

Support for Ranked Choice Voting and Partisanship of Voters: Results from a National Survey Experiment

Joseph Anthony (Oklahoma State University)

David C. Kimball (University of Missouri-St. Louis)

Jack Santucci (Drexel University)

Jamil Scott (Georgetown University)

Abstract:

This paper presents the results from a national survey experiment that tests how voters evaluate alternative voting rules, like ranked choice voting (RCV). We examine data from the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), which allows for comparisons across racial groups. The ability to have one's vote transfer to a second or third choice candidate is a major selling point of RCV. However, there is little direct evidence indicating whether American voters really like this feature. We find that a short explanation of the vote transfer properties of RCV does not increase public support for the voting rule. Furthermore, when given a choice between the single and ranked voting methods, a large majority among four racial groups prefers the status quo option of the single vote. However, Latino, Black, and Asian American respondents evaluate ranked choice voting more positively and express a stronger preference for RCV than White respondents. Furthermore, communicating that RCV helps elect more women and people of color increases preferences for RCV among Latino, Black, and Asian American voters, but not among White voters. Finally, partisanship is an inconsistent predictor of support for voting rules across racial groups. Jurisdictions adopting ranked choice voting will need sustained voter education campaigns to overcome initial public resistance to new voting rules.

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Introduction

A growing number of state and local jurisdictions in the United States have recently adopted preferential voting rules, known in the United States as ranked choice voting (RCV). While these reforms are gaining in number, there is a small evidence base indicating how American voters evaluate RCV rules. For example, the ability to have one's vote transfer to a second or third choice candidate is a major selling point of RCV. When given an explanation of the vote transfer properties of RCV, do American voters evaluate RCV more positively? How do Americans respond to other common argument for and against ranked choice voting? Do these evaluations vary across racial groups? Our study answers these questions by conducting a survey experiment to test how voters evaluate and use ranked choice voting (RCV).

American voters have little knowledge or experience with alternatives to plurality voting rules. This means that they are likely to be influenced by arguments about the positive or negative features of alternative voting rules. In the context of a voting task, we test whether arguments emphasizing the voter transfer properties of RCV, its alleged impact on diversity in political representation, and its confusing features, influence public support for RCV.

Our study tests these hypotheses in a large survey experiment, using data from an early release of the 2020 Collaborative Multi-racial Post-election Survey (CMPS). The CMPS is a very large national sample and includes large subsamples of Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans (with roughly 4,000 for each group), which allows us to examine whether evaluations of voting rules vary across racial and ethnic groups. We test our hypotheses on a national survey sample with the main voting task focused on potential

presidential candidates. We use a within-subjects design that asks each subject to vote under each voting rule with the same set of candidates. This experience may help voters better understand how voting rules differ.

In this paper, we use this national survey sample to examine whether voters prefer RCV to traditional plurality methods of voting. This study also examines the relationship between voters' race and support for RCV. We find that a long explanation of the vote transfer properties of RCV does not increase public support for the voting rule. We also find that voters prefer plurality voting rules to RCV, regardless of race. However, Latino, Black, and Asian American respondents express stronger support for RCV than White respondents. Furthermore, a message noting that RCV helps elect more women and people of color increases support for RCV among Latino, Black, and Asian American respondents, but not among White respondents. In contrast, arguing that RCV confuses some voters only reduces support for RCV by a small amount that does not vary by race.

Factors Influencing Public Evaluations of Ranked Choice Voting

Electoral Impacts

There are several factors that are likely to influence public opinion toward RCV. Much of the research on RCV examines broader impacts of this method on the political system; these impacts include candidate emergence, campaign strategy, and governance. For instance, scholars have documented a *campaign effect*, or the way that RCV electoral systems impact candidate campaigns. Studies show that RCV elections tend to have less negativity and more civility from candidates, which voters favor (Mauter 2014; Robb 2011; Donovan 2014; Donovan, Tolbert, and Gracey 2016; Kropf 2021). Evidence from

other countries using preferential voting rules points to additional positive results in governing processes (Farrell and Scully 2003).

Another electoral factor influencing support for RCV is that voters have a greater range of choices in matching their political preferences to candidates; this increased choice may favorably impact public opinion toward RCV. By reducing voter concerns about “wasted votes” for weaker candidates, ranked choice voting rules could provide incentives for more candidates to run for elected offices. Limited evidence seems to support this hypothesis. In one study of city elections, the number of mayoral and city council candidates increases substantially after the implementation of RCV rules (Montjoy et al. 2017). Other studies find an increase in the number of women and people of color running for local office and winning local elections after the adoption of RCV in the United States (John, Smith and Zack 2018; Terrell, Lamendola, and Reilly 2021). This small body of evidence suggests that RCV leads to more choices for voters. Since Americans profess to support racial and ethnic diversity (Horowitz 2019), we hypothesize that arguments noting that RCV helps elect women and people of color may boost public support for RCV (H_1).

Voter Confusion

A major factor affecting public opinion toward RCV systems is the level of voter confusion experienced when using ranked choice versus traditional plurality-based election rules. By asking for multiple candidate preferences, RCV ballots present voters with more complex choices than plurality ballots. There is concern that the task of ranking candidates in RCV elections may be confusing for some voters, especially since American

voters have grown accustomed to making one choice under plurality voting rules. Taking full advantage of the ability to rank multiple candidates means that voters need to gather more information about the candidates running in an election. The increased complexity of the ballot and the higher information costs may disproportionately disenfranchise inexperienced low-income voters and others lacking in resources. Some are less experienced with the voting process and may not receive proper poll worker assistance, and those voters may be vulnerable to errors when the ballot is confusing.

We have seen this before in American elections using plurality rules. For example, when voting machines or ballots have confusing features, they tend to create more voting errors particularly among low income and minority voters (Herrnson et al. 2008; Kropf and Kimball 2012). Furthermore, other recent election reforms intended to better serve voters, such as expanded early voting, may have worsened socioeconomic biases in voter turnout (Berinsky 2005; Rigby and Springer 2011). Perhaps RCV rules will have a similar impact on voters.

From a broad vantage point, it appears that voters are able to comply with ranked choice voting rules. In places that have adopted RCV rules, a majority of voters typically rank more than one candidate, unless a candidate or party instructs supporters to only rank one candidate (Mauter 2014; Neely and McDaniel 2015; Burnett and Kogan 2015; Alvarez, Hall, and Levin 2018; Gillespie, Levan, and Maisel 2019). Most voters also rank candidates in ways that reflect rational candidate preferences (Alvarez, Hall, and Levin 2019). In addition, in places using RCV voters indicate that they generally understand the voting rules (Neely, Blash, and Cook 2005; Schultz and Rendahl 2010; Mauter 2014; Donovan, Tolbert, and Gracey 2019; Gillespie, Levan, and Maisel 2019). Furthermore, an

intensive voter mobilization and education effort helps people learn more about how RCV works (Shineman 2016; Boudreau et al. 2020). The positive reports from voters stand in contrast to local election officials, who tend to believe that many voters do not understand RCV rules (Anthony et al. 2020). In the aggregate, most voters seem to be comfortable with ranked choice voting and follow the rules properly. In some RCV elections, however, low-income and minority voters were less likely to use all the available rankings (Neely, Blash, and Cook 2005; Schultz and Rendahl 2010). Also, voting errors are slightly more common in RCV elections (Neely and Cook 2008; Neely and McDaniel 2015; Schultz and Rendahl 2010; Maloy 2019, 122-123). Finally, Donovan and colleagues find that voters in RCV cities are somewhat less likely to report that the voting instructions are very easy than voters in cities using plurality rules (Donovan, Tolbert, and Gracey 2019). They find no racial or socioeconomic disparities in understanding RCV rules, but older voters are less likely to report understanding RCV than young voters.

In sum, the research is somewhat mixed. Overall, RCV rules do not seem to be substantially more difficult for voters than plurality rules. However, a relatively small number of voters seem to have trouble with RCV rules. Additionally, voter confusion can be substantially mitigated by increased information about RCV via voter guides (Boudreau, Colner, and MacKenzie 2020). Voter confusion also diminishes—and support for RCV increases—when voters become more familiar with this system (Neely et al. 2005; Shineman 2016; Blais et al. 2021; Crowder-Meyer et al. 2021). These results suggest that voters develop a more favorable view of RCV after learning more about how RCV works. Thus, we hypothesize that after receiving a clear explanation of the vote transfer properties of RCV and then ranking candidates in a multi-candidate choice task, voters will report more favorable ratings of RCV (H_2). Furthermore, since

Americans do not like confusing or overly bureaucratic rules (Herd and Moynihan 2019), we hypothesize that arguments about the confusing nature of RCV will reduce public support for the voting reform (H_3).

Existing Studies on Public Support for Ranked Choice Voting

The research measuring public support for RCV is limited, given that the use of this electoral system has—until recently—been used by only a handful of cities across the United States. The existing literature points to some prevailing factors in public evaluations of RCV. These primary factors include age (younger voters tend to be more supportive of RCV than older voters), partisan affiliation (Democratic voters are more supportive than Republican voters), and prior experience using RCV systems (voters who are more familiar with and experienced at using RCV are more supportive of this system). When asking voters to compare RCV with plurality-based voting systems, the evidence suggests that voters tend to prefer plurality voting. There are only a handful of studies that have examined the relationship between voters' race and support for RCV.

Overall

Early evidence of support for RCV indicated more positive evaluations compared with plurality-based systems. One of the first studies conducted in San Francisco “found generally positive responses to evaluative questions about Ranked-Choice Voting.” Around three in five respondents who voted in person and over three-fourths of respondents voting absentee reported that they preferred the RCV system to the former runoff system (Neely, Blash, and Cook 2005). In contrast to that positive early report, a

survey experiment found that having people participate in a candidate ranking task did not increase their support for RCV (Nielson 2017). Furthermore, Nielson finds that voters did not think that RCV rules provided fairer outcomes than a plurality election system. Given that the initial study in San Francisco only examined voters' opinions in a single jurisdiction, these findings may be limited by local context. Additionally, the Nielson study provides an experimental design using fictional candidates in a hypothetical election; this experimental design is illuminating, though it may not be generalizable in predicting support for RCV compared with traditional voting systems outside of this experimental environment.

Other recent studies find that public opinion tends to favor traditional, single-vote, plurality models. For instance, Andre Blais, Carolina Plescia, and Semra Sevi find that when given the option of four different voting methods (single, approval, ranked, and point/score), voters substantially prefer the "single-vote" system (2021). These results held across two survey experiments: one used real candidates in the 2020 Democratic primary election in Super Tuesday states, the other asked voters to select preferences from fictional candidates nationwide. Blais and colleagues note the possible status quo bias in respondents' preferences, as those who were more familiar with RCV were also more favorable toward this system. This study's findings did not find differences in support across education levels, though there was a marked difference in responses across age groups.

The evidence presented by Blais et al. is supported by equally emergent research from Joseph Cerrone and Cynthia McClintock (2021). In a national survey sample of just under 3500 voters that asked respondents to choose between plurality, runoff, and RCV

simulated elections, Cerrone and McClintock find that voter satisfaction is lowest under RCV rules. (2021). Therefore, we also hypothesize voters will prefer the single-vote plurality method over the RCV method of voting (H_4).

Perceptions & Impacts of RCV across Racial Subgroups

If relatively little is known thus far about the perceptions and impacts of RCV on a national scale, even less is known about how perceptions may differ across racial subgroups. Findings of this research to date tend to fall into three main categories: 1) general opinions of RCV, 2) voter confusion, and 3) representation. Existing studies show mixed, and sometimes inconclusive results on the perceptions and impacts of RCV across racial subgroups in American elections.

Perceptions

For the most part, previous studies do not find substantial differences in evaluations of ranked choice voting across racial and ethnic subgroups. The most comprehensive examination is a recent study by Devin McCarthy and Jack Santucci (2021) which examined data from five public opinion surveys, four of which ask respondents about race; two surveys were locally administered (Santa Fe and Maine), and three surveys drew from national samples. McCarthy and Santucci determine that age is the strongest demographic predictor of support for RCV—younger voters are far more supportive than older voters. On the question of race and support for RCV, Black voters were significantly less supportive of RCV than white voters in just one of the five surveys. This is consistent with other studies which find small to no differences in public

support for RCV across racial subgroups (Blais et al 2021; Anthony and Kimball 2021). Overall, there do not appear to be major racial differences in voter evaluations of RCV.

Ballot Errors

The evidence on the relationship between race and voter confusion in RCV systems is mixed. In their study of RCV in San Francisco, Neely, Blash, and Cook (2005) found that in some elections, low-income and minority voters were less likely to use all the available rankings (Neely, Blash, and Cook 2005; Schultz and Rendahl 2010). Black respondents also reported higher levels of confusion and lower levels of knowledge about RCV systems than white voters (Neely, Blash, and Cook 2005). Some studies also found higher error rates in minority precincts in San Francisco RCV elections (Neely and Blash 2008; Neely and McDaniel 2015). Another study of Minneapolis RCV elections, however found no racial or income disparities in overvotes after the adoption of RCV voting rules (Kimball and Anthony 2016). More recent studies are mixed. Coll (2021) finds no significant racial differences in abilities to rank candidates, while Maloy and Ward (2021) find that Asian and Black voters are more likely to make ballot mistakes than white voters. Studies of voter understanding of RCV rules tend to find minimal differences across racial groups (Donovan et al. 2019). Given the mixed results, it is possible that racial and ethnic minorities may be more concerned about the confusing nature of RCV than white voters.

Representation

There is also some debate about whether ranked choice voting improves political representation of racial and ethnic minority voters. As noted above, John and colleagues (2018) answer in the affirmative. In another study, Gerdus Benadè, Ruth Buck, Moon Duchin, Dara Gold, and Thomas Weighill employ data from judicial elections in four municipalities in the United States. The scholars find that compared with plurality systems, “STV systems tend to elect candidates of choice for people of color (POC) in proportion to POC population” (2021: 1). The study is limited however, in its regional scope, as well as in the fact that voter turnout in judicial elections is lower than other types of elections. On the other hand, Crowder-Meyer and colleagues (2021) use a conjoint experiment to test what choices voters make about candidates of color in RCV elections. They find no significant difference in voter choices candidates of color when comparing RCV and plurality election formats in nonpartisan elections. While the evidence of the impact of RCV on descriptive representation is mixed, Latino and Black Americans tend to value descriptive representation (e.g., Casellas and Wallace 2015; Sadhwani 2020), so we hypothesize that racial and ethnic minority voters will respond more positively than white voters to arguments about how RCV helps elect more women and people of color (H_5).

Finally, we examine the role of party identification in support for RCV. As the more conservative party, we expect Republicans to express a stronger preference for the status quo than Democrats. It may not be a coincidence that the American cities that have implemented RCV tend to be liberal communities. The adoption of RCV in Maine has been highly partisan, with Democrats largely supporting the reform and Republicans strongly opposed (Santucci 2018; Gillespie, Levan and Maisel 2019; Anthony et al.

2020). However, the adoption of RCV in some other locations (such as Alaska and Utah), provide more complicated cases of partisan support for the new voting rules. Existing evidence is mixed on this hypothesis. Some find stronger support for RCV among Democrats than Republicans (McCarthy and Santucci 2021; Anthony and Kimball 2021), while another finds little to no relationship between party affiliation and preferences for ranked choice voting (Blais et al. 2021). Nevertheless, we hypothesize that Democrats will express a stronger preference for RCV than Republicans (H_6).

Data and Methods

We continue efforts to use a within-subjects design to evaluate voter preferences for different voting rules (e.g., Blais et al. 2021). A within-subjects design asks each subject to vote under each voting rule with the same set of candidates, giving voters a more direct comparison of different voting rules. This may help voters better understand how voting rules differ.

Our data for this study is from the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS). The CMPS is a large sample survey and includes large subsamples of Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans (with close to 4,000 for each group).¹ One advantage of the CMPS is that it allows us to examine whether evaluations of voting rules, and voting behavior on each method, vary across racial and ethnic subgroups. The survey was completed online in a respondent self-administered format and was in the field from April 2, 2021 to August 25, 2021. Our set of questions on the CMPS started with a voting task asking respondents to choose among potential candidates for president in 2024. We used a within-subjects design that asked respondents to vote using single vote (plurality) and then again using ranked vote methods and

¹ This study relies on an early release of the primary samples of the CMPS data. A later release will include oversamples of some hard-to-reach subgroups.

then we asked respondents how satisfied they were with each voting method. For each voting method, respondents first completed a task with four candidates, and then they completed a task with ten candidates.

To test whether the description of voting methods influences voter evaluations, we varied the description of plurality and RCV rules before each voting task. Previous survey experiments tend to give respondents simple one-sentence descriptions of each voting rule. We test whether informing voters about how ballots are counted under each voting rule influences their assessments. As summarized in Table 1, one group received short descriptions of plurality and RCV rules (as in many previous studies) while the other group received longer and more complete descriptions of the voting rules. We borrowed language from previous studies and voter guides in the United States for the longer description of RCV.

Table 1. Conditions for First Survey Experiment (CMPS)

Condition	Single vote	Ranked vote
Short description	One way of voting involves a single vote, in which you vote for one candidate.	One way of voting uses a ranked vote, in which you rank candidates to indicate your first choice, your second choice, and so on.
Long description	One way of voting involves a single vote, in which you vote for one candidate. The candidate that receives the most votes wins the election, even if that candidate receives less than a majority of votes (less than 50 percent).	One way of voting uses a ranked vote, in which you rank candidates to indicate your first choice, your second choice, and so on. If a candidate receives a majority of first choice votes then that person wins. If no candidate has a majority of votes then the last place candidate is eliminated and that candidate’s first choice votes are transferred to the next choice. So, if your preferred candidate is eliminated then your vote is transferred to your next choice. This process of eliminating candidates and transferring votes continues until a candidate has a majority of votes and that person wins the election.

We measure evaluations of the voting methods in two ways. Immediately after casting their vote with a given method, respondents were asked to use a ten-point scale to rate how satisfied they are with that voting method. After completing both voting tasks, respondents were then asked which voting method they preferred. The voting method preference question included a second question wording experiment to test competing arguments about ranked choice voting (see Table 2). One version noted that “studies show the ranked vote helps elect more women and people of color.” Another version stated that “studies show that the ranked vote is confusing for some people.” The control group answered a version of the question that did not refer to any studies of ranked choice voting. See the Appendix for the complete wording of each survey question.²

² Out of concern about a possible recall in California, at the last minute we replaced Gavin Newsom with Andrew Cuomo as one of the presidential candidates in the voting task. Oops.

Table 2. Conditions for Second Survey Experiment (CMPS)

Message	Preference Question
Control	Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?
Promote diversity	Studies show that the ranked vote helps elect more women and people of color. Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?
Voter confusion	Studies show that the ranked vote is confusing for some people. Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?

Results

We first examine the satisfaction ratings given by respondents immediately after voting with each rule. Respondents were asked to report their satisfaction on a scale from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). Table 3 compares the mean satisfaction ratings of each voting rule by racial group. With one exception, majorities rated each voting rule positively (above 5 on the 10-point scale). Latino, Black, and Asian American respondents rated each voting method similarly (a mean rating near 6 for ranked choice voting, and a mean rating near 7 for the single vote method). White respondents, however, rated ranked choice voting almost one point more negatively, on average, than other racial groups ($p < .001$), and only 47 percent of White respondents gave the ranked vote a satisfaction rating above 5. Even though both voting rules tend to receive positive fairness ratings, the single vote is rated more positively than the ranked vote by each subgroup. As the bottom of Table 3 shows, each subgroup rated the single vote method more favorably than ranked choice voting, especially White respondents. White

respondents rated the single vote method only slightly less favorably than other subgroups.

Table 3. Mean Satisfaction Ratings of Voting Rules

Voting Rule	Respondent Primary Race			
	White (N=3,002)	Latino (N=4,006)	Black (N=4,005)	AAPI (N=3,975)
Ranked Vote	5.3	6.0	6.3	6.0
Single Vote	6.6	6.9	7.1	6.8
Difference	+1.3	+0.9	+0.8	+0.8

Cell entries are mean satisfaction ratings for each voting method (0-10 scale).
Source: 2020 CMPS primary samples only

The treatment varying the description of each voting rule did not produce the expected impact on satisfaction ratings. In fact, a more comprehensive description of each voting rule slightly reduces satisfaction with that voting rule. As Table 4 shows, providing a more thorough explanation that emphasizes the vote transfer properties of RCV tends to reduce satisfaction ratings by a small but statistically significant amount. At the same time, providing a fuller description of plurality rules that emphasizes the possibility of a non-majority winner tends to reduce satisfaction ratings of the single vote by a similar small but statistically significant amount. The estimated treatment effects are, on average, roughly 0.2 on the 10-point satisfaction scale, so these are substantively small effects. These treatment effects are similar to those found in a previous study (Anthony and Kimball 2021).

Table 4. Estimated Treatment Effect of Long Description on Satisfaction Ratings

Voting Rule	Respondent Primary Race			
	White (N=3,002)	Latino (N=4,006)	Black (N=4,005)	AAPI (N=3,975)
Ranked Vote	-0.22 (0.11)	-0.33* (0.10)	-0.37* (0.10)	-0.15 (0.09)
Single Vote	-0.23* (0.10)	-0.21* (0.09)	-0.17 (0.09)	-0.29* (0.08)

Cell entries are estimated treatment effects (difference of means) of a longer description (standard error in parentheses) on satisfaction ratings for each voting method (0-10 scale).

*p < .05 (two-tailed)

Source: 2020 CMPS primary samples only

When we asked which voting method they preferred, respondents overwhelmingly preferred the single vote method to ranked choice voting (see Table 5). These findings are consistent with previous studies showing a status quo bias in favor of keeping plurality voting rules (Nielson 2017; Clark 2020; Blais et al. 2021; Cerrone and McClintock 2021; Anthony and Kimball 2021). We also observe that the preference for ranked choice voting is roughly 4-10 percentage points higher among Latino, Black and Asian respondents than among White respondents (p < .001 for each group comparison). White voters are a bit more devoted to plurality voting than other voters.

Table 5. Percent Preferring Ranked Choice Voting by Sample

Prefer RCV to Single Vote	Respondent Primary Race			
	White (N=3,002)	Latino (N=4,006)	Black (N=4,005)	AAPI (N=3,975)
	19.1%	25.9%	23.1%	31.1%

Source: 2020 CMPS primary samples only

When we examine the impact of question wording treatments on preferences for the single vote or ranked vote, we also observe differences in respondent preferences for ranked choice voting. As Table 6 shows, the message that RCV helps increase the number of elected women and people of color boosts preferences for ranked choice voting by 10 to 15 percentage points among Latino, Black, and Asian respondents. These are relatively large and statistically significant treatment effects. However, the message about promoting diversity does not significantly influence preferences for ranked choice voting among White respondents. The message about voter confusion slightly reduces support for ranked choice voting in each subgroup, but the estimated effect is only statistically significant among Black respondents. Meanwhile, the longer description of the voting rules had no discernible impact on respondent preferences for ranked choice voting.

Table 6. Estimated Treatment Effects on Preference for Ranked Choice Voting
Respondent Primary Race

Treatment	White (N=3,002)	Latino (N=4,006)	Black (N=4,005)	AAPI (N=3,975)
Long description	-0.003 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.001 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Promotes diversity	0.03 (0.02)	0.10* (0.02)	0.15* (0.02)	0.11* (0.02)
Voter confusion	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.002 (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)

Cell entries are estimated treatment effects (OLS coefficients) of question wording treatments on preferences for ranked choice voting versus single vote (0=prefer single vote, 1=prefer RCV). The “long description” treatment effect is in relation to the “short description” treatment. The “promotes diversity” and “voter confusion” effects are in relation to a control group with no treatment.

* p < .05 (two-tailed)

Source: 2020 CMPS primary samples only

Our final analysis expands the comparisons in Table 6 to include additional correlates. The dependent variable is the respondent's preference for the ranked vote (coded 1) or single vote (coded 0). Independent variables include age (ranging from 18 to 100 years), education (ranging from grade school to a post-graduate degree), party identification (ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican), and dummy variables for women and registered voters. Finally, we control for the randomized treatments varying the length and detail of the descriptions of both voting methods, and the treatments testing message about RCV promoting diversity or voter confusion. Each independent variable is rescaled to range from 0 to 1. We include descriptive statistics for the independent variables in the Appendix. Table 7 presents the results of OLS regressions with each dependent variable modeled as a function of the independent variables described above.

Among covariates, age and education are the most consistent predictors of voting rule preferences, and age is the strongest predictor. In each racial group, older voters report a stronger preference for the status quo of the single vote than younger voters. The difference in preferences for ranked choice voting between the youngest and oldest respondents ranges from 16 points (among Latino respondents) to 30 points (among Asian American respondents). These findings are similar to those reported in other recent studies (McCarthy and Santucci 2021; Blais et al. 2021; Anthony and Kimball 2021). In each racial group, we also find that education is positively associated with a preference for ranked choice voting, although this relationship is more modest in size. The difference in preferences for ranked choice voting between the most educated and least educated respondents ranges from 6 points (among White respondents) to 12 points (among Asian American respondents). Younger and more educated and younger voters tend to be more receptive to ranked choice voting than older and less educated voters.

Table 7. Predictors of Preferences for Ranked Choice Voting

Independent variable	Respondent Primary Race			
	White	Latino	Black	AAPI
Age	-0.26* (0.03)	-0.16* (0.04)	-0.19* (0.04)	-0.30* (0.04)
Education	0.06* (0.03)	0.09* (0.03)	0.09* (0.03)	0.12* (0.03)
Party (GOP)	-0.20* (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.12* (0.02)
Women	-0.01 (0.01)	0.04* (0.01)	-0.002 (0.01)	-0.05* (0.01)
Registered voter	0.02 (0.02)	-0.08* (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)
Promotes diversity treatment	0.04* (0.02)	0.10* (0.02)	0.15* (0.02)	0.11* (0.02)
Voter confusion treatment	-0.004 (0.02)	-0.002 (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
Long description	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.001 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Constant	0.36* (0.03)	0.25* (0.02)	0.21* (0.02)	0.35* (0.03)
N	3,001	4,006	4,005	3,975
R ²	.06	.03	.05	.04

Cell entries OLS coefficients. Dependent variable measures preferences for ranked choice voting versus single vote (0=prefer single vote, 1=prefer RCV). All independent variables are scaled from 0 to 1. The “long description” treatment effect is in relation to the “short description” treatment. The “promotes diversity” and “voter confusion” effects are in relation to a control group with no treatment.

*p < .05 (two-tailed)

Source: 2020 CMPS primary samples only

Table 7 also shows that partisanship is inconsistent as a predictor of preferences for ranked choice voting. We observe the hypothesized relationship only for White and AAPI respondents. Among White respondents, the preference for RCV is 20 points higher among strong Democrats than strong Republicans. Among Asian American respondents, the preference for RCV is 12 points higher among strong Democrats than strong Republicans. However, partisanship is unrelated to voting rule preferences for Black and Latino respondents. Finally, sex and registration status are weak and inconsistent predictors of voting rule preferences.

Conclusion

As more American states and cities consider ranked choice voting rules, it is important to evaluate RCV voting against the existing plurality rules. Multiple surveys show that Americans rate the single vote method more favorably than ranked choice voting. Furthermore, when given a choice between the single and ranked voting methods, a large majority prefers the status quo option of the single vote. Our study finds that majority preferences for the single vote also prevail among representative samples of Latino, Black, and Asian American respondents. However, Latino, Black, and Asian American respondents evaluate ranked choice voting more positively and express a stronger preference for RCV than White respondents. Furthermore, communicating that RCV helps elect more women and people of color increases preferences for RCV among Latino, Black, and Asian American voters, but has a weaker impact on White voters. A message emphasizing racial diversity in political representation seems to polarize public opinion by race on voting rule preferences.

These results mean that jurisdictions adopting ranked choice voting need to prepare for initial resistance from voters who have grown comfortable with the simplicity of plurality rules. A public backlash against new voting rules is more likely to come from

White voters than other racial groups. However, a message noting that ranked choice voting is confusing, one of the main arguments made by opponents, does not reduce public preferences for RCV by any more than a small amount.

We also find that a brief explanation of the vote transfer features of ranked choice, and the non-majoritarian characteristic of plurality rules, does nothing to increase support for ranked choice voting. It is a challenge to explain to voters, in a sentence or two, the problems associated with plurality voting rules, like the “spoiler” effect of third-party candidates, or the advantages associated with alternative rules. Repeated communications are likely needed for this information to sink in. Thus, building understanding and support for ranked choice voting rules likely requires a more sustained campaign. For example, a voter education program including voter guides or other materials which voters can consult multiple times, seems to boost support for ranked choice voting (Shineman 2016; Boudreau et al. 2020). There is a need for more comparative studies of ranked choice voting – comparing the experience with RCV to the same or similar jurisdictions using plurality rules.

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Appendix – Question Wording (2020 CMPS)

Voting Task – Ranked Vote

Q195. “There are different ways of voting, and we would like to know how you would vote with two different ways of voting.”

[Short Description]

“One way of voting uses a ranked vote, in which you rank candidates to indicate your first choice, your second choice, and so on.”

[Long Description]

“One way of voting uses a ranked vote, in which you rank candidates to indicate your first choice, your second choice, and so on. If a candidate receives a majority of first choice votes then that person wins. If no candidate has a majority of votes then the last place candidate is eliminated and that candidate’s first choice votes are transferred to the next choice. So, if your preferred candidate is eliminated then your vote is transferred to your next choice. This process of eliminating candidates and transferring votes continues until a candidate has a majority of votes and that person wins the election.”

“For example, if the 2024 presidential election was today which candidate would you choose? Indicate your first choice in the first column, your second choice in the second column, and so on.” [Randomize order of candidates]

[4 candidates]

Candidate	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice
Donald Trump, Jr., Republican			
Nikki Haley, former Republican governor of South Carolina and ambassador to the UN			
Andrew Cuomo, Democratic governor of New York			
Stacey Abrams, former Democratic leader in the Georgia House of Representatives			

[10 candidates]

Candidate	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
Donald Trump, Jr., Republican					
Nikki Haley, former Republican governor of South Carolina and ambassador to the UN					
Marco Rubio, Republican Senator from Florida					
Mike Pence, Republican Vice President					
Ron DeSantis, Republican governor of Florida					
Kamala Harris, Democratic Senator from California					
Pete Buttigieg, former Democratic mayor of South Bend, Indiana					
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Democratic representative from New York					
Andrew Cuomo, Democratic governor of New York					
Stacey Abrams, former Democratic leader in the Georgia House of Representatives					

Q196. “On a scale of 0 to 10, how satisfied are you with this way of voting?”

[Widget 0=Not at all satisfied – 10=Very Satisfied]

Voting Task – Single Vote

Q197.

[Short Description]

“One way of voting involves a single vote, in which you vote for one candidate.”

[Long Description]

“One way of voting involves a single vote, in which you vote for one candidate. The candidate that receives the most votes wins the election, even if that candidate receives less than a majority of votes (less than 50 percent).”

“For example, if the 2024 presidential election was today which candidate would you choose? Select one.” [Randomize order of candidates]

[4 candidates]

Donald Trump, Jr., Republican

Nikki Haley, former Republican governor of South Carolina and ambassador to the UN

Andrew Cuomo, Democratic governor of New York

Stacey Abrams, former Democratic leader in the Georgia House of Representatives

[10 candidates]

Donald Trump, Jr., Republican

Nikki Haley, former Republican governor of South Carolina and ambassador to the UN

Marco Rubio, Republican Senator from Florida

Mike Pence, Republican Vice President

Ron DeSantis, Republican governor of Florida

Kamala Harris, Democratic Senator from California

Pete Buttigieg, former Democratic mayor of South Bend, Indiana

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Democratic representative from New York

Andrew Cuomo, Democratic governor of New York

Stacey Abrams, former Democratic leader in the Georgia House of Representatives

Q198. “On a scale of 0 to 10, how satisfied are you with this way of voting?”

[Widget 0=Not at all satisfied – 10=Very Satisfied]

Q199. Voting System Preference (Split A - no frame)

“Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?”

1. Single vote
2. Ranked vote

Q200. Voting System Preference (positive RCV frame)

“Studies show that the ranked vote helps elect more women and people of color. Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?”

1. Single vote
2. Ranked vote

Q201. Voting System Preference (negative RCV frame)

“Studies show that the ranked vote is confusing for some people. Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?”

1. Single vote
2. Ranked vote

Q202. Participation

“Given your answer to the previous question, would you participate in the following activities if the voting system fit your preference? (select all that apply)”

1. Run for political office
2. Encourage someone you know to run for office
3. Volunteer for a candidate or political party

Table A1. Mean Values for Independent Variables

Variable	White	Latino	Black	AAPI
Age (18 to 100 years)	0.40	0.28	0.32	0.32
Education (6 categories: grade 1-8 to post-grad)	0.60	0.49	0.53	0.68
Party ID (7 categories: strong D to strong R)	0.61	0.36	0.22	0.39
Sex (women)	0.51	0.52	0.51	0.52
Registered voter	0.73	0.45	0.58	0.55
N	3,001	4,006	4,005	3,975

All variables are rescaled to [0-1] range.