

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

*Separating Fact from Fiction*

***Disinformation is false information spread deliberately to deceive. Commonly it mixes false conclusions with lies.***

***Misinformation is the act of unknowingly sharing disinformation.***

The following is a response to disinformation posted online as [The Limits of Ranked Choice Voting](#). This piece re-publishes credible-sounding statements promoted by the Center for Election Science, as immediately followed by some facts countering the false claims. The net effect of this disinformation campaign is to stall election reform.



## **Center for Election Science says: What RCV Doesn't Do: Guarantee A Majority**

“Let’s start with one of the bigger RCV claims that falls short, that it always elects majority winners. Now, RCV will elect a majority winner—so long as that majority winner actually exists in the election. But because a majority winner doesn’t always exist, no single-winner voting method can guarantee a majority in every election. That includes RCV.

There are a couple issues to consider here on the majority concept. One is ballot exhaustion. Ballot exhaustion is

probably the more common criticism of RCV’s majority claim. Ballot exhaustion is when a voter’s ballot preferences get eliminated so that nothing carries over to later rounds. This means that the majority RCV arrives at is only within the remaining ballots rather than the original ballots. If you look closer at the

Maine example video above, you’ll see that was the case there, too. The winner had fewer than half the votes of the original ballots.

To be fair, if we were to do a traditional runoff, a lot of those voters wouldn’t come back a second time. We might look at that as a kind of voluntary—and perhaps a bit literal—ballot exhaustion. Still, it’s important to be clear that RCV isn’t talking about a majority of all the voters who casted a ballot. It’s only talking about the remaining ballots.

A more pointed objection is that much of the time RCV isn’t getting any kind of majority at all. Rather, it’s contriving a majority by artificially narrowing down the candidate field. RCV knocks out candidates over each round, but sometimes it knocks out good candidates by mistake. (You’ll learn more about how this goes on in the RCV vote splitting section.) You see, any voting method that finds some way to knock out candidates until two remain will get a “majority”. But that “majority” is contrived and merely a byproduct of having two candidates remaining.

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

*Separating Fact from Fiction*

Don't worry if that wasn't immediately obvious. The concept of majority in voting theory is counterintuitive. We have a whole article on the concept of majority alone."



**RCV for Colorado replies:**

**What RCV Does Do: Provide the majority preference of last round ballots.**

Let's start with one of greatest value propositions that RCV can claim: That RCV elects majority winners. The RCV process is a proven method that indicates who is the majority preference. To be precise, it is the majority preference of voters who continue to the last round. It is easy to remain until the last round... Just rank a candidate (any ranking) that makes it to the last round.

There are many criteria to judge the fairness of election systems and it is important to realize all voting systems have flaws. Selecting a voting system should entail maximizing the most important fairness criteria and minimizing its flaws. A top fairness criterion for RCV is picking the majority preference of participating voters. Remember, this is a system that allows a voter to pick backup choices if their favorite gets eliminated and thus picks

the group's favorite consensus preference when first choices and backup choices are included. The "majority winner" of RCV is technically the one who wins the majority of "continued ballots" or those ballots that make it to the last round. A ballot is continued if the voter has ranked a candidate that has not been eliminated from the race. If a significantly large number of ballots are not continued, then it is harder to be confident that the winner is the likely majority preference of participating voters. If a voter chooses not to rank more than one or only rank two, they are effectively choosing to leave the pool of voters if their one or two choices are eliminated. They are effectively choosing not to vote for the final round candidates if their choices are eliminated. In some people's minds this spoils the idea of a majority because it's not the entire original pool of voters. However, if voters choose not to rank as fully as they can, they effectively may be choosing to exit the election and leave the pool of voters of the final rounds. This is analogous to the voter that chooses not to participate in a second round of traditional runoffs; that voter is leaving the pool of voters.

It is thus very desirable to rank as many candidates as possible, which will cause as many ballots to continue as possible, allowing the winner to be representative of the preference of a large remaining group of voters. This can be accomplished through voter education

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

## *Separating Fact from Fiction*

to encourage ranking as many preferences as possible and a clear effective ballot to enable the ranking. That way, if the runoff continues into many rounds, the voter's ballot will continue to participate.

An example of a successful campaign to rank as many as possible was the Santa Fe city mayor election in 2018. In that case, more than 61 percent of respondents reported that they chose to rank all five candidates, more than 80 percent reported ranking at least three candidates, and more than 88 percent reported ranking at least two. From the first round to the last round of the five-candidate mayoral race, the voter's ballot drop-off was just 4 percent. That means eight of nine voters who backed one of the three candidates who lost before the final round also effectively chose to rank one of the final two candidates as a back-up - a far higher ratio than the typical decline of turnout in traditional runoffs.

([https://www.fairvote.org/2018\\_election](https://www.fairvote.org/2018_election), [https://www.fairvote.org/santa\\_fe\\_s\\_1st\\_rcv\\_election\\_produced\\_clear\\_outcomes\\_and\\_effective\\_ballot](https://www.fairvote.org/santa_fe_s_1st_rcv_election_produced_clear_outcomes_and_effective_ballot))

The additional idea that RCV's majority is artificial and contrived by knocking out candidates until two remain is ludicrous and erroneous. The last round candidates are there because they are the consensus finalists. They had first-choice backers, but also second- and possibly third-choice backers as well.

The last round candidates effectively represent a compromise majority preference when a first round majority winner is not selected outright.

*CES's statement falls into the category of disinformation because it relies on a half-truth.* A ballot design error in Oakland created an issue with the final-round having a majority winner who was below the first-round majority threshold. Best practices are to use the ballot design we are proposing.

How the Oakland error happened: The first step in the tally is to set the majority threshold that must be surpassed for the winner to win. In each round, the threshold is adjusted for the very small number of ballots become that have become inactive. An inactive ballot is one that not rankings on it for candidates still in the race. The vast majority of the time, in the final round, the winner has more than the number of votes that were required for a win in the first round. This adjusted majority is not perfect, but it is better than any other system.

How the Colorado proposal is different: How we ensure that as many ballots stay active as possible is to give people as many rankings as there are candidates, to a maximum of rank-6 choices. We give the election administrators the option of allowing ten rankings, just in case that makes sense. Early adopting cities were sometimes limited to a rank-3

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

## *Separating Fact from Fiction*

ballot style, Oakland and other cities have since updated their ballot design.



### **Center for Election Science says: What RCV Doesn't Do: Properly Address Vote Splitting**

Vote splitting occurs when voters must decide between candidates with overlapping similarities. When this happens, vote splitting decreases the support among those similar individual candidates. On the surface, with all the ranking transfers that RCV does, it looks like RCV addresses the vote splitting issue. But it only does so a little bit.

To give RCV credit, it does address vote splitting in some cases where fringe candidates genuinely have little support. In RCV's minor victory, it defends well against vote splitting from the edges of political support. But it largely fails at addressing vote splitting from the center. (Here's a fun visualization tool to play with to see for yourself. RCV is noted as IRV.)

An example of RCV behaving well was the recent RCV election in Maine where a third-party candidate with little apparent support divided the vote between another liberal candidate. Once the third party candidate was eliminated for having the fewest first-choice preferences, those votes overwhelmingly went to the Democrat.

So while some liberals got to vote for a third party, it didn't cost them the election. That's because the independent's votes transferred over to a stronger candidate.

This scenario where an unpopular candidate shares support with a leading candidate is where RCV performs best and is clearly superior to the current choose-one way of voting. In competitive elections, however, more than two candidates can have significant support. And there, RCV has a tougher time.

Here's an example of one such election in Louisiana that included a runoff. And though it was a runoff, the mechanics played out the same as in an RCV election<sup>2</sup>.

The 1991 Louisiana gubernatorial election was a close three-way race between Edwin Edwards (34%), David Duke (32%), and Buddy Roemer (27%). Another candidate, Clyde Holloway, was in fourth with 5%, while the remaining candidates had less than one percent.

Roemer was the incumbent governor. Edwards was suspected (and later convicted) of corruption charges, while Duke was the Grand Wizard of the Klu Klux Klan. The vote mainly split between these three candidates. This vote splitting caused Edwards and Duke to go to the second round instead of the more tame candidate, Buddy Roemer.

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

## *Separating Fact from Fiction*

It's also clear that Roemer was the preferred candidate. In polling that was able to compare candidates head-to-head, Roemer was preferred in 2-way races with both Edwards and Duke. So what happened here?

Voters split their first-choice preferences, and that caused Roemer to get eliminated. The same happens in rankings. First-choice preferences get split and so Roemer would have still gotten eliminated. And in an RCV election, that would have continued to let the corrupt Edwin Edwards go to the next round with clansman David Duke.

The "center squeeze" effect  
When we see close elections between three or more candidates under ranked choice voting, we can expect this randomness to carry out again because of this first-preference vote splitting. Primaries would be particularly dangerous territory where you tend to have many competitive candidates with overlapping ideology. Further, with competitive elections there's a tendency to squeeze out the center candidate, as described in the figure below, which would favor more extreme candidates (as was the case in the Louisiana election). This is called the "center squeeze effect".

That's not how you want your primary elections decided, which makes RCV a particularly bad choice for those elections. RCV does mitigate these

scenarios ever so slightly compared to our choose-one voting method, but RCV is still highly vulnerable to the center squeeze effect.

## 2

### **RCV for Colorado replies: What RCV Does Do: Properly Address Vote Splitting**

RCV addresses vote splitting in the cases where fringe candidates genuinely have little support.

It also address vote splitting from the center.

The Louisiana case example of the traditional runoff not a fair case study. The race was not run as an RCV election where voters knew they could differentiate their choices up front. A traditional runoff has a different psychology where voters still must strategize in the first round and may struggle with who to vote for due to fear of causing a split vote between their top two favorites. In RCV, voters can vote their conscience.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1991\\_Louisiana\\_gubernatorial\\_election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1991_Louisiana_gubernatorial_election)

Also, the center squeeze effect is theoretical and is not necessarily demonstrative of what would happen in RCV. Each candidate needs to stand on their own. A center candidate among 3

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

## *Separating Fact from Fiction*

total candidates needs to get enough backing through first place votes to stay in the race (>33% in the example). The candidate will need to court moderate voters on both sides to make that happen. It is true that the major party structure can make that hard. But allowing more voices, such as centrists, can moderate the party leaning over time, and bring it back to the middle.

*CES's statement falls into the category of disinformation because it relies on a lie.*

The Louisiana example was a top-two race. A top-two runoff system is a plurality race, which is followed by a runoff between the top two vote-getters. Although top-two is better than plurality, it has a series of problems - costly, low-turnout runoffs and the vote splitting that can let extremists advance to the next round. Louisiana had a bad outcome with top-two, not RCV.



### **Center for Election Science says: What RCV Doesn't Do: Always Let You Honestly Rank Your Favorite Candidate First**

Admittedly, RCV does let voters get away with ranking their favorite first in two situations. But it can get dicey if you're unsure whether you're in one of those two situations.

One safe situation is when your favorite candidate is able to beat the other leading candidate in the last round. Then you're fine. The other safe situation is when your favorite candidate has no chance against either the leading candidate or the candidates who could beat the leading candidate. You're good there, too.

It becomes risky, however, to rank your honest favorite when that candidate is in between those two spots (or you're unsure). To reiterate, this dangerous in-between spot is when your favorite candidate is neither a clear loser nor a clear winner. In those in-between cases, ranking your favorite as first risks getting a bad candidate elected. And that bad candidate gets elected by RCV eliminating a superior compromise candidate too early.

If a voter is either in this in-between state or is unsure, then they have two options. They can either rank their favorite first and risk a terrible candidate winning. Or, they can not rank their favorite first at the cost their favorite candidate's much-needed support. Both of these outcomes are bad.

Need a visual? No worries. RCV can get complicated.

This scenario can happen in competitive elections. And it does happen. One famous example was in 2009 in Burlington, Vermont. There,

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

## *Separating Fact from Fiction*

conservatives ranked their favorite candidate first and it got them their least favorite candidate as the winner. Had these conservative voters instead tactically placed their favorite candidate as second, then they would have gotten a much better outcome.

Burlington voters have since chosen to repeal RCV.

Unfortunately, RCV's complexity can make this favorite betrayal issue difficult to understand. But RCV's complexity does not actually keep this issue at bay. It just makes it difficult to explain when it does happen.

And this scenario will happen again.



### **RCV for Colorado replies: What RCV Does Do: Lets You Honestly Rank Your Favorite Candidate First**

The word "always" is eliminated, because it is too absolute. However, a voter can be confident in honestly voting in all situations, knowing there may be a small flaw in improbable cases. Remember the goal in selecting an election method is minimizing the flaws or the consequences of the flaws, while maximizing the most valuable fairness criteria.

First, there are improbable cases when three or four candidates are nearly evenly divided in a round. If their difference is small, any slight change in choice will change who is eliminated first and thus the final outcome. For example if three candidates are nearly evenly split approximately 33.3% three ways, a small variation in choice will swing who gets eliminated and who wins. This can be seen as a flaw, because one fairness criterion states that the order of your second and third choices shouldn't cause your first choice to lose. It's important to note that this is a flaw, but it's a low-cost flaw. For one thing it is unpredictable, so there is not a good strategy to game it. You cannot predict if whether placing a second place vote or third place vote for your next-favorite candidates will help or hurt. Not knowing a game causes more honest voting. Also, it is improbable that a single vote will swing the results unless there is a very low sample of voters.

The example of Burlington Vermont is not useful. Gaming the vote didn't work in that election and would not have helped because the outcomes, from the first through third round, were unpredictable. RCV did exactly what it was supposed to do. It elected the consensus compromise candidate. The Republican led in the first round and second round. But when the Democrat was eliminated in the third round, the voters that voted for the Democrat had

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

*Separating Fact from Fiction*

their second and third place votes go to the progressive. If one focuses on political leaning only, there were more liberals (democrats, progressives and independents) voting preference for the winner than conservatives (republicans and independents) voting preference for the loser. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009\\_Burlington\\_mayoral\\_election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_Burlington_mayoral_election))

*CES's statement falls into the category of disinformation because it relies on a bases a conclusion on a misunderstanding of the tally. When tallying the votes, it is not possible to go over 50% twice. There may be more than two candidates in the race in the final round. However, if all of the votes for the losing candidates were added up - they would not total over 50% of the votes.*



## **Center for Election Science says: RCV Doesn't Do: Work In Presidential Elections**

Some folks even want to use RCV in presidential elections already. This would be a terrible mistake and a logistical nightmare, with or without a national popular vote.

With the Electoral College, it's challenging to implement any new voting method for a presidential election that doesn't match all the other states. That's because the discordance between states can mean that you don't

actually want electoral votes going to your favorite candidate if your favorite candidate isn't competitive. Then, you're not even just throwing away your vote. You're throwing away electoral votes. And electoral votes are much more valuable.

Even under a national popular vote, RCV faces enormous technical hurdles. For one, the nature of RCV tabulation requires that all the ballot data be centralized for tabulation. This creates both security and logistical concerns. Just try getting all the raw ballot data together for all 50 states with all their individual precincts.

Realistically, you'd have to deal with holdout states still using our choose-one method, even if you had a national popular vote. But you can't add RCV and regular choose-one ballots together. It just doesn't work. You really realize RCV's technical limitations when you consider the most viable approach to a national popular vote, which is through an interstate compact (though perhaps in some iteration other than its current form).



## **RCV for Colorado replies: What RCV Does Do: Work in Presidential Elections**

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

## *Separating Fact from Fiction*

Vote splitting does occur on the presidential election level (think Gore, Bush and Nader; Clinton, Bush and Perot), so it would be desirable to implement an RCV solution to avoid vote splitting. Because the Electoral College is a U.S constitutional institution and has its various quirks, and because each state has its own rules, from giving all electors to the winner to splitting proportionally the electors based on candidate outcomes, it would be impossible to choose a winner with a nationwide RCV popular vote without changing the constitution.

Implementing RCV for the final presidential election on a statewide basis would be possible if state rules to assign electors are followed. RCV could be used vote on the candidates and then assign the state electors, but it would be important to realize that flexible strategies among the electors to switch allegiances could remain. A better RCV system nationwide will have to wait until a constitutional change is acceptable. The logistics of a nationwide centralized tabulation center would also require additional thought.

Currently the best way to use RCV is to determine the winner of a presidential primary within a party. The current method is to select a winner from a large slate of candidates produces winners with small percentages of the overall vote which only represent their base instead of the majority of voters. The

winnowing of candidates due to party pressure or fund raising (instead of voter choice) could be eliminated. With RCV, a good compromise candidate with broad support within the party can be chosen. Four states are planning to use RCV in the [2020 Democratic Party presidential primaries](#): Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas, and Wyoming for all voters.

*CES's statement falls into the category of disinformation because it relies on a bases a conclusion on a misunderstanding of the facts.* RCV is already used in conjunction with pick-one voting. One example is the ballots in Minnesota where Minneapolis uses RCV, but the county and statewide races do not.



### **Center for Election Science says: What RCV Doesn't Do: Help Third Parties**

RCV's complex tabulations don't show support for candidates' rankings once a candidate is eliminated. This can hide a lot of support for third parties. Below is a very common tabulation table for RCV.

Tabulation for an RCV election in Oakland

Compare this to other methods like approval voting that show all the data at once.

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

## *Separating Fact from Fiction*

CES approval voting poll for 2016 US presidential election  
Also, according to Duverger's Law (a political science concept), a voting method needs to have at least one of two features to encourage third parties. It needs to either (1) have a lower vote count threshold for a candidate to be elected or (2) allow voters to honestly support their favorite. RCV does neither of these things.

Sometimes people get confused about RCV's support for third parties. In these cases, they tend to be thinking about single transferable vote, a different multi-winner voting method that is proportional. These two separate voting methods behave very differently.



### **RCV for Colorado replies: RCV Does Do: Help Third Parties**

RCV doesn't necessarily directly help any party. It empowers the voters. RCV allows a more representative outcome of the populace. Currently minor parties are discouraged from running to avoid vote splitting, or voters are discouraged to vote for them because of vote splitting.

RCV (both single winner and multi-winner versions) relieves that discouragement factor by allowing voters to honestly support their favorite,

RCV for Colorado  
January 21, 2020

and allows minor parties more voice. If there is majority support for a minor party in the community electorate, that will be seen in candidate success. What RCV municipal elections have shown across the country is an increase in demographic and viewpoint diversity of candidates. What RCV allows is a brighter chance for growth of a minor party by allowing fair representation of their constituents.

It is true that multi-winner districts held with RCV elections, provide the best way to allow representation of minor parties compared to a situation where the minor party can't garner majority support in a single-winner election.

*CES's statement falls into the category of disinformation because it relies on a bases a conclusion on an exaggeration.* Minor parties are aided, even when they do not win. When minor party candidates become viable, they can raise money and represent their voters in the debates. Minor parties are aided if their candidates gain enough votes to meet the state's requirements to become a major party.

Who deserves to win remains up to the voters to decide.



### **Center for Election Science says: Don't Forget Your Other Options**

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

## *Separating Fact from Fiction*

These big RCV claims were all made by either large media outlets or by advocacy organizations themselves. These false claims are common and rarely questioned.

Mind you, this is not a call to get rid of RCV. Where RCV has been implemented, it's moved us past our choose-one method, and that's a good thing.

This is a call, however, for outlets to be careful of the claims they make and to evaluate their options beyond RCV. We need to take a closer look at other options. The mere fact that RCV elected someone is not enough cause to celebrate. If we place the bar at merely getting a clear result, then we can hurdle the same bar merely drawing names from a hat. We must set higher standards.

We have other voting method options, and they too need exploring. Approval voting is an obvious candidate. Following decades of research within academia, Fargo became the first city to implement approval voting in 2018. Approval voting does have its criticisms (like any method). But there's strong evidence that in addition to being far simpler, it also performs substantially better than RCV. It's much better about vote splitting, you can always support your honest favorite, it helps third parties, it's workable for presidential

elections, and it's fine for primaries (presidential and otherwise).

Our default away from our terrible choose-one method shouldn't be a needlessly complex method that has its own issues. This essay didn't even go into RCV's monotonicity failure where ranking a candidate as better can hurt that candidate and ranking a candidate as worse can help that candidate. This nonmonotonic behavior happened in Burlington's wild election.

The takeaway here is that we have better and simpler options. Let's look at them before going all in with RCV.



### **RCV for Colorado replies: RCV is a proven alternative to plurality (first-past-the-post) elections.**

There is a lot of momentum gathering in many parts of the country to replace plurality elections with the much fairer RCV approach. That said, RCV for Colorado conducts periodic reviews of alternative methods which could better serve the voters. In the interim, stalling RCV implementations because something better could be discovered serves the interests of those who wish to stop election reform rather than the voters who are currently left out.

# Bursting the Bubble on Anti-RCV Disinformation

*Separating Fact from Fiction*

The only variant of AV that produces a majority winner in single balloting (of which RCV for Colorado is aware) is Bucklin Voting which was ruled to violate the principal of one-vote (Brown v. Smallwood).

*CES's statement falls into the category of disinformation because it bases a conclusion on lies.* Fargo did not implement AV in 2018, they passed a local initiative. [https://ballotpedia.org/Fargo, North Dakota, Measure 1, Approval Voting Initiative \(November 2018\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Fargo,_North_Dakota,_Measure_1,_Approval_Voting_Initiative_(November_2018)) ) AV doesn't get rolled out until June 2020. <https://vip.sos.nd.gov/pdfs/Portals/electioncalendar.pdf> It is not known if voters will vote strategically or if it will withstand legal challenge.



## **Center for Election Science says:**

Many voting methods have the confusing feature of multiple names. Ranked choice voting was called instant runoff voting, but its advocates chose to rename it. This is unfortunate because there are many other different ranking methods (ex// Condorcet methods, Borda, Bucklin). Consequently, ranked choice voting is often confused with an entire class of voting methods.



RCV for Colorado  
January 21, 2020

## **RCV for Colorado replies:**

RCV is the voter-centric language for one voting method which can be applied to single-winner races (like president) or multiple-winner races (like some city council at-large seats). This one system of voting has two differences in how it plays out in single- or multiple-winner tallies.

1. The majority threshold formula yields a different result. The formula is  $(1/(n+1))+ 1$  vote where  $n$ =the number of seats to be filled. Thus for a single-seat race the winner must pass 50%. In a single-seat winner-take-all system, this provides representation for a minimum of 50.01% of voters. For a multiple-seat race with two seats, the same formula yields a different threshold result, which provides representation for a minimum of 66.67% of voters.
2. In the tally, the process stops after the final winner is identified. The transfer of surplus votes from a candidate who already won in irrelevant to a race with only one winner.

Ranked Choice Voting is the umbrella-term for single-winner (instant runoff voting) and multi-winner (single transferrable vote).

*CES's statement falls into the category of disinformation because it relies on outdated language to confuse voters.*

**Facts matter.**