do see leaders elected that are female, younger, and belong to a racial or ethnic minority group. Yet this is not a common occurrence. Even rarer is an elected official who does not hold a significant amount of wealth—at least at the national level. Looking at most elected officials, we see that the United States has a long way to go if we are aiming to make our elected leaders look more like the average American (i.e. make America more descriptively representative). Taken together, this leads many Americans to look for, discuss, or maybe even vote for some form of electoral reform. Currently, ranked choice voting [RCV] is one form of electoral reform that is gaining momentum across the United States. Currently used in 52 jurisdictions across the U.S., RCV allows the voters to rank multiple candidates on their ballot rather than just voting for one. Ballots are then counted through rounds of tallying until one candidate reaches over 50 percent.

Ranked choice voting arguably better gauges voters’ attitudes toward the candidates on their ballot than the traditional plurality system. It certainly allows the voter to convey more information to elected officials than the traditional ballot on which a voter only gets to select one candidate. By allowing the voter to rank their preferences, we may see some softening of the deep partisan divide in the U.S.

There is some evidence that RCV encourages more positive campaigning (Donovan et al 2016; Kropf 2021; McGinn 2020). This is because RCV allows voters to choose more than just one candidate. Candidates, therefore, are not inherently focused on advocating for themselves to the detriment of their opponents; instead, candidates can advocate for themselves and their positions while also drawing similarities between their candidacy and their opponents' positions. This is especially true if they are trying to ensure a voter includes them in second- or third-place rankings; they do not want to campaign so hard against an opponent as to prevent those voters from ranking them second, third, or fourth.

However, discussions of electoral reform (even those that may tone down the hyperpartisan rhetoric and generate more civil campaigning) are regularly politicized (Ahlquist et al 2018; Bowler and Donovan 2007; Druckman et al 2013). More importantly, in the United States, electoral reform is generally seen as a goal of the Democratic Party more so than a Republican priority (Coll et al 2022). However, there is little reason to suspect that RCV benefits one Party more than another. RCV has predominantly been adopted in blue jurisdictions (e.g. San Francisco, Minneapolis, New York City), but not exclusively so. In fact, in 2019 several cities in Utah began using RCV under a pilot program signed into law by the Governor the previous year. This paper examines whether or not there is a partisan motivation in adoption of RCV. To explore this question, I use a mixed-methods approach. First, I use a series of qualitative interviews with RCV stakeholders in Minneapolis, New York City, San Francisco, and Alaska to better understand how RCV came to be adopted in these jurisdictions. Then, I use a uniquely compiled dataset to explore whether or not partisanship is a driver of RCV adoption. But first I take a brief look at the existing research focused on the historical roots of RCV in the United States. Doing so highlights the fact that RCV is historically grounded in party politics, specifically the Progressive movement in the early 1900s.

The Partisan Roots of RCV

Ranked Choice Voting is not a new phenomenon to the United States. RCV made its first appearance in the USA in 1915 when it was adopted for municipal elections in Ashtabula, OH. RCV was a reform initially tied to the progressive voting reforms of the early 1900s (Santucci 2017). In addition to

Ashtabula, RCV went on to be adopted in more than 20 jurisdictions across the United States between 1915 and 1950, including Sacramento, CA, Cleveland and Cincinnati, OH, New York City, and several cities in Massachusetts. Throughout this initial round of adoption, RCV was largely a reform that was driven by the left: progressives, socialists, labor groups, and other left-aligned organizations.

The goals of the progressive movement involved several different social and political reforms: child-labor laws, antitrust regulation, women's suffrage, and government reform (Amy 2002). When specifically looking at government reform, progressives were largely focused on reducing the power of political machines (e.g. Tammany Hall in New York City) in order to clean up some of the corruption these machines were notorious for: bribery, political kickbacks, and patronage (Donovan and Smith 1994). To help advance the goals of the progressives, the Proportional Representation League was founded in 1893 to advocate for proportional representation in the United States which also received support from the working class and Socialists (Calvelli 2024). Socialists joined the cause because they viewed it as the easiest path to obtaining representation in Congress. They thought that working within the existing party structure would allow them to gain influence within the parties and ultimately win elective office. They were also joined by labor unions, which supported reform because they believed it would help produce minority representation, an important goal of the unions (Calvelli 2024). So, in the push for PR, election reformers partnered with Socialists, Progressives, and labor unions to achieve their goals of getting PR in as many jurisdictions as possible throughout the United States - drawing clear partisan lines of support in the first round of RCV adoption.

In 1912, the Proportional Representation League decided that targeting local elections for reform would be the best way to advance the reform agenda. In order to change local election processes, most cities require an amendment to their charter which normally requires a referendum vote (Amy 2002). While this is still certainly a lot of work, it requires less organizational effort, money, and resources than it would at the state or national level. The hope of many progressive reformers was that electoral reform would spread to localities across the country and expand upward (i.e. to the state and national levels). Two years later, in 1914, the National Municipal League (the leading proponent of urban reform) included

RCV elections in its model city charter lending significant support to election reform advocacy throughout the United States (Amy 2002).

Ultimately, these advocates were successful in spreading RCV, but RCV became entwined with progressive causes and as a result electoral reform became politicized. This politicization came partly as a result of the success of RCV. In a comprehensive study of Ohio's experimentation with reform, RCV created fairer and more proportional representation of political parties throughout the jurisdictions that used it. RCV eliminated the tendency of single member district systems to exaggerate seats given to the larger party and the subsequent underrepresentation of the smaller party (Barber 1995). Amy (1996) found similar results for New York City. Ashtabula saw the election of the first Irish Catholics to public office and Toledo saw Polish Americans elected for the first time. Additionally, African Americans were elected to public office for the first time in Cincinnati, Hamilton, and Toledo - something that was seen as impossible prior to the adoption of STV (Amy 2002). Thus, in terms of representation, RCV generated improvements. Underrepresented minority groups saw elected representation for the first time and partisan representation was better balanced across the two parties.

RCV also had the desired effects on political machines that reformers had hoped for. Cincinnati, for example, actually saw its political machine lose its majorities after adopting reform. Amy (2002, 269) writes, "After the transition to PR, Cincinnati went from a city with one of the worst reputations for corruption to one that won praise for the integrity and professionalism of its city government." While this was the case in Cincinnati, it was not the case for all cities that adopted RCV. Not all political machines lost power, but RCV adoption still had an impact. RCV allowed for nomination and election of independent partisans - those not endorsed or supported by the machines, helping chip away at the power of party bosses (Amy 1996). So, while RCV did not necessarily eliminate political machines across the country, it did limit their power in a number of cities that adopted the reform, helping give that power back to the voters.

It was RCV's success that ultimately led to its undoing, as by 1950 all but two jurisdictions repealed its usage and returned to using plurality elections. Parties and candidates who lost under RCV

raised complaints and legal challenges against it. This is not surprising given the fact that adoption of RCV led to parties and politicians needing to adapt their campaigns and strategies to a new election system, many of whom were reluctant to do so. In many cases, political parties mounted legal challenges to RCV with some state courts siding with these parties, ruling that RCV violated state constitutions. In other cases, voters repealed RCV in the same way it was adopted: through persistent efforts at popular referenda. Opponents to reform would find a wealthy donor, who would fund repeal campaigns. Over time, supporters of reform would lose interest or simply run out of energy to continue defending reform, and ultimately any reform would be repealed.

Additionally, in some cities, some of the coalition partners surrounding RCV came to believe that minorities were becoming overrepresented with the reforms in place (Busch 1995). Cincinnati provides a prime example. It used RCV for roughly three decades and in a majority of those years, their city council included an African American member - something that did not happen prior to adoption of RCV. At the time, the mayor of Cincinnati was largely a ceremonial role and the council would often elect from among its members the councilmember who received the most votes to serve as mayor (Lee and Eberhard 2021). However, in both 1953 and 1955, an African American - Ted Berry - received the most votes. Instead of voting for an African American to be mayor of one of America's most populous cities, the council voted for one of the White councilors instead (Lee and Eberhard 2021). In 1957, it appeared that Berry was once again likely to be the recipient of the most first-place rankings, leading many to wonder if he rightly deserved to be Cincinnati's mayor. However, in response, White Cincinnati residents mounted a campaign to repeal RCV rather than accept an African American mayor (Barber 1995). In this odd-year, low-turnout election, Cincinnati residents voted to repeal RCV with White-majority precincts voting in favor of repeal and minority-majority precincts voting against (Lee and Eberhard 2021).

Ultimately, similar storylines played out in the other jurisdictions that adopted RCV - minority representation was too great, repeal efforts were better funded, and supportive groups ran out of steam (Amy 2002). By 1960 only Cambridge, MA and Arden, DE had resisted the repeal efforts and continued to use RCV for municipal elections. This history of RCV in the United States highlights how these early

adoptions of RCV and their subsequent repeals were politicized - clearly linked with left-aligned parties, groups, and organizations. The question, therefore arises whether or not this alignment is still true today. Clearly, when taking a look at the jurisdictions throughout the country today that use RCV for some elections, these areas are bluer than those that have not, but not exclusively so. There are some red areas that have chosen to adopt RCV as well. The mechanism of RCV is not inherently partisan - it simply allows voters to rank their preferences instead of just selecting one candidate. But, due to its partisan history, the assumption persists that it is a liberal reform. Additionally, there is consistent evidence today that RCV is expanding representation of minority and female voices - something that led to RCV's undoing at the end of the Progressive era (Crowder-Meyer et al 2021; John et al 2016; Lamendola and Terrell 2020; Otis and Dell 2021). So, the idea that RCV is more aligned with Democratic areas rather than Republican persists.

Comparative Case Studies: RCV Adoption in Alaska, Minneapolis, New York City, and San Francisco

To begin to unpack whether there is still a belief that RCV is associated with Democratic politics, I spoke with a number of stakeholders in four different jurisdictions: Alaska, Minneapolis, New York City, and San Francisco. Minneapolis, New York City, and San Francisco are largely blue areas, while Alaska is reliably red. These stakeholders included elected officials, government officials, advocates, journalists, and advisors. Three questions were used to better understand how these jurisdictions decided to adopt RCV: 1) What factors led to the adoption of RCV in your jurisdiction?; 2) From your vantage point, please describe what local party leader involvement looked like leading up to the adoption of RCV; 3) How would you describe the strength of the major two parties in your jurisdiction? The results of those interviews are synthesized below.

San Francisco, California

San Francisco's adoption of RCV in 2002 tells the story of how reformers were able to leverage insider political relationships within a progressive legislative environment. The city's adoption of RCV can largely be characterized as strategic coalition building that united political actors within the city while

capitalizing on widespread dissatisfaction with the existing runoff system (De Leon 2025; Gonzalez 2025; Mirkarimi 2025; Pimentel 2025). Steven Hill emerged as the central driving force in San Francisco's RCV campaign, bringing together leaders and experts from various sectors into a cohesive coalition to advance the prospect of adopting RCV (De Leon 2025; Gonzalez 2025; Hernandez 2024). We saw this approach of fostering collaboration among key individuals and groups that had overlapping interests and expertise paralleled in New York City's strategy more closely than Minneapolis or Alaska, which tended to rely more on a single organizational driver. This coalition brought together political players from multiple sectors, creating a broad base of support that included members of the Board of Supervisors, the Democratic Party, the Green Party, among other local community groups and organizations.

RCV advocates in San Francisco employed a number of different actions to help advance RCV. Activities included targeted lobbying of Board of Supervisors members, co-authoring the ballot proposition, extensive community organizing through one-on-one conversations, radio appearances, phone banking, and precinct walking (Hill 2024; Gonzalez 2025; Hernandez 2024; Mirkarimi 2025). Advocates also directed efforts toward the Democratic County Central Committee, recognizing the importance of working within the city's party structure. In order to effectively advocate for RCV adoption, San Francisco supporters framed RCV primarily around cost savings and runoff election problems. The messaging promoted RCV as a solution capable of simultaneously addressing the practical concerns about election costs and low turnout in runoff elections (Gollinger 2025; Gonzalez 2025; Pimentel 2025).

San Francisco is very clearly a Democratic-dominant city, characterized by multiple factions and clubs. This created both opportunities and challenges for RCV advocates. The city's progressive supermajority on the Board of Supervisors proved crucial, as did the support of the Board President (Gonzalez 2025; Hill 2024). Unlike the other jurisdictions examined here, San Francisco advocates actively cultivated and leveraged party and Board support to drive adoption, though parties themselves did not lead the reform effort. The endorsement landscape reflected San Francisco's factional Democratic politics. The Democratic County Campaign Committee endorsed the measure, as did Green Party leaders

and various smaller clubs (Mirkarimi 2025). However, the driving force remained a cross-partisan alliance of Greens, Independents, and progressive Democrats rather than a single party. This pattern of leveraging party connections while maintaining advocacy leadership outside formal party control distinguishes San Francisco's approach from the more party-avoidant strategies employed in Minneapolis, New York City, and Alaska.

Therefore, when holistically evaluating the adoption process in San Francisco, three factors ultimately seem to have led to a successful adoption campaign: 1) political insider relationships, particularly with Board members; 2) the progressive legislative landscape willing to explore electoral reform; and 3) the broader political climate, which included reverting back to district elections at the local level, growing frustration with runoff election costs and turnout, and negative campaigning (Hill 2024; Gollinger 2025; Gonzalez 2025; Mirkarimi 2025; Sethi 2024; Walton 2025). These contextual factors opened the Overton window for RCV reform, which its advocates successfully navigated.

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Minneapolis adopted RCV through a November 2006 ballot measure, embarking on an implementation journey that would span nearly three years before it was first used in municipal elections – mayor, city council, park and recreation board, and board of estimate and taxation. The Minneapolis case demonstrates how sustained community education and deliberate non-partisan coalition building can overcome initial hesitancy among the local political parties.

Jeanne Massey and FairVote Minnesota served as the central organizing force behind Minneapolis's choice to adopt RCV (Kruger 2025; Massey 2025; Palmisano 2025). Unlike San Francisco's network of individual political actors, advocacy within Minneapolis centered on a dedicated organization with a clear non-partisan identity. This organizational approach reflected the assessment that RCV's success required buy-in from all major electoral constituencies—parties, candidates, and voters—which could best be achieved through sustained education presented from a non-partisan perspective (Grossman 2025; Massey 2025; Perez 2025).

In its advocacy for RCV, FairVote Minnesota focused on relationship building and careful,

intentional coalition expansion over time. This coalition building included cultivating relationships with both major parties, nurturing support from nonprofit organizations, gaining endorsements from party leaders, and ensuring prospective candidates were supportive of RCV (Jenkins 2025; Massey 2025; Palmisano 2025). While Minneapolis is heavily Democratic, there are factions within the Democratic Party (e.g. Democratic Socialists, Socialists, etc.), making adoption a little more challenging. There was initial skepticism and hesitancy among elected officials when RCV was proposed because it would require changes to normal campaign processes that elected officials had become accustomed to (Jenkins 2025; Palmisano 2025; Payne 2025). However, the Democratic Party proved more open to RCV while Republicans showed little interest due to the lack of popularity of RCV in Republican dominant areas of the state (Jenkins 2025; Payne 2025; Ramsey 2025; Zaunbrecher 2025). Regardless, FairVote Minnesota worked to create an educational strategy that demystified RCV and addressed questions/concerns prior to adoption.

The effort to educate Minneapolis stakeholders about RCV prior to voting on it was extensive. Community leaders, elected officials, and nonprofit leaders collaborated in organizing events designed to ensure voter familiarity with RCV before the ballot measure (Massey 2025; Perez 2025; Ramsey 2025). These efforts underscore RCV's advocates' understanding that sustainable reform required not just adoption but genuine stakeholder understanding so that voters were making an informed choice.

In Minneapolis, there were two primary factors that led to favorable conditions for RCV adoption: the political culture and electoral environment challenges. The city's political culture was characterized by a "politically vicious" environment, growing opposition to the rigid two-party system, willingness to experiment with electoral innovations, increasing support for third parties and outlier candidates, and interest in "voting your conscience" rather than strategic voting (Jenkins 2025; Perez 2025). These cultural attributes created an electorate potentially receptive to alternative voting methods. Simultaneously, the electoral environment presented problems that RCV seemed likely to address. Like San Francisco and New York city, low turnout in costly runoff elections was a driving issue in addition to the candidates' tendency to campaign only in areas of assured support rather than broadly across districts

– something that was also noted as an issue in New York City (Brewer 2025; Palmisano 2025). These frustrations, combined with the cultural factors, and FairVote’s commitment to advocacy generated the momentum for change that was needed to convince Minneapolis to adopt RCV.

FairVote Minnesota's patient advocacy gradually transformed attitudes toward RCV. Local elected officials, particularly progressives, eventually came around and supported RCV due to FairVote’s sustained advocacy efforts (Massey 2025). The adoption of RCV in party caucuses also helped familiarize voters with the concept before its implementation in municipal elections, providing a testing ground that fostered familiarity (Massey 2025; Perez 2025). This gradual progression from hesitancy among the parties to progressive support underscores the importance of sustained advocacy and the importance of demonstrating RCV in lower-stakes environments before full implementation.

Following adoption, Minneapolis engaged in meticulous implementation planning, hoping for a smooth transition from plurality elections to RCV. A Task Force was created within one month of adoption, complete with Technical Advisory and Legislative Rules subcommittees (City of Minneapolis 2025). From January 2007 through May 2009, the city focused on adopting "Ranked Choice Voting" as the official name of the voting mechanism, carefully reviewing the enabling ordinance, and determining the process by which ballots would be counted to ensure compliance with Minnesota law.

A test election held in May 2009 allowed officials to evaluate initial ballot designs, train election workers, begin voter education efforts, and develop hand-counting protocols (City of Minneapolis 2025). Analysis of test election feedback led to ballot improvements before the first use of RCV in November 2009. Notably, because Minnesota law required certification of electronic voting systems and no certified RCV equipment existed, Minneapolis developed the "Minnesota Method" for hand-counting—a system capable of processing a 70,000-voter turnout election for 22 offices in 37 eight-hour shifts using 102 election judges (City of Minneapolis 2025). This hand-counting process took 15 days following the first RCV election but ensured candidates were seated on time and established a careful, transparent counting protocol in line with Minnesota election law.

Minneapolis's deliberate, education-focused approach reflected advocates' understanding that

successful implementation of RCV required not just legal adoption but institutional capacity and public understanding. This investment in preparation distinguished Minneapolis's pathway to adoption and contributed to RCV's continued use in all subsequent municipal elections.

New York City, NY

New York City adopted RCV through a Charter Commission revision process, with the measure ultimately approved by voters in 2019. The New York case illustrates how reform can succeed through government-adjacent leadership with broad coalition organizing, even in the absence of strong party support.

Susan Lerner of Common Cause New York was clearly the central leader behind the push for RCV in New York City. Identified by almost every individual we spoke with, Lerner was clearly seen as the gravitational center around which a variety of interested groups collaborated (Brewer 2024; Goff 2024; Rivlin-Nadler 2025; Kellner 2025). New York's approach most closely resembled San Francisco's strategy of coordinating a diverse array of key individuals rather than relying on a singular organization to make the push. However, New York's pathway to reform through the Charter Commission added a distinctive institutional dimension that shaped advocacy strategies.

The pre-adoption phase involved multiple complementary activities. Research-based information and advice flowed from advisors and think tanks to the Charter Commission, other non-governmental organizations, and communications leaders (Goff 2024; Green 2024; Kellner 2025; Rivlin-Nadler 2025; Restler 2024; Wang 2024). Public communication encompassed testimony to the Commission, press conferences, media coverage, NGO position statements, and promotional activities. This multifaceted approach combined expert knowledge through research with public engagement.

Once the Charter Commission placed RCV on the ballot, a variety of NGOs and local government entities conducted widespread voter education campaigns – focusing mainly on the technical aspects of the ballot (Goff 2024; Green 2024; Hughes 2025; Quesenbery 2025; Stabile 2024; Swatek 2024; Wang 2024). This division of labor—with the Commission providing institutional legitimacy and diverse organizations providing public education—proved strategically effective in building support

across New York's complex political landscape.

There were five main factors that led to conditions favorable to RCV adoption in New York: timing, financial resources, public support, runoff system problems, and perceived potential benefits (Brewer 2024; Restler 2024; Rivlin-Nadler 2025). The timing proved particularly crucial, as a massive City Council turnover was approaching, creating both opportunity for electoral innovation and particular appeal for RCV's potential benefits when many new candidates would be competing (Goff 2024). Simultaneously, broader anxiety about declining participation levels helped generate support for reform. Public support manifested at multiple levels. Key governmental officials provided testimony and public advocacy, Common Cause supplied crucial leadership in driving research and advocacy, and numerous NGOs participated in advocacy, research, and public communications campaigns (Brewer 2024; Goff 2024; Kellner 2025). This diverse base of support helped create momentum for RCV that proved larger than any single organization or political faction. Additionally, the existing runoff system provided a concrete target for advocates for electoral reform. Runoffs were costly and led to victories with narrow margins and low turnout. RCV offered an alternative, promising both cost savings and majority winners (Green 2024; Hughes 2025; Kellner 2025). Finally, a potential benefit of electoral reform included the possibility of increasing diversity of local elected officials. Many believed that RCV would help diversify elected officials and increase the number of candidates seeking office, appeals that proved particularly resonant given the anticipated Council turnover.

New York City, like San Francisco and Minneapolis, is predominantly Democratic. Though, again like the previous two case studies, it is also characterized by factional divisions among Democrats, creating a complex environment for electoral reform. Parties demonstrated hesitancy toward RCV, viewing it as potentially threatening to incumbents, reflecting general risk aversion and resistance to change, and sometimes appearing scared or hesitant even to oppose the measure publicly (Brewer 2024; Restler 2024; Rivlin-Nadler 2025). Recognizing minimal party support, RCV advocates pursued a strategy of working around parties while partnering with supportive individual elected officials and external groups (Goff 2024; Swatek 2024). This approach paralleled Minneapolis and Alaska more

closely than San Francisco, which had more successfully leveraged party structures. While party support remained minimal overall, certain party-affiliated elected officials did publicly support the measure and actively advocated for adoption – most notably long-time Councilwoman Gale Brewer (Brewer 2024; Goff 2024; Restler 2024).

This navigation of party dynamics reflected strategic pragmatism. Rather than viewing party reluctance as prohibitive, advocates pivoted, using other factors to determine campaign viability and proceeded by building alternative bases of support (Green 2024; Kellner 2025; Wang 2024). The Charter Commission process itself provided an institutional pathway that circumvented the need for party-driven reform, allowing advocates to build support through research, public engagement, and coalition organizing rather than working directly with City Council to place RCV on the ballot.

Alaska

Alaska's adoption of RCV through a 2020 ballot measure represents the most recent case examined and the only statewide implementation – currently just one of two states to adopt RCV for statewide use. Alaska's pathway distinguished itself through its integration of RCV with Final Four voting and dark money reforms, creating a comprehensive electoral reform package that simultaneously addressed multiple concerns held by Alaskan voters.

Scott Kendall drafted the ballot measure that led to RCV adoption in Alaska, with the campaign led predominantly by Alaskans for Better Elections, an organization created specifically to advocate for this reform package (Hutchinson 2025; Kendall 2025). This single-organization focus resembled Minneapolis's approach – reliant on FairVote Minnesota – more than the multi-actor networks characteristic of San Francisco and New York. However, Alaska advocates confronted more hostile institutional opposition, with many state elected officials actively campaigning against the reform (Giessel 2025; Lucky 2025; Kendall 2025).

The comprehensive nature of Alaska's reform—combining RCV with Final Four voting and dark money restrictions—reflected a strategic calculation that bundling multiple reforms could build a broader coalition and address multiple sources of electoral dissatisfaction at the same time. This approach differed

from the more focused RCV-only campaigns in other jurisdictions, potentially broadening appeal while also increasing the stakes and complexity of the advocacy effort.

There were three primary factors that created conditions favorable to electoral reform in Alaska: desire for change to the state's primary system, polarization, and a politically diverse electorate (Giessel 2025; Kendall 2025; Lucky 2025; Fenumiai 202). Frustration with the closed primary system generated demand for reform, leading to the formation of a dedicated group focused on changing these elections, with particular emphasis on addressing dark money concerns alongside voting methods (Giessel 2025; Kendall 2025). Polarization in Alaska's state legislature created increasing dysfunction that reform advocates effectively exploited. Growing perceptions that the legislature was not functioning, combined with gridlock in both the state House and Senate and increasing polarization among elected officials, generated public openness to structural reforms promising to reduce polarization's negative effects (Giessel 2025; Kendall 2025; Lucky 2025). Alaska's politically diverse electorate proved crucial to reform prospects. A majority of Alaskans identify outside the two major parties, reflecting a strong non-partisan streak (Kendall 2025; Montemayor 2025). While Republicans represent the strongest of the two major parties, Unaffiliated or Non-Party identifiers actually outnumber Republicans. This independent streak within Alaska created an opportunity for, and openness to, reforms that could appeal beyond traditional party boundaries, as neither major party could claim majority status among the electorate – at least in terms of registered party membership.

Alaska exhibited the most pronounced party opposition among the four jurisdictions examined here. Both major parties opposed the reform, with local party leaders joining elected officials in opposition (Giessel 2025; Kendall 2025). This resistance reflected the parties' fear of losing control over candidate selection and electoral processes – to say nothing of having to learn a new set of rules under which to campaign. Most elected officials, particularly those firmly linked to a party, opposed RCV adoption (Giessel 2025). Given the parties' resistance to reform, it should come as little surprise that support for reform came primarily from outside traditional party structures. Moderate progressives and third parties supported the reform, while progressives within the major parties offered only tepid support

(Lucky 2025; Montemayor 2025). This pattern reflected Alaska's unique political landscape, where the concentration of Independent identifiers and the strength of non-partisan identification created space for reform advocacy that explicitly positioned itself against party control.

The strategy of working around, and even against, party structures in Alaska contrasted sharply with San Francisco's leveraging of progressive party factions and resembled the party-circumventing approaches employed in Minneapolis and New York. Alaska advocates essentially bet that the state's Independent-heavy electorate would support reform despite party opposition, a calculation that proved correct but underscored the challenges reformers face when parties view electoral changes as existential threats.

Does Partisanship Impact Adoption Likelihood? A Brief Quantitative Look

Based on the information collected from key stakeholders in the above case studies, it seems like political parties were more hesitant to embrace reform rather than lending their support to RCV adoption.

However, we still see that each of the above jurisdictions adopted RCV regardless of the reluctance of the political parties. So, what made these jurisdictions choose to pursue RCV adoption if not partisanship? Instead of adoption being driven by one particular party (i.e. the Democratic Party), it seems like it may be that one-party dominance in a particular jurisdiction is what makes a jurisdiction interested in adopting election reform. Looking at the partisan breakdown of these four jurisdictions in Figures 1-4, it is clear that each is dominated by one party. San Francisco, Minneapolis, and New York City are all largely Democratic dominant and while Alaska is the most diverse, they are still mostly Republican dominant.

[Figures 1-4 about here]

To test this hypothesis, I use the research design developed by Kimball and Anthony (2016) and a uniquely compiled data set that brings together demographic data of various jurisdictions along with the partisan homogeneity of a district (i.e. how uniformly the area identifies as Democratic or Republican). First, as Kimball and Anthony (2016) do, I compile a list of jurisdictions that have adopted RCV and demographically similar jurisdictions that have not adopted RCV. This list of jurisdictions can be found in Appendix A. The dependent variable in this equation is whether or not the jurisdiction adopted RCV. I

then run a logistic regression equation with the following independent variables: age, education, income, race, the number of foreign born individuals in a jurisdiction, and party homogeneity. All variables, except for party homogeneity are taken from the 2020 U.S. Census data to measure traits of these jurisdictions. So, the mean age, mean education level, mean income, percentage white, and the percentage of the population that is foreign born are included in the model. The party homogeneity score is taken from the Cook Partisan Voting Index, which measures how Democratic or Republican a jurisdiction is. For example, a jurisdiction that is labeled R+2 is two points more Republican than the country as a whole in the past two presidential elections, while a score of EVEN means the jurisdiction is within half a point of how the country voted. The larger the number, the more one-sided the jurisdiction is. While compiling this data, I did not differentiate between Republican and Democrat strength, but instead just captured how strong one party performed in that jurisdiction. The results of this model are presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

The results in Table 1 confirm the hypothesis that the more homogenous a jurisdiction is, the more likely that jurisdiction is to adopt RCV. The measure of party homogeneity is actually the only variable that attains significance. The odds ratio of 1.17 highlights the fact that as an area gets more uniform in its partisanship, it is more likely to adopt RCV by a factor of 1.17. Admittedly, this is a small sample size, so this result should be taken with caution, but it certainly lends support to the idea that the more one-party dominant a jurisdiction is, the more likely that jurisdiction is to explore electoral reform. The other variables fail to attain levels of statistical significance, despite the fact that they all present challenges to adopting RCV. Older, less educated, minority, and less wealthy voters have shown a propensity to struggle with RCV shortly after it is rolled out (Coll 2021; Wendland and Carman 2023).

Why do we see party homogeneity linked with a willingness to adopt RCV? Likely because there is more comfort with exploring electoral reform in a safe district rather than one that is more competitive. In conducting these interviews, it became clear that politicians were reluctant to embrace RCV because they were reluctant to campaign under new rules. They understood - and more importantly won - under

the old rules and were therefore less than excited to endorse a new electoral mechanism that would force them to learn new rules and campaign differently than how they were used to. In fact, a council member of New York said, “I don’t remember the parties being particularly supportive. The parties generally aren’t supportive of good government reforms. They [parties] don’t know what the f*ck they are doing. Progressives weren’t worried about losing power under RCV” (Restler 2024). Ultimately, it seems like when one party dominates a jurisdiction, the voters and politicians are more comfortable experimenting with electoral reform - especially when the voters are the ones pushing for it.

Conclusions

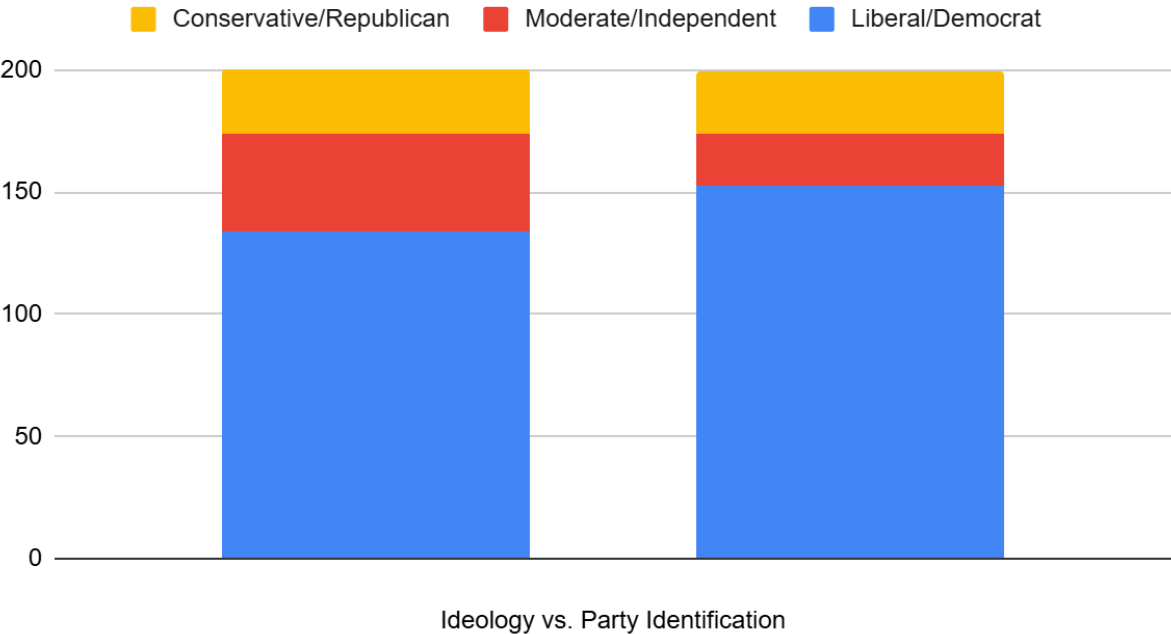
Ranked Choice Voting has no doubt seen a resurgence in interest over the past two decades. As a result, research into RCV has increased substantially as scholars, reformers, and practitioners work to understand the impact, benefits, and drawbacks of adopting RCV as their jurisdiction’s election mechanism. There are several studies that point to evidence that RCV increases voter turnout (Bowler et al 2003; Juelich and Coll 2021; Dowling et al 2024), engages younger voters (Juelich and Coll 2021; Wendland and Carman 2023), and increases participation and representation across racial and gender groups (John et al 2018; Otis and Dell 2021; Terrell et al 2021).

What is much less clear in the extant research is whether or not political parties are playing a role in RCV adoption. I have set out to help shed light on this question. Through qualitative interviews with key stakeholders in Alaska, Minneapolis, New York City, and San Francisco I was able to gain a depth of knowledge about what drove RCV adoption in those jurisdictions - both the idiosyncrasies of each of these areas as well as similarities across them. One common theme across all four jurisdictions is that the Democratic and Republican parties were largely hesitant and skeptical of electoral reforms. Some of this hesitancy stemmed from principled reasoning, but most of it came from a reluctance to change the rules under which they could win elective office. To further investigate this question, I pulled together data on a subset of jurisdictions - some of which have adopted RCV and some which have not. Combined with their demographic characteristics, I used logistic regression to demonstrate that RCV is not driven by partisanship per se, but rather the amount of party homogeneity in a jurisdiction that creates a willingness

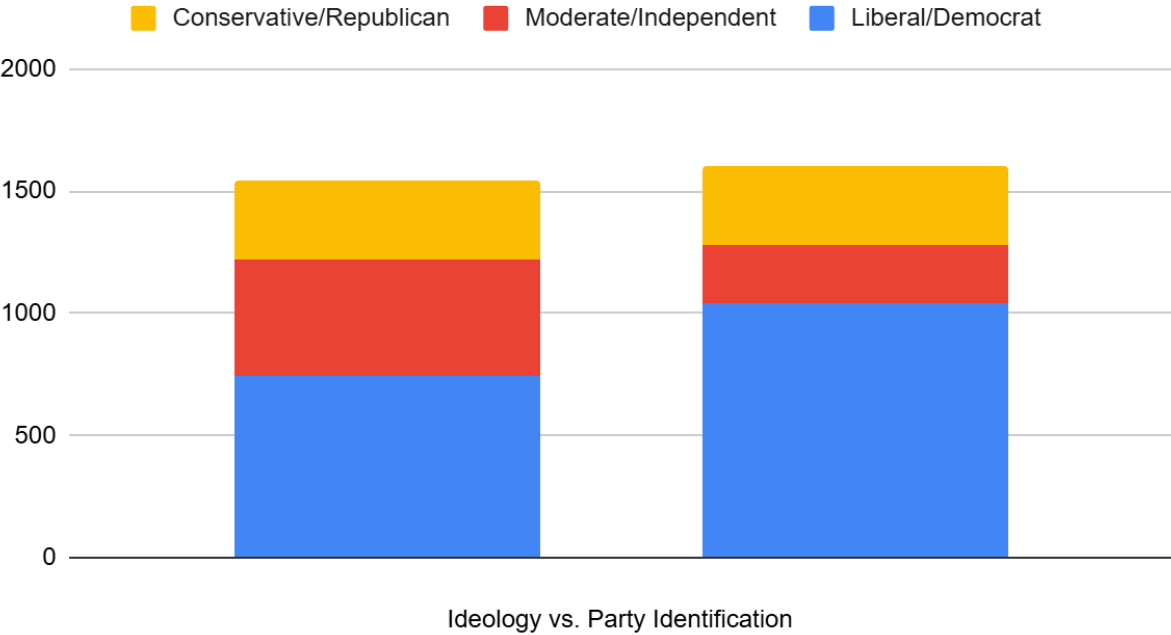
to explore electoral reform. This is, admittedly, a small dataset so these results should certainly be taken cautiously. However, these results provide support for the idea that jurisdictions that are dominated by a single party are ripe for electoral reform.

Through the interviews, it became clear that even in these one-party dominant jurisdictions, the parties were not necessarily uniform. In fact, in each jurisdiction explored in-depth here, almost every stakeholder discussed the factionalization of the parties within their area. This factionalization highlights that there is a certain amount of ideological diversity within the parties. While parties are certainly better sorted today, they are still not monolithic in their ideological beliefs. This ideological diversity pairs nicely with RCV. With RCV, Democratic voters can rank three to five different Democrats in a primary while Republicans can also rank a variety of candidates in their primary. This allows partisan voters to better express their opinions about which candidate better represents their values and issue positions. RCV is therefore not a red or a blue reform, but rather a reform that allows red and blue voters a better mechanism through which to communicate their true preferences.

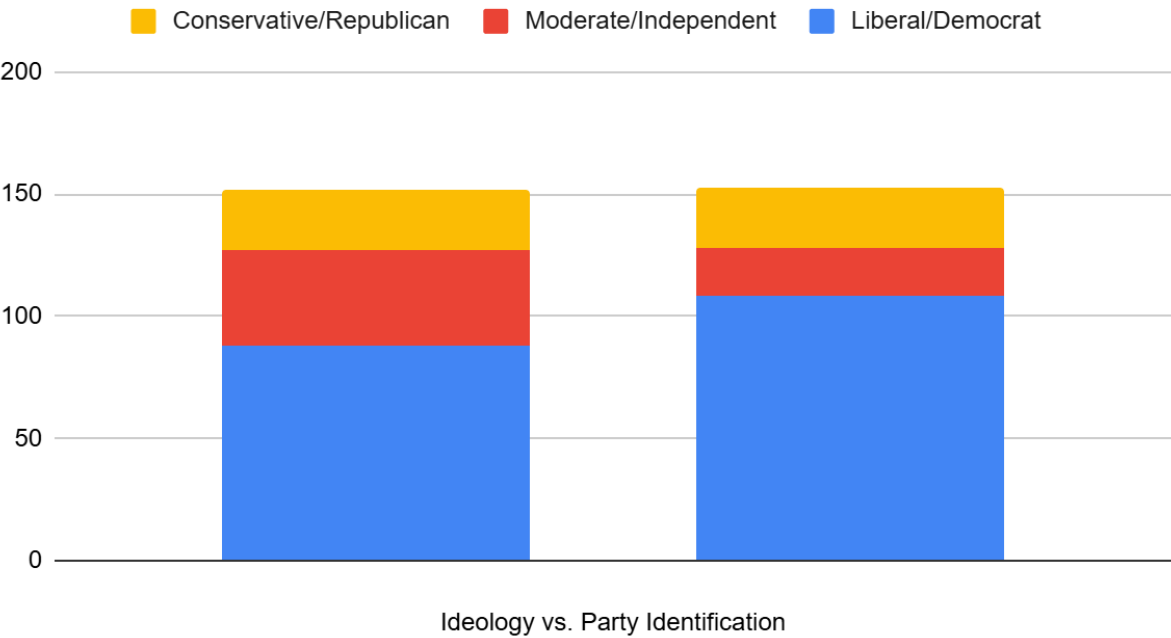
San Francisco, CA: Ideology vs. Partisan Self-Identification



New York City, NY: Ideology vs. Partisan Self-Identification



Minneapolis, MN: Ideology vs. Partisan Self-Identification



Alaska: Ideology vs. Partisan Self-Identification

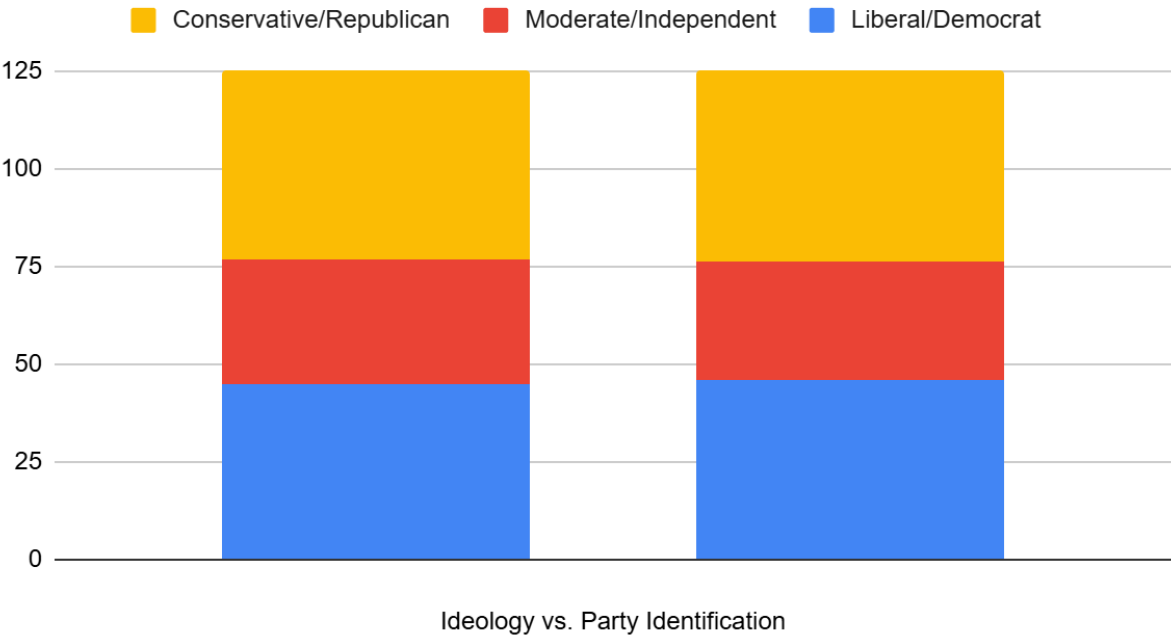


Table 1: Logistic Regression Results of Predictors of RCV Adoption

Variable	Coefficient	Robust Standard Error
Party Homogeneity	.155 * (1.17)	.061
Age	.406	.292
Education	.130	.079
Income	-0.0001	.0001
White	0.456	.061
Foreign Born	0.112	.088
Constant	-22.09	14.025
N	31	
R-Squared	.4773	

Note: * denotes $p < 0.05$; t-test used due to smaller sample size

Appendix: Cities Included in Analysis Found in Table 1

RCV City	Matched RCV Cities
Minneapolis, MN	Boston, MA; Cincinnati, OH; Tulsa, OK; Seattle, WA
St. Paul, MN	Cedar Rapids, IA; Des Moines, IA; Madison, WI; Spokane, WA
Cambridge, MA	Ann Arbor, MI; Lowell, MA; Stamford, CT; Worcester, MA
Berkeley, CA	Alameda, CA
Oakland, CA	Anaheim, CA; Santa Ana, CA;
San Leandro, CA	Santa Clara, CA; Stockton, CA; Richmond, CA
San Francisco, CA	San Jose, CA
Portland, ME	Lewiston, ME; Dover, NH
New York City, NY	Chicago, IL

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