

A Tale of Two Ballots: Comparing Ranked-Choice and Simple-Plurality Voting in Utah

Official Nonpartisan Primary Ballot
Utah County, Utah
August 12, 2025

To vote for a candidate, mark the space adjacent to the name(s) of the person(s) you favor for each respective office.

Official Ballot for
Provo City, Utah

Heidi Hillman

Instructions to voters: To vote for a candidate, mark the space adjacent to the name(s) of the person(s) you favor as the candidate(s) for each respective office.

MARSHA JUDKINS

ERIC MITCH

THATCHER ALAIN LONGMAN

KATRICE MACKAY

ADAM SHIN

TOM FIFITA SITAKE SR

Provo City Council District 2
Vote for one

SALLY CLAYTON

JEFF WHITLOCK

HANNAH PETERSEN

Provo City Council District 5
Vote for one

SAM BLACKBURN

RACHEL WHIPPLE

SHAY ASLETT

TIM JAFEK

Official Nonpartisan Primary Ballot
Utah County, Utah
August 12, 2025

To vote your choice, completely fill in the oval to the left of your name so that your intent is clear. DO NOT initial or sign a correction.

Official Ballot for
Vineyard City, Utah

Pamela D. Spencer
Pamela Spencer, Vineyard City Recorder

Instructions to voters: To vote for a candidate, mark the space adjacent to the name(s) of the person(s) you favor as the candidate(s) for each respective office.

Vineyard City Council
Vote for up to three

BRETT CLAWSON

JACOB WOOD

CADEN RHOTON

TERENCE

EZRA

PARKER MCCUMBER

DAVID LAURET

STEVE TERRY

OFFICIAL BALLOT
MUNICIPAL GENERAL ELECTION
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2025

BT58 - E - SLC006

INSTRUCTIONS: Use a ballpoint pen with dark ink. To vote your choice, completely fill in the oval completely. If you make a mistake, mark the space adjacent to the name(s) of the person(s) you favor as the candidate(s) for each respective office.

RANKED CHOICE VOTING	1st option	2nd option	3rd option	4th option	5th option
DAVID BERG	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
CHRIS WHARTON	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
BLAKE MCCLARY	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
JAKE SEASTRAND	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
LIDDY HUNTSMAN-HERNANDEZ	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

END OF BALLOT

KA01:I-C-

Annemarie Plaizier, City Recorder

Instructions:

Making Selections



Use a ballpoint pen with dark ink.

Fill in the oval completely.

Kaysville City Council
Vote for up to TWO

PERRY R OAKS

NATE JACKSON

DAVID MOORE



UTAH FOUNDATION

RESEARCH • ANALYZE • INFORM

AUGUST 2026

A TALE OF TWO BALLOTS: COMPARING RANKED-CHOICE AND SIMPLE-PLURALITY VOTING IN UTAH

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About the Utah Foundation

Since 1945, leaders, legislators, and community members have relied upon the **illuminating, independent, and nonpartisan public-policy research** produced by the Utah Foundation to support informed decision-making on topics that matter most. As a 501(c)(3) with broad community support and a 60-member board, the Utah Foundation exists to empower **civic engagement as the foundation for enhanced quality of life for Utahns.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Utah State Legislature authorized a pilot program allowing municipalities to use a ranked-choice process for municipal elections. That program sunset in 2026.

Discussion during the pilot suggests that many voters and political leaders misunderstand ranked-choice voting. In response, the Utah Foundation decided to publish this primer comparing ranked-choice voting with simple-plurality voting. A subsequent report addresses Utah's experience with ranked-choice voting, including voter turnout and competitiveness.

Evidence suggests that ranked-choice voting has three main strengths.

- It allows voters to communicate more information than simple-plurality voting.
- It ensures that the elected candidate will win a majority of the non-exhausted ballots.
- It can save on administrative costs when used to combine multiple elections (such as a primary, general, or runoff election).

Evidence is mixed on whether ranked-choice voting improves election quality. Some argue that ranked-choice voting incentivizes more civility and coordination between candidates, allows for more competitive elections, results in higher voter turnout, and is more likely to elect the “right” candidate. These outcomes are often influenced by other factors such as candidate quality, issue salience, voting accessibility, voter education efforts, and similar factors. Benefits to election quality also depend somewhat on which measures are used to evaluate it.

Ranked-choice voting has two primary drawbacks. It is complex and unfamiliar to many voters.

In terms of complexity, voters face a more complex ballot. Consequently, it is harder for election administrators to ensure ballots are counted accurately and reported understandably. This added complexity often leads to longer waits for election-day results, while timing for official results is set by law.

In terms of unfamiliarity, while ranked-choice voting is not uncommon elsewhere, it represents a change from the status quo. As such, investment is needed to help voters and candidates understand the process. As a result, there is strong momentum to stick with simple-plurality elections, which are most familiar to Utahns.

Ultimately, the choice is not between a complicated system with flaws and a simple system without flaws. Rather, it is a choice between two election systems that prioritize different values and create different kinds of risks.

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INTRODUCTION

A democracy's essential component is widely understood to be the right to vote. Yet voting procedures vary widely across different forms of democracy.

In the United States, the most common voting procedure is simple-plurality, where voters choose a single candidate, and the candidate with the most votes wins. This is also sometimes known as first-past-the-post.

However, there are several alternative voting procedures. Each voting procedure has strengths and weaknesses. Many cities and states in the United States are experimenting with ranked-choice voting, also known as instant-runoff voting, preferential voting, or alternative voting.¹

Utah was among these states. In 2018, the Utah State Legislature created a pilot program authorizing municipalities to opt in to a ranked-choice voting procedure.²

This report is a primer on ranked-choice voting. It includes added context from over 1,500 municipal elections in Utah from 2011 to 2025. While these data do not cover all municipal elections, they cover those the Utah Foundation could access from counties, cities, and towns statewide. (See the Appendix.)

A companion report examines Utah's ranked-choice voting pilot program and evaluates it across several metrics. That report uses a mixed-methods analysis to evaluate the program across Utah cities using quantitative and qualitative metrics, such as voter turnout, election competitiveness, and city council members' perceptions.

BACKGROUND ON RANKED-CHOICE VOTING

Ranked-choice voting originated in 19th-century Europe as a similar voting procedure called single transferable voting.³ Its modified counterpart, instant runoff voting, was first used in the United States in 1915 to elect city council members in Ohio, and by the 1940s, over twenty cities were using instant runoff voting.⁴ However, the initial spread of ranked-choice voting in the United States tapered out and then reversed. By 1962, ranked-choice voting had been repealed in all but one city.⁵

1 MIT Election Data + Science Lab. "Ranked Choice Voting: Instant Runoff Voting Use in the United States." *MIT Election Data + Science*. Updated June 24, 2026. <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/ranked-choice-voting-instant-runoff-voting-use-united-states>.

2 House Bill 35, 2018 General Session, "Municipal Alternate Voting Methods Pilot Project," <https://le.utah.gov/~2018/bills/hbillenr/HB0035.htm>.

3 Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center, 2026, "History of RCV," *Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center*, <https://www.rcvresources.org/history-of-rcv/>.

4 Ibid.

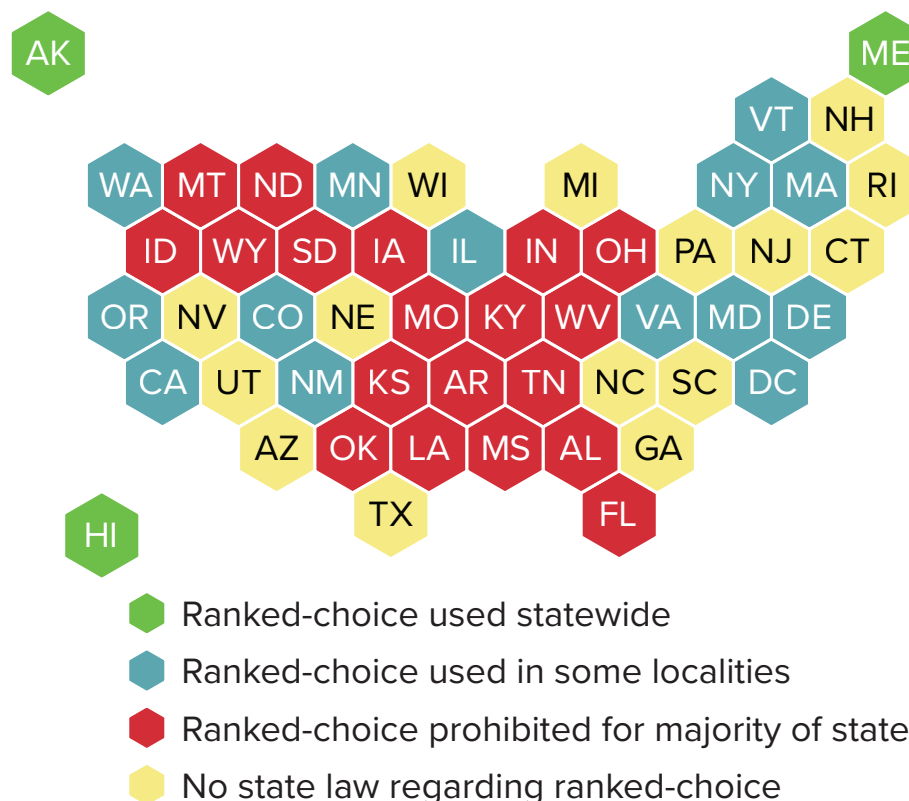
5 Ibid.

A resurgence of ranked-choice voting has been occurring over the last decade.⁶ In 2016, just 10 cities used ranked-choice voting (no statewide use), while more than 30 cities, two counties, and two states used it in 2026.⁷ As of 2026, only Alaska and Maine have adopted ranked-choice voting statewide (Hawaii requires it in some special elections).⁸

Yet resistance still exists; as of 2026, 19 states have laws preventing or limiting ranked-choice voting, compared with just 16 states and D.C. that allow or require it.⁹ (See Figure 1.)

U.S. split roughly three ways: one third has banned ranked-choice voting, one third permits it, and one third has no official stance.

Figure 1: Ranked-Choice Voting Usage in U.S. States Including D.C., 2026



Please note: This figure simplifies each state's stance; some states allow ranked-choice voting for military personnel and in primaries and special-purpose governments, though not for most voters in the general elections.

Source: FairVote, Ballotpedia, and the National Conference of State Legislatures.

- Merrefield, Clark. "Ranked Choice Voting: An Explainer and 3 Tips for Reporters." *The Journalist's Resource*, October 30, 2024. <https://journalistsresource.org/politics-and-government/ranked-choice-voting/>
- Mantell, Will. "Fact Sheet: Ranked Choice Voting Headed for Biggest Election Day Yet." *FairVote*, October 23, 2024. <https://fairvote.org/press/fact-sheet-rcv-electionday-2024/>; FairVote. "Ranked Choice Voting Information." 2026. <https://fairvote.org/our-reforms/ranked-choice-voting-information/>.
- FairVote. "Ranked Choice Voting Information." 2026. <https://fairvote.org/our-reforms/ranked-choice-voting-information/>; National Conference of State Legislatures. "Ranked Choice Voting." Updated March 23, 2026. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting>.
- Ballotpedia. "Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV)." 2026. [https://ballotpedia.org/Ranked-choice_voting_\(RCV\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Ranked-choice_voting_(RCV)).

An increasing number of states are banning ranked-choice voting. Six states banned it in 2025: Wyoming, West Virginia, Kansas, North Dakota, Iowa, and Arkansas.¹⁰ This followed six other states banning ranked-choice voting in 2024. A total of 19 states prohibit ranked-choice voting.¹¹

While still uncommon, ranked-choice voting did get some national attention when it was used in the New York City Mayoral Primary in 2021 and 2025.¹² However, many local governments have abandoned ranked-choice voting after adopting it. Fifty-three U.S. localities stopped using ranked-choice voting as of early 2026.¹³ Nearly half of these cities (24) were in Utah.¹⁴

10 Ballotpedia. "Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV)." 2026. [https://ballotpedia.org/Ranked-choice_voting_\(RCV\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Ranked-choice_voting_(RCV)).

11 Ibid.

12 New York City Campaign Finance Board. *Voter Analysis Report: 2021–2022*. New York: New York City Campaign Finance Board, 2022. https://www.nycfb.info/pdf/2021-2022_VoterAnalysisReport.pdf. Hutchinson, Rachel, and Adnaan Mohamud. "Ranked Choice Voting in New York City's 2025 Primaries: An In-Depth Analysis." *FairVote*, December 17, 2025. <https://fairvote.org/report/nyc-report-2025/>

13 Ballotpedia. "Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV)." 2026. [https://ballotpedia.org/Ranked-choice_voting_\(RCV\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Ranked-choice_voting_(RCV)).

14 Ibid.



Bountiful, Utah.

RANKED-CHOICE VOTING PROCEDURES

Ranked-choice voting begins when participants rank candidates in order of preference, from highest to lowest. Once ballots are counted, if a candidate receives a majority of first-place votes in the first round, they are declared the winner.

If no candidate received a majority of the active ballots, then the candidate with the fewest first-choice votes is eliminated. Those who ranked that candidate as first then see their votes reallocated to their next non-eliminated choice. The process repeats until one candidate achieves more than 50% of the active ballots.¹⁵ See Figure 2 for an example of what a ranked-choice voting ballot looks like.

On a ranked-choice ballot, voters rank candidates in order of preference.

Figure 2: An Example of a Ranked-Choice Ballot

SALT LAKE CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 3					
RANKED CHOICE VOTING: Rank up to Five candidates					
	1st option	2nd option	3rd option	4th option	5th option
DAVID BERG	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
CHRIS WHARTON	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
BLAKE MCCLARY	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
JAKE SEASTRAND	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
LIDDY HUNTSMAN-HERNANDEZ	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5

Source: Salt Lake City.

¹⁵ The Campaign Legal Center, "Ranked Choice Voting," 2025, <https://campaignlegal.org/democracyu/accountability/ranked-choice-voting>.

Walkthrough of a Ranked-Choice Voting Scenario

Here is a fictional scenario: 1,000 Utahns rank their favorite of the state's five National Parks: Arches, Bryce Canyon, Zion, Canyonlands, and Capitol Reef. Utahns rank their National Parks (see Figure 3), and then the votes are tallied (see Figure 4).

Voters rank the National Parks in order of their preference.

Figure 3: An Example of a Single Ranked-Choice Ballot for Favorite National Park

Candidate	First Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice	Fourth Choice	Fifth Choice
Arches	☐	☐	☐	☒	☐
Bryce Canyon	☐	☒	☐	☐	☐
Zion	☐	☐	☒	☐	☐
Canyonlands	☒	☐	☐	☐	☐
Capitol Reef	☐	☐	☐	☐	☒

The votes are then tallied.

Figure 4: An Example of a Ranked-Choice Tally for Favorite National Park

Candidate	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4
Arches	300	310	325	445
Bryce Canyon	260	280	319	eliminated
Zion	220	255	326	506 — winner!
Canyonlands	140	150	eliminated	—
Capitol Reef	80	eliminated	—	—
Exhausted	0	5	30	49
Total	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000

Round 1: After the first round of voting, no National Park clears 501, the majority mark. Capitol Reef has the fewest votes, so it is eliminated. Its 80 ballots are reviewed again: whichever park those voters ranked second now gets the vote: 10 go to Canyonlands, 20 to Bryce Canyon, 35 to Zion, 10 to Arches, and 5 ballots had no other park ranked at all, so they “exhaust” and drop out of the count entirely.

Round 2: There is still no majority, which now takes 498 votes, since only 995 ballots are still active. Canyonlands is last, and it is out. Its 150 ballots are redistributed: 15 to Arches, 39 to Bryce Canyon, 71 to Zion, and 25 exhausted.

Round 3: It is now a tight three-way race, but no park has reached the 486 votes needed of the remaining 970 active votes. Bryce Canyon is eliminated. Its 319 ballots are split between the two frontrunners: 180 for Zion, 120 for Arches. The other 19 are exhausted.

Round 4: Zion now holds 506 votes, clearing the 476-vote majority threshold, and wins. It even holds a majority of the original 1,000 ballots cast, not just the votes still in play.

This fictional example can highlight several factors. In this case, Zion would not have won a simple-plurality, but it received more second- and third-place voters than Arches. However, this does not have to be the case. Often the first-place candidate of the first round goes on to win the election. In some cases, a candidate can win multi-seat of the vote in the first round, and no elimination rounds are required.

Not all voters filled out second-, third-, or fourth-place positions. When voters leave these positions blank, the ballots are “exhausted” and not counted toward the final tally.

BACKGROUND ON UTAH'S MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

This report evaluates ranked-choice and simple-plurality voting with context from Utah's municipal elections. This section provides a short background on municipal elections.

Many municipal elections in Utah are for a single position. A city may only have one mayor, so mayoral elections are single-seat elections. Sometimes elections for positions that have several open seats, such as city councils or special-purpose government boards or commissions, award several seats in a single election. Rather than holding three elections to fill three city council seats, voters choose three candidates in one election, and the three with the most votes win.

One key factor in Utah's municipal elections is that no more than two candidates can run per seat in the general election. In other words, Utah law requires primaries or municipal conventions when more than twice as many candidates as open seats run, limiting the general election to two candidates per open seat.¹⁶

In elections for a single contested position, the two-candidates-per-seat rule would limit the general election to two candidates. A two-seat election would be limited to four candidates. A three-seat election (the most seats possible in a Utah municipal election) would be limited to six candidates.

COMPARING RANKED-CHOICE AND SIMPLE-PLURALITY ELECTIONS

Because most Americans are familiar with simple-plurality voting, it serves as a useful contrast to highlight the similarities and differences between ranked-choice voting and simple-plurality voting. Figure 5 (on pages 8 and 9) provides an overview of these similarities and differences, while the following sections discuss each topic in more depth.

¹⁶ Utah Code § 20A-9-404 (effective May 25, 2026), https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title20A/Chapter9/C20A-9-S404_2026050620260525.pdf

Ranked-choice and simple-plurality differ in some key areas.

Figure 5.1: Overview of Similarities and Differences Between Ranked-Choice and Simple-Plurality Voting

Topic	Ranked-choice voting	Simple-plurality voting
Simplicity		
Ballot Simplicity	More complex ballots with multiple columns and bubbles offer more chances for invalidated ballots.	Single-seat elections are simple; one column, one bubble to fill out per election. Multi-seat elections are slightly more complicated; still just one column, but up to three bubbles per column.
Ballot Validation	Additional concerns. Ballots can be complicated by skipped rankings, choosing multiple rankings for a single candidate, or choosing multiple candidates with the same rank.	Fewer concerns. Verify that each ballot has no more markings than available seats.
Ballot Tabulation	Complex if there is no winner in the first round, since officials must re-tabulate votes each round. Because elimination order matters, ballots cannot be tabulated at the precinct level but must be tabulated all at once.	Simple: Add each additional ballot to the previous sum. Tabulations can happen at lower levels and added to the total sum.
Timing of Results	The timing of official results is usually regulated by statute regardless of voting procedure. Unofficial results may be tabulated more quickly – particularly if a candidate wins in the first round. If multiple rounds are necessary, unofficial results may be tabulated more slowly, as all ballots are needed to determine the elimination order.	Statute usually regulates the timing of official results, regardless of the voting procedure. Unofficial results may be tabulated more quickly, although elections decided by small margins may still take time to determine.
Primary Elections	Ranked-choice elections can replace a separate primary and general election. All primary candidates can be considered at once, and there is no need to limit candidates to one per party.	Primary elections or municipal conventions are necessary to prevent candidates from winning with only a small percentage of voter support.
Elections by Majority		
Majority Win	The process ensures a majority of non-exhausted ballots. This is further addressed in the exhausted ballots and wasted votes sections.	Crowded elections can result in winners with no majority. Utah's requirement restricting the number of candidates in general elections usually prevents this.
Majority Requirements	Can simplify elections that require a majority win.	Can sometimes require multiple cycles if there is a requirement for a majority.
Voter Preferences		
Voter Choice	Best option: Voters can choose their favored candidate without “wasting” their vote.	Voters whose favored candidate may have a limited likelihood of winning may choose a non-favored candidate to prevent “wasting” their vote.
The Spoiler Effect	Ranked-choice voting is less affected by the spoiler effect, as votes for spoiler candidates are reallocated to others when a spoiler candidate is eliminated.	Spoiler candidates can split a vote, allowing the suboptimal candidate to be elected.

Ranked-choice and simple-plurality differ in some key areas.

Figure 5.2: Overview of Similarities and Differences Between Ranked-Choice and Simple-Plurality Voting

Topic	Ranked-choice voting	Simple-plurality voting
Votes that Count		
Exhausted Ballots	Ballots are exhausted if all of the voters' listed priorities have been eliminated. While exhausted ballots may not affect the final margin, they affect which candidates made it to the final round by determining the elimination order.	Conceptually, ballots submitted indicating fewer candidates than the number of seats are similar to exhausted ballots.
"Wasted" Votes	Critics may argue exhausted ballots are "wasted." However, they still affect candidate elimination order and may convey the information that they no longer prefer or want any of the remaining candidates.	Ballots can be considered wasted.
Audits	Audits require more work because ballots are more complex, and if no candidate wins in the first round, tabulation must verify multiple rounds and potential elimination-order effects.	Audits are more straightforward statistically, using sampling to assess whether votes were counted correctly and support the reported outcome.
Vote Equality	Each person can rank the same number of candidates. People can choose not to rank all candidates, which may make their vote carry less weight than a voter who ranked all candidates. Exhausted ballots still affect the election outcome through the elimination order.	Each person can cast a vote for a specific number of people. People can choose to vote for fewer people, which may make their vote carry less weight than a voter who voted for all possible positions.
Election Quality		
Voter Turnout	Voter turnout is likely more affected by other non-voting procedure factors. However, primary turnout should be larger when combined with the general election.	Voter turnout is likely more affected by other non-voting procedure factors. However, primary turnout is likely lower than what would occur in a combined general election.
Campaign Civility	Some argue that ranked-choice voting incentivizes civility to maintain a high priority for voters with other preferences. Candidates may have incentives to form alliances.	Limited incentives for civility or alliances.
Electing the "wrong" candidate	If the consensus candidate has few first-place votes, they can be eliminated in early rounds, creating a route for the "wrong" person to be elected. Models estimate this occurs 17% of the time in a five-candidate election.	In crowded fields, spoiler candidates can reduce the consensus candidate's share of the vote, creating a route for the "wrong" person to be elected. Models estimate this occurs in 39% of five-candidate elections.
Competitiveness	A simple measure of competitiveness shows similar levels between ranked-choice and simple plurality. A subsequent report will provide a more in-depth analysis.	A simple measure of competitiveness shows similar levels between ranked-choice and simple plurality. A subsequent report will provide a more in-depth analysis.
Transparency	Election transparency is determined when rules, ballots, and tabulation methods are documented and independently verifiable. Additional complexity may make it <i>feel</i> less transparent to voters.	Election transparency is determined when rules, ballots, and tabulation methods are documented and independently verifiable. The simplicity of simple-plurality may make it <i>feel</i> more transparent to voters.

SIMPLICITY

Generally, a simple-plurality election is simpler than a ranked-choice election. It is simpler for voters and for tabulation. There are fewer ballot validation problems. Consequently, officials can generally determine preliminary results for simple-plurality elections more quickly.

While a ballot is more complex in a ranked-choice election, tabulation is only more complex or slower if there is no first-round winner. A first-round winner occurred in one-third of Utah elections, and surveys of different sets of national elections found a first-round winner between approximately 40% and 70% of the time.¹⁷ In these cases, the tabulation process and time to determine the winner are very similar to simple-plurality contests.

However, some argue that ranked-choice voting is simpler than simple-plurality voting because it can combine primary, general, and runoff elections into a single contest.

This section provides these arguments in more detail, including some context from Utah's municipal elections.

¹⁷ Utah elections are determined using Utah Foundation's collection of municipal data. For national data see the following: FairVote's analysis of 500 national races reported 40% didn't require a runoff - FairVote. "Research and Data on RCV in Practice." <https://fairvote.org/resources/data-on-rcv/>; Associated Press found that 70% of 150 ranked-choice elections in 2024 were decided in the first round - Lieb, David A. "Voters Rejected Historic Election Reforms across the US, despite More than \$100M Push." Associated Press, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/bc797f209e5f98a18afb2e5f784e63b6>; An academic article reviewing 362 races found 53% of three-candidate races and 39% of five-candidate races were decided in the first round - Katzman, Spencer, and Keith L. Dougherty. "Ranked Choice Voting with Different Elimination Procedures." Public Choice (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-026-01427-0>.



Ballot Simplicity

A simple-plurality ballot has one column of candidates, and voters fill in one bubble per seat. (See Figure 6.) A single-seat election (such as an election for mayor) requires filling one bubble. Multi-seat elections may require filling two or three bubbles in the same column. (See Figure 6.)

Ranked-choice ballots commonly use a grid in which candidates appear in rows and rankings appear in columns.¹⁸ (See Figure 2 on page 4 and Figure 6.) Voters must understand that each ranking should ordinarily contain

¹⁸ Utah typically has as many rank opportunities as candidates. Some locations limit the number of

A ranked-choice ballot in Utah has as many ranking columns as candidates. Simple-plurality ballots have one column.

Figure 6: Sample Ballots Illustrating Different Ballot Layouts

INSTRUCTIONS TO VOTERS: Completely fill in the ovals ● and rank as many or as few candidates as you would like. Do not vote for more than one candidate in each column. Use a black or blue ballpoint pen. If you tear, deface, or wrongly mark this ballot, contact the County Clerk's office.											
Heber City Council Four Year Term Rank in Order of Preference 1-11 3 Council Seats Will be Filled											
	1st Preference	2nd Preference	3rd Preference	4th Preference	5th Preference	6th Preference	7th Preference	8th Preference	9th Preference	10th Preference	11th Preference
CASEY POWERS	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
CHRISTEN THOMPSON	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
SID OSTERGAARD	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
JAMI HEWLETT	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
VAUGHN ERIC HOKANSON	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
DANNY HILL	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
NICK LOPEZ	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
PAUL ROYALL III	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
AARON CHEATWOOD	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
TORI E BROUGHTON	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
MIKE JOHNSTON	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Official Ballot for Vineyard City, Utah	
 Pamela Spencer, Vineyard City Recorder	
Instructions to voters: To vote for a candidate, mark the space adjacent to the name(s) of the person(s) you favor as the candidate(s) for each respective office.	
Vineyard City Council Vote for up to three	
☐	BRETT CLAWSON
☐	JACOB WOOD
☐	CADEN RHOTON
☐	TERRY EWING
☐	EZRA NAIR
☐	PARKER MCCUMBER
☐	DAVID LAURET
☐	STEVE TERRY

Source: Heber City, Vineyard City,.

rankings. For example, in Maine, elections could have eleven candidates, but only six available rankings. See Maine Legislature, House Paper 96, Legislative Document 108, 129th Legislature, "An Act To Establish a Presidential Primary System for Maine," https://legislature.maine.gov/legis/bills/bills_129th/billtexts/HP009601.asp.

no more than one candidate and that the same candidate should not be assigned more than one ranking.

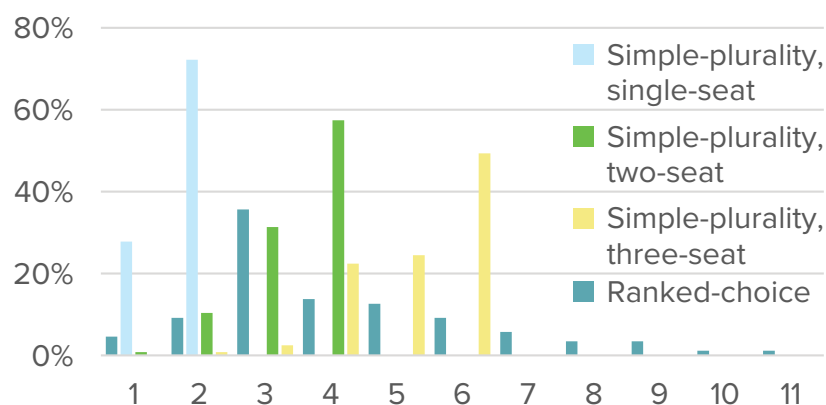
This added complexity creates more opportunities for errors that could invalidate ballots. However, as individuals become acclimated to the process, these errors would likely decrease.¹⁹

Ranked-choice ballots are more complicated not only because they have multiple columns, but also because they are not limited to two candidates per open seat. However, this is something of a false comparison. It is likely that simple-plurality elections often have more than two candidates filing per open seat, but primaries or municipal conventions limit those candidates for the general election. Indeed, the fact that between half and nearly three-quarters of simple-plurality elections have the maximum number of candidates indicates that primaries or conventions have simplified these elections. (See Figure 7.)

The Utah Foundation’s municipal elections database includes several examples of elections with large candidate pools, such as Heber City in 2023. In that ranked-choice election, 11 candidates ran for city council. Lehi and Payson also saw ranked-choice elections with nine candidates in 2021 and 2023, respectively.

Ranked-choice elections tend to have more candidates than simple-plurality elections.

Figure 7: Number of Candidates in Utah Municipal Elections by Election Type: 2011–2025



*Note: Simple-plurality elections are limited to two candidates for each open seat.

Source: Utah Foundation’s Municipal Elections Database.

19 National Conference of State Legislatures. “Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Implementation Considerations for Policymakers.” Topic titled “Impact on Ballot Design.” Updated September 28, 2022. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting-in-practice-implementation-considerations-for-policymakers>; U.S. Election Assistance Commission. *Alternative Voting Methods in the United States*. 2023. <https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/alternative-voting-methods-united-states>

While simple-plurality ballots would likely be more complicated with more candidates not eliminated from primaries, they would still be simpler ballots than the multiple columns of ranked-choice ballots.

Ballot Validation

Single-seat simple-plurality elections require administrators to determine whether each ballot contains one valid selection, then total the selections for each candidate. Multi-seat elections use a similar determination process but allow more votes per election. Ranked-choice voting requires additional administrative rules and procedures. Officials must determine how to treat skipped rankings, duplicate candidate rankings, multiple candidates assigned the same ranking, and write-in candidates.²⁰

Ranked-choice voting creates additional possible marking errors, including selecting two candidates for the same ranking, assigning the same candidate more than one ranking, or leaving a ranking blank while completing a later ranking. The effect of an error depends on where it occurs and on state counting rules. An error in a late ranking may never matter if a voter's earlier choice remains active, while marking two candidates in first place can prevent the vote from being counted in the opening round.

With the municipal election data available for Utah, the Utah Foundation is unable to make such comparisons based on local data. However, a 2025 study examining approximately 3.1 million ballots in 165 ranked-choice races found that 4.8% contained at least one improper marking. Importantly, about 90% of the mismarked votes were still included in the final count; the study found a first-round rejection rate of approximately 0.35% in ranked contests, compared with 0.04% in the simple-plurality elections examined. These results show both that ranked ballots create more opportunities for irregular markings and that an irregular marking does not necessarily invalidate the entire ballot.²¹

Ballot Tabulation

In a simple-plurality contest, every valid vote is assigned to one candidate, the candidates' totals are added, and the largest total determines the winner. In a ranked-choice election, if a candidate wins a majority in the first round, the process looks very similar.

20 Pettigrew, Stephen, and Dylan Radley. "Overvotes, Overranks, and Skips: Mismarked and Rejected Votes in Ranked Choice Voting." *Political Behavior* 48 (2026): 229–251. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-025-10028-4>.

21 Ibid.

However, if no candidate wins a majority, officials eliminate the lowest-performing candidate.²² Officials transfer the eliminated candidate's ballots to the next-highest non-eliminated candidate. This process repeats as necessary. Because each round depends on the previous one, administrators must be able to reproduce the elimination order, identify the transferred ballots, and show the resulting totals.²³ If there is no first-round winner, the tabulation is inherently more detailed than the single round of a simple-plurality process.²⁴

In addition, officials can tabulate simple-plurality votes at different levels and locations, and then sum those subtotals. This applies only to the first round of ranked-choice voting. If no one wins a majority in the first round, the elimination order becomes essential in the ranked-choice process. Still, administrators cannot determine the elimination order based on a precinct-level subtotal of ballots.²⁵ While elections with large margins between candidates may permit preliminary results without a full accounting of all ballots, close elections require collecting all ballots before evaluation.²⁶

Timing of Results

Law usually regulates the time to determine official results, and it varies by state.²⁷ It may take days or weeks.²⁸ Utah municipalities must certify results and declare the winning candidates within 14 calendar days.²⁹ This applies to simple-plurality and ranked-choice elections.

While law sets dates for official election results regardless of the election process, voters often expect results on election day or soon after. These results, however, are preliminary. For unofficial results, simple-plurality elections are often easier to report on election night because officials can add each new batch of ballots directly to the candidates' totals.

22 National Conference of State Legislatures. "Ranked Choice Voting." Updated March 23, 2026. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting>.

23 U.S. Election Assistance Commission. *Explanation on Federal Certification of Voting Systems Utilizing Ranked Choice Voting*. October 2023. <https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-10/RCV%20Voting%20Systems%20V3%20Final%2010.20.23.pdf>.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Tisler, Derek, Elizabeth Howard, and Edgardo Cortés. "Roadmap to the Official Count in the 2024 Election." Brennan Center for Justice. Published October 26, 2020. Updated September 24, 2024. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/roadmap-official-count-2024-election>.

28 Fernekes, Collier, Michael Thorning, Wren Orey, and Hannah So. "Certified Stamp of Approval: When the Election Results Will Be Final in Each State." Bipartisan Policy Center, November 6, 2020. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/article/state-election-results/>.

29 Utah Code § 20A-4-301, "Board of canvassers," <https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title20A/Chapter4/20A-4-S301.htm>.

When ranked-choice results show a winner in the first round, the timing of results looks very similar. However, it may take additional time when no candidate wins in the first round. Preliminary results may be misleading because newly tallied ballots can change the elimination order. The need for complete ballot records to determine the elimination order can severely slow the process of providing unofficial results.³⁰

However, regardless of the voting procedure, delays can occur while officials process mail, provisional, military, overseas, or other outstanding ballots.³¹ This is particularly true for elections determined by a small margin.

30 National Conference of State Legislatures. "Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Implementation Considerations for Policymakers." Topic titled "Will RCV slow down the release of election results?" Updated September 28, 2022. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting-in-practice-implementation-considerations-for-policymakers>; U.S. Election Assistance Commission. *Explanation on Federal Certification of Voting Systems Utilizing Ranked Choice Voting*. October 2023. <https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-10/RCV%20Voting%20Systems%20V3%20Final%2010.20.23.pdf>.

31 U.S. Election Assistance Commission, "Where Do I Find Election Results?," December 23, 2025, <https://www.eac.gov/where-do-i-find-election-results>.



Regardless of the process, the winning margin plays a major role in how quickly results are announced. Landslides are determined quickly, while elections decided by a handful of votes take longer to verify, whether using simple-plurality or ranked-choice voting.

Primary Elections

Primary elections often narrow the field for a general election. If more than twice as many candidates file as there are seats available, Utah legislation requires a primary or convention to narrow the field to two candidates per open seat.³²

However, ranked-choice voting can replace primary elections. The ranked-choice process narrows the field until one candidate gains a majority within a single election. This can reduce the number of elections required.

Vineyard City's staff found that using a ranked-choice election to avoid a primary saved the city at least \$10,000.³³ The Salt Lake City Recorder's Office prepared an estimate of election costs, showing that a simple-plurality with a primary would be around \$119,000. In contrast, a ranked-choice contest without a primary would cost just over \$72,000 – a savings of \$47,000.³⁴

ELECTIONS BY MAJORITY

One of the strongest arguments for ranked-choice elections over simple-plurality voting is that they guarantee a candidate will be elected by a majority of active votes. However, Utah's municipal election law creates elections in which few candidates win without a majority of votes. This does, however, require additional steps such as primaries or municipal conventions. Other states rely on runoff elections. This section discusses these issues in more detail.

32 Utah Code § 20A-9-404 (effective May 25, 2026), https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title20A/Chapter9/C20A-9-S404_2026050620260525.pdf.

33 Based on the phrasing of the minutes, it is not clear if the primary election would cost \$20,000, or the whole election would cost \$20,000, half of which would be the cost of a primary. Vineyard City Council, Minutes of a Special Session, April 3, 2025, pp. 2–3 <https://www.utah.gov/pmn/files/1253115.pdf>.

34 Lauren Shafer, Deputy City Recorder, Update: Ranked Choice Voting and Participation in the Municipal Alternative Voting Method Pilot Program, memorandum to Salt Lake City Leadership, Mayor Erin Mendenhall, and Council Chair Amy Fowler, Salt Lake City Recorder's Office, March 23, 2021, pp. 1–3, https://www.slcdocs.com/recorder/March_23_RCV_Memo.pdf.

Majority Win

When four or more candidates run in an election decided by simple-plurality, it is not uncommon for the majority of voters to support candidates other than the winner. In a five-candidate contest, for example, a candidate could win with only 30% of voters. That means 70% of voters preferred someone else. Ranked-choice voting is designed to ensure that whichever candidate wins, a majority of non-exhausted votes preferred that candidate.³⁵

However, Utah's two-candidates-per-open-seat rule means primaries or municipal conventions must be held to limit candidates if more than two candidates per open seat file to run.³⁶ Limiting candidates to two per seat sharply reduces the chance of a candidate winning with less than a majority of valid votes.

The Utah Foundation found records for 907 municipal elections with a single contested seat and two candidates. A candidate won a majority of the votes in all but seven of these single-contested-seat elections. These elections were influenced by strong write-in candidates.

35 National Conference of State Legislatures. "Ranked Choice Voting." Updated March 23, 2026. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting>.

36 Utah Code § 20A-9-404 (effective May 25, 2026), https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title20A/Chapter9/C20A-9-S404_2026050620260525.pdf.



The story is less extreme in Utah's multi-seat municipal elections. In these elections, voters choose two or three candidates from the total list. Out of an observed 688 elections with two or three seats, candidates in 72 elections were elected without receiving a majority of valid votes – just a little over 10% of the time.

Majority Requirements

Simple-plurality elections often have results in which the winner does not receive a majority of the votes – particularly in races with more than two candidates per seat. In jurisdictions that require a majority win, this requires an additional election (often known as a runoff) where a subset of candidates (usually the winner and runner-up) compete for votes again. This adds costs and time to determine the winner.

Ranked-choice elections can simplify this process into a single election. If the first round does not produce a majority, then candidates are eliminated, and votes are reallocated until a candidate wins a majority of the remaining active votes. This can simplify the overall election calendar, but it is not identical to a conventional runoff. Voters cannot reconsider their choices after seeing the initial election results, candidates cannot campaign between rounds, and only people who participated in the original election are represented in the ranked-choice count.

Utah's municipal election law does not require a candidate to win with a majority, so runoff elections are not necessary.

VOTER PREFERENCES

Generally, ranked-choice voting lets voters express more of their preferences than simple-plurality. A common criticism of the simple-plurality process is that it tends to concentrate votes around two leading candidates, marginalizing others. Voters may feel forced to choose one of the two leading candidates, even if they prefer another candidate.

Ranked-choice elections let voters rank their preferred candidates first while still expressing a preference among the leading candidates. This section discusses these issues in more detail.

Voter Choice

With simple-plurality voting, voters often choose one of the two main candidates even if their preferred candidate is a “third-party candidate” or low-likelihood candidate.³⁷ Voters do this to prevent their vote from being “wasted,” as only the difference between the top two candidates matters under a simple-plurality process.

Under a ranked-choice process, voters can put their preferred candidate first, knowing that if that candidate is eliminated, their vote would not be wasted but would be reallocated to their next preference.³⁸

In Utah’s municipal elections, this is not a major factor, as candidates are already limited to two per seat.

37 To be clear, this is a tendency, not an absolute. See Peeters, Ronald, Rene Saran, and Ayşe Müge Yüksel. “Strategic Party Formation on a Circle and Duverger’s Law.” *Social Choice and Welfare* 47, no. 3 (2016): 729–759. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00355-016-0990-z>.

38 U.S. Election Assistance Commission. *Alternative Voting Methods in the United States*. 2023. <https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/alternative-voting-methods-united-states>.



The Spoiler Effect

Vote splitting is when two candidates draw votes away from each other. One common example occurs when a third-party candidate pulls votes from a major candidate who shares a similar position on the political spectrum.³⁹ The third candidate in this situation is considered a “spoiler” candidate, and thus this is referred to as the “spoiler effect.”

The Utah Foundation has no data on whether this was a factor in Utah’s recent simple-plurality or ranked-choice elections. On a broader scale, a series of simulated elections indicated that the spoiler effect was present in both election processes, but less common among ranked-choice elections.⁴⁰ A review of British elections from 1992 through 2010, including some simple-plurality and some ranked-choice elections, showed that 11.3% of simple-plurality elections displayed a spoiler effect, compared with just 4.5% of ranked-choice elections.⁴¹

VOTES THAT COUNT

With the added complexity of a ranked-choice ballot, voters have more opportunities to make mistakes that invalidate their ballots.

Ranked-choice opponents will argue that exhausted ballots are invalid. The Utah Foundation takes the position that just as not voting for a specific candidate in a simple-plurality election lets a voter communicate their preferences, so not listing a preference for every candidate on a ranked-choice ballot also lets a voter communicate their preferences. While that means the ballot does not transfer to candidates whom the voter did not rank, it reflects a conscious choice by the voter. Moreover, exhausted ballots affect the election outcome by determining the elimination order. In that sense, neither simple-plurality nor ranked-choice has an inherent edge over the other.

This section provides these arguments in more detail, including some context from Utah’s municipal elections.

Exhausted Ballots

A ranked-choice ballot becomes exhausted, or inactive, when it cannot transfer to any continuing candidate. This most commonly occurs when the voter ranked only candidates who have since been eliminated. It can also occur when an invalid or skipped ranking prevents further transfer.

39 Election Science, “What is Vote Splitting?” 2024, <https://electionscience.org/education/vote-splitting>.

40 McCune, David, and Jennifer Wilson. “Ranked-Choice Voting and the Spoiler Effect.” *Public Choice* 196, nos. 1–2 (July 2023): 19–50. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-023-01050-3>.

41 Miller, Nicholas R. “Ranked-Choice Voting and the Spoiler Effect: A Supplementary Note.” *Public Choice* 198, nos. 1–2 (January 2024): 153–159. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-023-01116-2>.

In many ways this is equivalent to an undervote – the submission of a ballot with fewer than the maximum number of candidates selected.

However, exhausted ballots become more of an issue when a ranked-choice election has more rounds. Out of the 87 ranked-choice elections for which the Utah Foundation has data, 31 were decided in the first round of voting. That means more than one-third of ranked-choice elections had no exhausted ballots. However, the rate of exhausted ballots likely grows with each successive round. The Utah Foundation has records of 19 ranked-choice elections that had five or more rounds. Among these 19 elections, an average of 10% of votes were exhausted. Among these elections, as few as 1.5% of ballots were exhausted in a five-round election in Springville, and nearly 23% in a seven-round election in Sandy. At the same time, voters may use exhausted ballots to communicate ambivalence, or that they don't support any of the remaining candidates.

More broadly, studies looking at national data report a range of elections decided in the first round. Depending on which group of elections are considered estimates range from approximately 40% and as high as 70%.⁴² This limits the practical concern of exhausted ballots. Moreover, while exhausted ballots may not determine the final round, they do affect the elimination order, which determines the final candidates.

42 For national data see the following: FairVote's analysis of 500 national races reported 40% didn't require a runoff - FairVote. "Research and Data on RCV in Practice." <https://fairvote.org/resources/data-on-rcv/>; Associated Press found that 70% of 150 ranked-choice elections in 2024 were decided in the first round - Lieb, David A. "Voters Rejected Historic Election Reforms across the US, despite More than \$100M Push." Associated Press, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/bc797f209e5f98a18afb2e5f784e63b6>; An academic article reviewing 362 races found 53% of three-candidate races and 39% of five-candidate races were decided in the first round - Katzman, Spencer, and Keith L. Dougherty. "Ranked Choice Voting with Different Elimination Procedures." Public Choice (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-026-01427-0>.



Wasted Votes

There is no universal definition of a wasted vote, and when individuals or groups use the term, they often mean different things.

One measure of a wasted vote is whether it counted in determining an election outcome. In this context, wasted votes might include votes for a minor third-party or write-in candidate in a simple-plurality contest, as discussed in the Voter Preference section of this report.

This section examines wasted votes that may result from overvotes, undervotes, and other ballot errors. However, the available data do not identify which specific reason the vote was not counted.

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission has established several definitions for different categories of votes that could be considered wasted. While not everyone uses the commission's terminology, its definitions can help clarify what others mean when they consider wasted votes.

A spoiled ballot is a ballot that was mismarked and never cast because the voter realized it was not filled out correctly.⁴³

An overvote occurs when a voter selects more candidates than allowed.⁴⁴ In a simple-plurality contest, this means selecting more than one candidate in a single-seat contest, or selecting more than three candidates in a three-seat contest. In a ranked-choice contest, an overvote would be marking more than one candidate in a single ranking.

An undervote occurs when fewer candidates are marked than allowed.⁴⁵ This might look like not marking anyone in a single-seat race or only voting for two candidates in a three-seat race. In ranked-choice elections, this would look like leaving some candidates unranked.

One confusing marking that applies specifically to ranked-choice elections is skipped preferences in which a candidate might be ranked first, and another candidate fourth, but no candidates were marked second or third. In this case, Utah law required counting the first vote for the first-place candidate, but once that candidate is eliminated, the ballot was considered exhausted. Initially, any skipped ranking would make the ballot exhausted after candidates before the skipped ranking were eliminated.

43 U.S. Election Assistance Commission. *Glossary of Election Terminology*. Version 1.1. Washington, DC: U.S. Election Assistance Commission, July 16, 2021. https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/glossary_files/Glossary_of_Election_Terms_EAC.pdf.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

A 2022 legislative change allowed one skipped ranking.⁴⁶ Because the example above had two consecutive skipped rankings, it would still be considered exhausted after the first-place candidate was eliminated, even after the 2022 change.

In the Utah Foundation's municipal election database, not all records include the total number of ballots and votes cast. However, these data are available for 806 elections. Of those elections, there are 14% fewer votes than the maximum allowed by the number of ballots cast. Similar data are available for 40 ranked-choice elections. The average share of votes exhausted or otherwise not tallied in the final deciding round of the election was 9%.

To be clear, this may not reflect only improperly marked ballots; it also includes ballots reflecting voters' choice not to cast a vote for candidates they did not approve. Moreover, it is unclear whether this difference is significant or due to chance, since ranked-choice elections make up about 5% of the total sample of elections.

46 H.B. 264, 2022 General Session, *Municipal Alternate Voting Methods Amendments*. <https://le.utah.gov/~2022/bills/hbillenr/HB0264.pdf>.



Source: Shepard Fairey.

As mentioned in the Ballot Validation section, a 2025 study found a first-round ballot rejection rate of approximately 0.35% in ranked contests, compared with 0.04% in the simple-plurality elections examined. These results show both that ranked ballots create more opportunities for irregular markings and that an irregular marking does not necessarily invalidate the entire ballot.⁴⁷

One criticism made by those who oppose ranked-choice voting is that exhausted ballots represent “wasted” votes. This is likely untrue for two different reasons. First, unranked candidates may represent a conscious choice that the voter has no preference over the remaining candidates. Second, if the race is not determined in the first round (when there are no exhausted ballots), then the ballots that become exhausted still play a key role in determining elimination order, which certainly has a large effect on who the remaining candidates are, even if they do not express a preference among the remaining candidates.

Audits

Generally, election audits aim to ensure no systematic errors were large enough to affect an election’s outcome. Potential problems include scanner misreads, ballot definition errors, programming mistakes, incorrectly marking valid votes invalid or invalid votes valid, tabulation errors, and transferring ballots without secure processes.⁴⁸ Small mistakes are expected to happen. The larger threat is a systematic error – or an error that happens the same way over and over again.

Many key components of an election look the same regardless of the voting procedure. Accordingly, many, if not most, of the audit processes look the same for both ranked-choice elections and simple-plurality elections. The difference here is less about any specific audit procedure and more about the added complexity of a ranked-choice ballot. In other words, a ranked-choice audit requires more work to verify that ballots were scanned correctly and that elections with more than one round were tabulated correctly.

The biggest difference is determining how well the sample aligns with the final result. It is a relatively straightforward calculation to take a sample of simple-plurality votes and calculate the likelihood that the sample supports or challenges the final results.

47 Pettigrew, Stephen, and Dylan Radley. “Overvotes, Overranks, and Skips: Mismarked and Rejected Votes in Ranked Choice Voting.” *Political Behavior* 48 (2026): 229–251. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-025-10028-4>.

48 U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Draft Election Audit Standards. Draft, February 18, 2026. https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2026-02/Draft_Audit_Standards_021826_Clean.docx; Lindeman, Mark, and Philip B. Stark. “A Gentle Introduction to Risk-Limiting Audits.” *IEEE Security & Privacy* 10, no. 5 (September–October 2012): 42–49. <https://www.nist.gov/document/gentle-introduction-risk-limiting-audits>; Lovato, Jerome. Risk-Limiting Audits—Practical Application. U.S. Election Assistance Commission, June 25, 2018. https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/6/Risk-Limiting_Audits_-_Practical_Application_Jerome_Lovato.pdf.

With a ranked-choice audit, the outcome may depend on an intermediate elimination.⁴⁹ Audits of ranked-choice elections would also need to consider whether a small number of ballots could alter which candidate was eliminated first, since elimination order can produce different winners.⁵⁰

However, Utah's election audit procedures focus primarily on correct ballot scanning and tabulation.⁵¹ In this sense, auditing either election process looks very similar.

Vote Equality

Critics argue ranked-choice voting violates the principle of one person, one vote. They argue that an exhausted ballot doesn't have the weight of an active ballot.⁵² As outlined above, an exhausted ballot still affects an election's outcome. Moreover, Utah's multi-seat municipal elections have a similar problem. In a three-seat election, a voter who selected three candidates carries more weight than a voter who only selected one or two. Moreover, several courts have ruled against this argument.⁵³

ELECTION QUALITY

Many proponents of ranked-choice voting argue that the different procedure may produce higher-quality elections. This quality is often based on whether elections raise turnout, lead to more civil campaigns, increase competitiveness, and elect the most preferred candidate. Several factors beyond the election process affect these elements. That makes it difficult to measure whether ranked-choice elections really differ from simple-plurality elections in these contexts. With that in mind, this section explores these issues in more detail.

49 U.S. Election Assistance Commission. *Explanation on Federal Certification of Voting Systems Utilizing Ranked Choice Voting*. October 2023. <https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2023-10/RCV%20Voting%20Systems%20V3%20Final%2010.20.23.pdf>.

50 Ibid.

51 Utah Office of Administrative Rules. Utah State Bulletin. Vol. 2025, no. 18. September 15, 2025. Page 127, <https://rules.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/b20250915.pdf>.

52 Balser, Jimmy. "Ranked-Choice Voting: Legal Challenges and Considerations for Congress." Congressional Research Service, LSB10837. October 12, 2022. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/LSB10837>.

53 Balser, Jimmy. "Ranked-Choice Voting: Legal Challenges and Considerations for Congress." Congressional Research Service, LSB10837. October 12, 2022. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/LSB10837>.

Voter Turnout

Research comparing ranked-choice and simple-plurality elections has produced mixed findings. Turnout depends heavily on factors outside the election process, such as election timing, office salience, candidate competition, registration rules, and local political conditions.⁵⁴ One study found higher turnout probabilities in municipalities with ranked-choice voting and direct voter contact with campaigns.⁵⁵ However, when cities adopt ranked-choice voting, they usually run an accompanying information campaign to ensure voters understand the new voting procedure. This information campaign could drive higher turnout in jurisdictions switching election processes. If the turnout boost stems from an information campaign rather than greater voter involvement with ranked-choice voting, then initial turnout boosts in a ranked-choice election would be expected to fade over time.

One of the strongest pieces of evidence that ranked-choice elections create higher turnout relates to their ability to include primary or runoff elections. Primary and runoff elections typically see lower voter turnout than the general election.⁵⁶ A ranked-choice election might not see higher levels of turnout than a standard election, but it would likely see higher turnout than a primary election, if one had been held.

The Utah Foundation takes a more in-depth look at turnout during Utah's ranked-choice pilot project in a subsequent report.

Campaign Civility

Proponents argue that ranked-choice voting changes the incentives candidates face because victory may depend on voters ranking them second or third after their first-choice candidates are eliminated.⁵⁷ In theory, this gives candidates a reason to appeal beyond their core supporters and to avoid alienating voters who favor another candidate first. Simple-plurality provides less direct value from being a voter's second choice because only first-choice support is recorded.

54 National Conference of State Legislatures. "Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Implementation Considerations for Policymakers." Topic titled "When and how does RCV have an impact on turnout?" Updated September 28, 2022. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting-in-practice-implementation-considerations-for-policymakers>.

55 Dowling, Emily, Caroline J. Tolbert, Nathan Micatka, and Todd Donovan. "Does Ranked Choice Voting Increase Voter Turnout and Mobilization?" *Electoral Studies* 90 (2024): 102816. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2024.102816>.

56 This is a broad trend. The 2024 election provides a good example. Utah saw less than 50% turnout in the 2024 state primaries, but the general election saw a turnout of 85%. See Utah Office of the Lieutenant Governor. June 25, 2024 Primary Election Statewide Canvass. 2024. <https://vote.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024-Primary-Election-State-Canvass-Final-Signed.pdf>; Utah Office of the Lieutenant Governor. 2024 General Election Statewide Canvass. 2024. <https://vote.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/2024-General-Election-Statewide-Canvass-2.pdf>.

57 Otis, Deb. "RCV and Political Engagement." FairVote, August 2, 2016. https://fairvote.org/report/rcv_and_deliberative_engagement/.

However, these incentives should not be treated as a guarantee of more civil campaigns, less polarization, or more moderate winners.⁵⁸

The Utah Foundation has no data on whether civility factored into Utah's recent simple-plurality or ranked-choice elections. One researcher found evidence of more civility in newspaper coverage, but not in Twitter/X communications.⁵⁹ Party structure, campaign finance, district composition, media incentives, and election type can also shape candidate behavior.⁶⁰

Electing the “Wrong” Candidate

Determining who the “right” candidate is can be subjective. When partisans talk about the “wrong” people being elected, they may mean candidates more likely to succeed under a voting procedure that does not tend to create two viable candidates as simple-plurality does.

When political scientists generally talk about the “right” candidate when it comes to election theory, they are usually referring to the Condorcet candidate, or the candidate who would win all their elections if paired directly with each other candidate in a two-candidate election. Most of the time, the election winner is the Condorcet candidate.⁶¹ However, election processes sometimes create situations where a non-Condorcet candidate can follow all the rules and still be elected.⁶²

This happens differently in ranked-choice and simple-plurality elections. In ranked-choice elections, the preferred candidate may have few first-place votes and be eliminated before they can fully utilize their much more numerous second- or third-place votes. In a simple-plurality election, the vote can split between two similar candidates, allowing a third to win with the most votes.⁶³

58 National Conference of State Legislatures. “Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Implementation Considerations for Policymakers.” Topic titled “Will RCV increase or decrease polarization?” Updated September 28, 2022. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting-in-practice-implementation-considerations-for-policymakers>.

59 Kropf, Martha. “Using Campaign Communications to Analyze Civility in Ranked Choice Voting Elections.” *Politics and Governance* 9, no. 2 (2021): 280–292. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i2.4293>.

60 National Conference of State Legislatures. “Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Implementation Considerations for Policymakers.” Topic titled “Will RCV increase or decrease polarization?” Updated September 28, 2022. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting-in-practice-implementation-considerations-for-policymakers>.

61 Bruns, Winfried, and Bogdan Ichim. “Computations of Volumes in Five Candidates Elections.” *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023): 13266. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-39656-8>.

62 Ibid.

63 Merrill, Samuel III. “A Comparison of Efficiency of Multicandidate Electoral Systems.” *American Journal of Political Science* 28, no. 1 (February 1984): 23–48. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2110786>.

Using standard election data, it is difficult to verify when the “wrong” candidate is elected. However, simulated elections using modeled data indicate that the likelihood of choosing the “wrong” candidate is higher in simple-plurality elections than in ranked-choice elections, falling from 12% to 4% for a three-candidate field and from 39% to 17% for a five-candidate field.⁶⁴

Competitiveness

While a landslide may indicate broad popular support, competitive elections can produce more responsive candidates, encourage losing stakeholders to be more engaged in the democratic process rather than resort to violence, and avoid ideological extremes to compete for the median voter.⁶⁵

However, there are different methods to measure competitiveness. One of the simplest is to look at the margin between the winner with the smallest vote share and the next closest candidate. Using this metric, Utah’s simple-plurality elections and ranked-choice elections show a similar level of competitiveness. Approximately 30% were either extremely or mildly competitive.

It should be noted that Utah’s election laws restricting the number of candidates and the ranked-choice voting candidate elimination process are both designed to increase the margin between the winning and losing candidate. Because the primary metric for competitiveness is the margin, these elections tend to make contests seem less competitive.

For example, comparing the margins between the first- and second-place candidates in the first round of a ranked-choice election shows a much more competitive election. Only 30% of last-round results were competitive, but nearly 50% of first-round results were competitive.

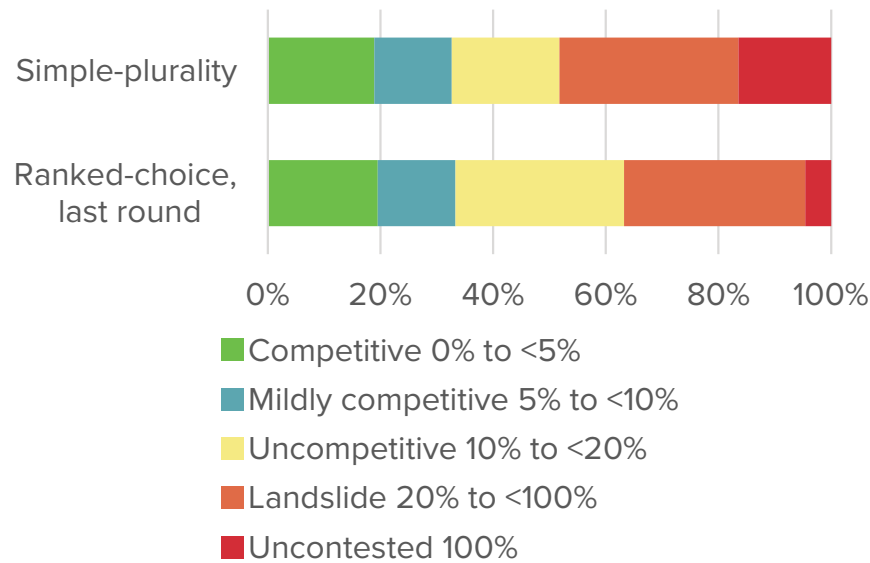
But these data would be much more comparable to primary simple-plurality elections – for which the Utah Foundation does not have data. There are additional, arguably better ways to compare an election’s competitiveness. The Utah Foundation includes a more in-depth study on competitiveness in a subsequent report on Utah’s experience with ranked-choice voting.

64 Bruns, Winfried, and Bogdan Ichim. “Computations of Volumes in Five Candidates Elections.” *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023): 13266. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-39656-8>; Miller, Nicholas R. “Closeness Matters: Monotonicity Failure in IRV Elections with Three Candidates.” *Public Choice* 173, nos. 1–2 (October 2017): 91–108. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-017-0465-5>.

65 Gottlieb, Jessica, and Katrina Kosec. “Competitive Elections Are Good for Democracy—Just Not Every Democracy.” International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), January 4, 2019. <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/competitive-elections-are-good-democracy-just-not-every-democracy/>; Przeworski, Adam, Gonzalo Rivero, and Tianyang Xi. “Elections as a Conflict Processing Mechanism.” *European Journal of Political Economy* 39 (September 2015): 235–248. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpolco.2015.05.006>; Bernhardt, Dan, Larissa Campuzano, Francesco Squintani, and Odilon Câmara. “On the Benefits of Party Competition.” *Games and Economic Behavior* 66, no. 2 (July 2009): 685–707. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geb.2008.10.007>.

Ranked-choice and simple-plurality show limited competitiveness – by design.

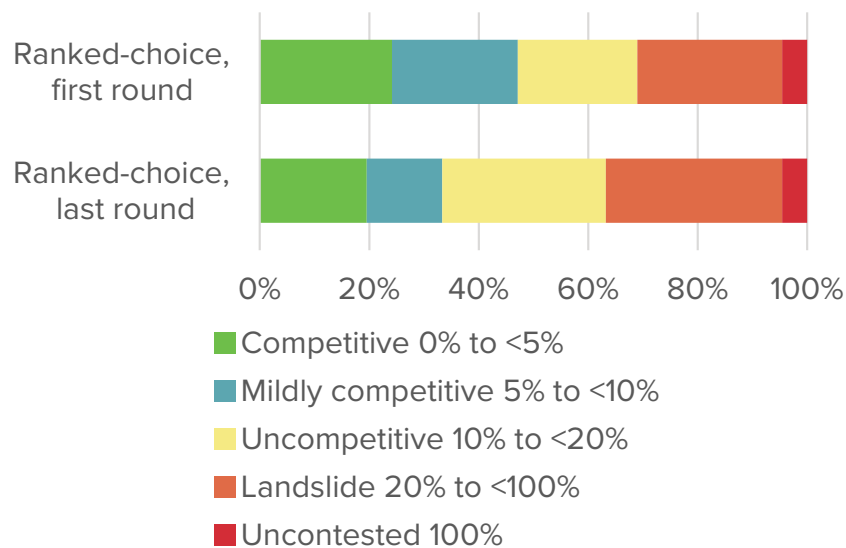
Figure 8: Ranked-Choice and Simple-Plurality Elections Categorized by the Margin Between the Winner with the Fewest Votes and the Next Runner-Up



*In a multi-seat election, this would be the winner with the fewest votes and the loser with the most votes
Source: Utah Foundation's Municipal Elections Database.

The first round of ranked-choice voting shows higher levels of competitiveness than the last round.

Figure 9: Ranked-Choice Elections First and Last Rounds, by the Margin Between the First-Place and the Second-Place Candidates



Source: Utah Foundation's Municipal Elections Database.

Transparency

While ranked-choice voting tends to be more complex, transparency and complexity are not opposites. A process can be quite complex yet still be highly transparent if every step is observable, documented, reproducible, and independently verifiable.⁶⁶ Conversely, a very simple process can be opaque if officials do not disclose the rules, data, or methods used to reach the reported result.

Whether an election is transparent depends less on the specific process used and more on ensuring results are independently replicable. In that sense, neither ranked-choice nor simple-plurality elections are inherently more transparent.

The most transparent post-election data would be anonymized ballots, and a complete set of rules regarding the election process – which votes are valid, and how valid votes are tabulated. The rules are more complex in ranked-choice systems, but not necessarily less transparent.

Even if observers can replicate results, ranked-choice elections may still *feel* less transparent to the general public. Ranked-choice elections are more complex, use a system that may be harder for voters to understand intuitively, and take longer to tabulate. The fact that the initial frontrunner can lose may make ranked-choice voting feel less transparent to voters.

Utah has made several recent changes to its transparency requirements from 2023 to 2025. In 2023, the Utah State Legislature heightened the reporting requirements with standardized statistics and a review process.⁶⁷ In 2025, the state required shorter deadlines for transmitting information to the Lt. Governor’s office, and required even more information from the election report.⁶⁸ A special session, also in 2025, required the addition of a cast vote record – a digital anonymized record of every vote.⁶⁹ These requirements greatly increased transparency in Utah’s elections – both simple-plurality and ranked-choice elections.

66 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Securing the Vote: Protecting American Democracy. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25120>.

67 House Bill 448, 2023 General Session, “Election Changes,” <https://le.utah.gov/~2023/bills/static/HB0448.html>.

68 Senate Bill 164, 2025 General Session, “Modifications to Election Law,” <https://le.utah.gov/~2025/bills/static/SB0164.html>; House Bill 263, 2025 General Session, “Election Record Amendments,” <https://le.utah.gov/~2025/bills/static/HB0263.html>.

69 House Bill 1004, 2025 First Special Session, “Election Records Amendments,” <https://le.utah.gov/~2025S1/bills/static/HB1004.htm>.

CONCLUSION

Ranked-choice voting changes how voters can communicate and how election officials identify a winner. Compared with simple-plurality, it allows voters to express preferences among multiple candidates, reduces some forms of vote splitting and the effect of spoiler candidates, and is generally more likely to elect the “right” candidate (Condorcet winner). It can also eliminate the need for a separate primary or runoff when election law permits all candidates to compete in a single ranked-choice election.

These advantages come with important tradeoffs. Ranked-choice ballots require voters to understand additional instructions and create more opportunities for irregular markings. Election officials must apply more complicated validation, tabulation, auditing, and reporting procedures, and final results may take longer when the elimination order cannot be determined until most ballots have been received.

Simple-plurality avoids many of these administrative and ballot-design complications, but its simplicity does not eliminate wasted votes, vote splitting, spoiler effects, or majoritarian failure. A simple-plurality winner may receive substantially less than half of the vote, and voters who prefer less competitive candidates may feel pressure to support a more viable alternative.

Ultimately, the choice is not between a complicated system with flaws and a simple system without flaws. Rather, it is a choice between two election systems that prioritize different values and create different kinds of risks.



APPENDIX

The Utah Foundation attempted to gather all the data on general municipal elections from 2011 to 2025. Before 2025, the Lieutenant Governor’s office did not aggregate data on municipal elections, so the Utah Foundation turned to counties (which have some responsibility for municipal elections) and the municipalities themselves. Data availability varied widely. Some counties, such as Tooele, had a searchable database of all local elections. Other municipalities required the Utah Foundation to submit a GRAMA request by physical mail before they would provide election results. The Utah Foundation obtained data on 1,725 elections across 211 cities from 2011 to 2025.

Utah Foundation’s Municipal Elections Database spans 14 years, 211 cities, and 1,725 elections.

Figure A: Number of Cities and Elections in Utah Foundation’s Municipal Elections Database

Year	Unique Cities	Elections
2011	67	101
2013	73	169
2015	70	109
2017	104	241
2019	104	176
2021	134	310
2023	120	181
2025	197	438
Total	211	1,725

Source: Utah Foundation’s Municipal Elections Database..



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