The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion
Daniel Pink

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Readers argue it'll thaw our polarized politics.

October 22, 2024

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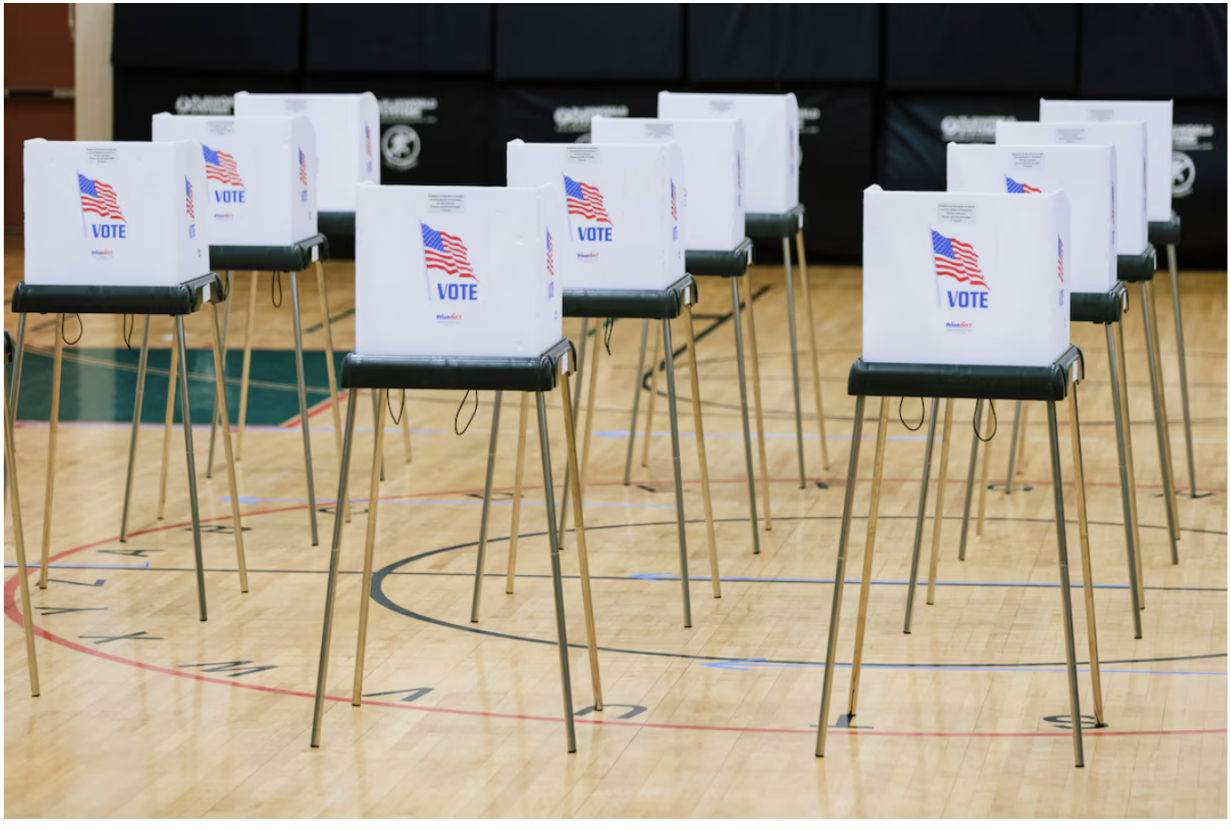

Empty voting booths. (Wesley Lapointe for The Washington Post)

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Each week, readers across the country send our Why Not? project hundreds of ideas for improving American life. The suggestions span many topics, but at the top of the list is a proposal for remaking how Americans vote: ranked-choice voting.

Under such a system, voters don't just choose one candidate for an office. They list the candidates from their first choice to their least favorite (hence the "ranking"). Why Not? readers and other fans of ranked choice say this approach has two key virtues. It more accurately reflects voters' true preferences. And it incentivizes candidates to appeal to broader swath of the electorate.

The Why Not? Project

Help us deliver a jolt of adrenaline to the American imagination!

Share your bold, unexpected idea for improving our country, our organizations or our lives. We read every submission and will select the most intriguing ideas to explore in future columns.

"It could mitigate our problems with extremist and unpopular candidates winning party nominations as well as general elections," wrote a reader in Fort Worth.

Many readers home in on primaries as a major cause of electoral dysfunction because candidates can eke out modest pluralities by appealing to the most zealous partisans on the far left or right.

"Why not adopt open primaries with the first four going to the general election and instant runoff (ranked-choice voting) for all general elections?" asked another reader from Waynesville, N.C.

This steady stream of suggestions got me wondering: Why not see whether readers are onto something? If polarization is what ails the body politic, could ranked-choice voting offer, if not a full cure, at least a powerful analgesic?

Ranked-choice voting is having a moment

As it happens, ranked-choice voting is not just on people's minds. It's also on many of their ballots. Next month, voters in four states and D.C. will decide whether to make the switch. Meanwhile, voters in Missouri will decide whether to prohibit it. And Alaskans will vote on repealing the ranked-choice system they put in place in 2020.

Colorado's Proposition 131 offers a crisp example of the kind of system Why Not? readers support. This ballot initiative would eliminate party primaries for the Senate and House, statewide offices and state legislative seats. And it would replace them with a single all-candidate primary election: what supporters call an "open primary" and opponents dub a "jungle primary." Voters select a single candidate in that primary. Then the top four finishers advance to a general election.

In that contest — prepare to swoon, election nerds — voters rank the four candidates instead of choosing only one. If no candidate captures a majority of first-place votes, the last-place finisher is eliminated. Voters who ranked that candidate first have their second-choice picks counted. If there's still nobody with a majority, the candidate now in last place gets bounced — and their supporters' backup choices are reallocated to the two remaining candidates, one of whom will cross the 50 percent threshold.

For all the attention directed at the wonkish magic of ranked-choice voting's counting methods, Nick Troiano, executive director of Unite America, a deep-pocketed advocacy group behind Colorado's ballot initiative, told me that ending the primary system is more critical: "The core problem in our politics right now is that the vast majority of elections are decided in low-turnout party primaries."

Case in point: right-wing rabble-rouser and theater buff Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-Colo.). In June, after switching congressional districts, she won a six-candidate Republican primary with fewer than 55,000 votes — less than 44 percent of the total. Because Republicans outnumber Democrats by more than 2 to 1 in her district, she'll almost certainly win in November — rejected by a majority of her party's own voters in her district and catapulted back into Congress by 7 percent of the district's voters.

If Boebert instead had to run in a ranked-choice general election with three other candidates — in a district that contains more independents than members of either party — she might not prevail. Voters in Colorado's 4th District, nearly 57 percent of whom backed President Donald Trump in 2020, probably would not elect a liberal or even a Democrat. But this red district might choose a congressional representative whose shade of red more accurately reflects the broad majority of constituents. Scale this outcome to dozens or hundreds of other districts, and Congress could become less polarized and more functional.

Ranking the evidence

Ranked choice holds an intuitive appeal to those of us who fear that American politics has run off the rails. But what does the research say?

Scholars who've examined voter attitudes after ranked-choice elections have detected some promising signals. Voters in ranked-choice elections found the campaigns less negative than in winner-take-all elections, according to one study, perhaps because it became riskier for candidates to tear down their opponents. Other research showed that voters grow more positive about the system once they try it. And ranked-choice voting seems to modestly boost turnout among younger voters.

But this medicine turns out to be less efficacious than many hope. A study this year of ranked-choice municipal elections found the impact on campaign civility was minimal. Other research has shown that this system can slightly *reduce* turnout. More troubling, a study last year found that in already polarized locales, instant runoffs might even exacerbate polarization.

Another challenge is complexity. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania have discovered that voters make significantly more mistakes and thus risk having their ballots invalidated in ranked-choice systems than in traditional ones. And even if voters eventually master its mechanics, the system still imposes a burden. Instead of selecting one candidate for each office, voters now must make a welter of decisions and comparisons. In Colorado, that could mean coming up with one's top four candidates in seven separate races. Proponents maintain that ranking every candidate in every race is optional. But that risks creating a system that disadvantages the most time-pressed voters. In New York City's 2021 ranked-choice election, for instance, voters in wealthier neighborhoods were more likely to fully take advantage of their candidate options than those in low-income neighborhoods.

Election officials such as Molly Fitzpatrick, the Boulder County clerk and recorder, also caution that getting ranked-choice voting right will require ample time and money. Fitzpatrick, who doesn't take positions on ballot initiatives and hasn't taken a stand on ranked-choice voting, implemented the system for mayoral elections in the city of Boulder last year. But the process took a few years. Implementing it throughout Colorado would require changes to the state's entire election apparatus — from redesigning ballots to training judges and election officials to educating voters to upgrading and testing election equipment. "If one thing goes wrong," she told me, "we're doomed."

Why or why not?

Thanks to Post readers, whose entreaties to explore ranked-choice voting sparked me to examine the research and to interview people on both sides of the issue, I've landed in an unaccustomed place.

Usually my columns offer a full-throated call to action. (Has your city banned left turns yet?) In this case, my view is measured: "Why not give ranked-choice voting a try?" After all, Proposition 131 has already delivered a certain kind of bipartisan harmony: Colorado's Democratic and Republican parties both oppose it. That's a promising sign. Ranked choice doesn't advantage one party over another, but it does jolt the status quo, which is usually better than doing nothing.

Yet I can't muster much more enthusiasm than that because ranked-choice voting is ultimately a technical fix for an existential problem.

Something has gone awry in how we govern ourselves. On that, most Americans agree. But the problems run deeper — far deeper — than ballot configuration and primary eligibility rules. An information ecosystem that allows, and even encourages, citizens to confirm biases rather than confront truth. A once-great political party that refuses to accept the results of legitimate elections. A fixation on differences in individual identity at the expense of commonalities in shared values. A 235-year-old national governing structure that thwarts majority rule. Public officials who spend more time dialing for dollars than listening to Americans in despair.

Tweaking one aspect of election administration won't change much.

Nonetheless, on Nov. 5, I'll vote here in D.C. to give this tweak a try. But to rescue American democracy, it's not my first choice.

What readers are saying

The comments on the article about ranked choice voting (RCV) reflect a mix of opinions. Some commenters support RCV as a necessary reform that could empower third parties and reduce polarization, while others criticize it as complex and potentially unfair, citing negative... Show more

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