

How Does Ranked Choice Voting Work in New York City?

BY RACHEL HOLLIDAY SMITH, THE CITY

There's a new way to vote in New York City called ranked-choice voting, which was approved by 73% of voters in 2019.

But now that the method will be used on ballots this year, ranked-choice has sparked some backlash from city officials who worry voters won't know how to use it.

Visually, the switch on the ballot is fairly simple and supporters say the method makes elections more fair. Here's what you need to know before heading to the polls:

What is ranked choice voting, and how does it work?

Instead of choosing only one favorite candidate, voters will rank each candidate in a race by preference, choosing their top five candidates on the ballot.

If one candidate gets more than 50% of the vote, that person wins. If no candidate reaches that majority, however, instead of an expensive run-off election between two vote-getters, the ranked-choice method aims to mathematically sort out the best-preferred candidate for the most people.

Here's how that works, explained in less than 90 seconds by Minnesota Public Radio ahead of the 2013 mayoral race in Minneapolis. Voters there approved the use of ranked choice voting in 2006.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHRPMJmzBBw>

Need to hear how it works one more time? Here's a different clear explanation from the Northern California public radio station KQED. San Francisco voters approved the implementation of ranked choice voting there in 2000.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P10PFuBFVL8>

Here are a few more good sources for information about ranked-choice voting, or RCV:

- The city's nonpartisan Campaign Finance Board (CFB) prepared an [explanation of RCV](#) with images of a sample ballot and answered [frequently asked questions](#) about the method.
- Vox.com wrote a detailed article about what ranked choice voting is and how it works ahead of the New York City's ballot measure in 2019 that approved the change.

Why use ranked-choice voting? What does it change?

While the changes on the physical ballot are small, the implications for candidates and our elections are huge, advocates say.

The system favors candidates who are more broadly supported in the electorate, and research has shown ranked-choice voting tends to make campaigns less negative and encourages more women and nonwhite candidates to run.

The method also saves taxpayer money by eliminating the need for runoff elections.

Then why is ranked-choice controversial?

As THE CITY previously reported, even supporters of ranked-choice voting are worried that voters will not be properly educated about the method in time to vote in the June primaries. They also fear the city's notorious Board of Elections will not do enough to prepare to implement it.

A cohort of City Council members cited those concerns and more — including worries that RCV would disenfranchise Black voters — when they sued to delay the new voting scheme. A Manhattan State Supreme Court judge rejected the bid in mid-December, but the plaintiffs told WNYC they plan to appeal the decision.

Meanwhile, the CFB has begun an education campaign about the voting method, including holding free virtual training sessions with organizations that want to help get the word out to voters about how to use RCV.

So, when do voters start using ranked choice voting?

The first voters to use ranked choice on their ballot will be those voting in four special elections in The Bronx and Queens coming up in the winter and spring of 2021.

The first is in City Council District 24 in Queens, set for Feb. 2. The second is the City Council District 31 special election on Feb. 23. Then, special elections for both Council District 11 and 15 in The Bronx are set for March 23. For more information on those elections from the CFB, visit [NYC Votes](#).

The citywide primary date for all other elections, including the race for mayor, comptroller, and much of the rest of the City Council, is June 22.

The NYC Board of Elections has resources on how to register to vote [here](#), and you can find important dates and deadlines [here](#) (state BOE) and [here](#) (city BOE).