Shaky political "science" misses mark on ranked choice voting

What does political science and social science research say about ranked choice voting? A number of misleading studies fall well short of real science

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ABSTRACT

This paper is designed for policymakers, journalists, political scientists, researchers and civic leaders seeking to assess the quality and credibility of scholarly research about ranked choice voting (RCV). It reviews 40 studies on RCV, many of which have been cited in public debates over RCV reforms. We summarize and assess this research and find that the most reliable studies were grounded in real-world election data, while many studies critiquing RCV have relied on flawed survey methods and abstract models that failed to accurately simulate what happens in real-world elections. Despite the availability of data from over 700 RCV elections since 2004 – spanning 16 million voters across 50+ jurisdictions – many studies eschewed empirical election data in favor of speculative or unrealistic simulations.

We evaluate existing research on RCV's impacts on representation, voter error, turnout, demographic participation and more. Studies using actual election results consistently showed positive or neutral effects, whereas many critical findings stemmed from questionable methodologies and poorly constructed surveys. Moreover, many critiques of RCV often lacked comparative context, failing to assess how alternative electoral systems (e.g., plurality, runoff, Condorcet, approval, fusion) would perform on similar metrics; oftentimes the critique advanced against RCV applied *even more* to these other electoral systems, but that was not analyzed or mentioned. Other studies made sweeping claims based on a small sample size and limited evidence, in some cases only a single election. Many of these studies also lacked peer review and exhibited selective use of data, undermining their credibility. Nevertheless these flawed studies have become influential due to being uncritically and repeatedly cited by other researchers, journalists and anti-RCV activists.

INTRODUCTION

Ranked choice voting (RCV) is an increasingly common election method in the United States. Since 2004, RCV has been used in over 700 elections by 16 million voters in over 50 cities, counties and states, at local, state and federal levels. RCV keeps expanding in use – voters have not repealed RCV anywhere since 2010, and a large number of cities have adopted it since 2016. Six Southern states – Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina – use RCV ballots for their military and overseas voters so those absentee voters can participate in their states' delayed two-round runoff elections. Democrats and Republicans at the state level have begun using RCV in their party primaries and caucuses to nominate their candidates, including for presidential primaries in five state Democratic parties in 2020 and the Virgin Islands GOP in 2024. In 2024, RCV was used in Maine and Alaska for its presidential elections as well as other federal and state races.

RCV has been approved by voters in dozens of city ballot measures, including wins with over 70% of the vote in New York City and Washington, D.C. Voters also have passed RCV in five statewide ballot measures, including two initial wins and two successful defenses in Alaska and Maine, along with a 2022 win in Nevada (before a follow-up loss in 2024– Nevada law requires two wins before implementation).

As RCV has progressed and generally lived up to its promise in practice, it has attracted increasing amounts of opposition and criticism. RCV's critics and opponents include strange bedfellows, including some Republicans unhappy with RCV election results in Maine and Alaska as well as a handful of liberal groups and political and social scientists, some of whom are promoting their own alternate election reforms. These critics and opponents have publicized a number of academic papers that they believe support their critiques of RCV, based on alleged impacts on representation, turnout, voter error and confidence, election integrity and participation of various demographic groups.

This research paper is both an analysis and summary of 40 research papers regarding RCV and its impacts. As the reader will see, we review and summarize paper after paper and reveal how the quality of this research varies significantly. Some studies generated more confusion than clarity; some research has illuminated some interesting findings, while other research has been lacking in real "science." Many studies critical of RCV also lack comparative context, such as showing how the critique advanced against RCV applies *even more* to other electoral systems, such as plurality – the most widely used method in the US – or two-round runoffs, Condorcet voting, fusion voting, approval voting and other methods. Other studies overlook the overall positive impacts of RCV in favor of zeroing in on relatively minor negative narratives, made sweeping claims based on very limited evidence, or failed to account for different ballot designs, voting equipment and voter education approaches. Still other studies deployed badly flawed research methodologies and models to examine the effects of RCV on elections.

The most illuminating research has been those studies *based on actual election results* over a sufficient time horizon that allowed the drawing of broader conclusions beyond a mere one-election snapshot. Other studies have used one-time surveys while others have been based on theoretical modeling. These studies are less credible, as they frequently suffer from puzzling assumptions and methodological deficiencies that were not based in real-world situations. Unsurprisingly, a number of those studies have reached conclusions that strain credulity, and in some cases are even far-fetched and run counter to the RCV studies based on real-world election results. Comparing studies based on real world results vs studies based on surveys and modeling is a lot like designing a computer model to analyze a pharmaceutical drug that concludes the drug doesn't work, even after it has already gone through clinical studies based on real usage by real people showing that it does work.

In addition, some of the research highlighted in this paper appears to have a "cherry-picked" quality to it. Like prosecutors making a final argument for a guilty plea, the researchers often cite other research that supports their conclusions, but ignore research that contradicts that particular researcher's assessment. A generous assumption would be that the authors were unaware of these other studies due to lack of funding or time. Notably, many of these research papers have not been through peer review or been published in credible academic journals with editorial oversight. Instead they have been posted online via websites like the Social Science Research Network (SSRN), which is more like an academic-oriented online workshop where authors can self-publish their research papers without undergoing a rigorous review process. Undoubtedly many of these papers would never pass a peer review standard, due to their disqualifying flaws and deficient methodologies.

Nevertheless these studies have become influential due to being repeatedly cited by journalists and being deployed by anti-RCV activists across the US, such as MAGA Republicans and political scientists backing alternative reforms. These attacks based on shaky research contributed to the defeat of RCV in four state ballot measures in 2024, and RCV being banned over the past two years in 14 conservative red states (albeit mostly in states where localities already were not allowed to implement RCV).

Unfortunately many of the 40 studies reviewed in his paper have suffered from inadequate review that might have challenged the poor assumptions, puzzling methodologies and outlier conclusions.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF THE "SCIENCE"

Generally speaking, the research on ranked choice voting that is reviewed in this paper can be categorized into three types:

1) **Research based on actual election results**, using real data from real world elections and the over 700 contested elections conducted in the US using RCV (and in some cases the thousands of RCV elections conducted in other countries, including Australia and Ireland);

2) **Research based on one-time simulated elections or on opinion surveys** of respondents, that tried but failed to mimic what happens in a real-world RCV election by, for example, asking voters in one election to rank candidates in a simulated election with virtually no voter education, no actual candidates campaigning, or any other features of an actual RCV election; and

3) **Research based on mathematical or theoretical models**, also failing to mimic what happens in a real-world RCV election, often divorced from reality due to being based on shaky assumptions and non-real-world scenarios that lacked real-world context.

The second and third types of research have proven to be the least credible. In these studies, political science researchers often based their simulated elections and theoretical models on shaky assumptions and non-real-world scenarios that often lacked real-world context and deep, path-dependent history. The theoretical/mathematical models frequently used a design so lacking in credibility and unrooted in real-world elections that common sense should have signaled that any results would be meaningless.

While the first type of research, based on actual election results and real-world data, is inherently more credible, even here there are puzzling examples in which the researcher made odd assumptions and extrapolations that seem to indicate they don't really understand how ranked choice voting works in the real world, or why voters make some of their choices.

In the next sections of this study, we will review examples of studies of RCV that fall well short of high quality academic standards, and in so doing present unsubstantiated results that clash with findings from other studies, as well as with real-world election results. First, we examine studies based on mathematical or theoretical models, or simulated elections or opinion surveys, that try to mimic what happens in a real-world election. Then we will look at studies based on real world election data.

I. STUDIES USING SIMULATED ELECTIONS, OPINION SURVEYS AND THEORETICAL/MATHEMATICAL MODELS

Studies about the impact of ranked choice voting on "polarization"

1. *Beyond the Spoiler Effect: Can Ranked Choice Voting Solve the Problem of Political Polarization? by Nathan Atkinson, Edward B. Foley and Scott Ganz*. SSRN. (Atkinson, Foley et al., 2024).
This research paper by three university academics purports to use innovative methods to reveal the impact of ranked choice voting on political polarization. The researchers' methodology for their analysis did not use any real-world election data from the hundreds of actual RCV elections. Instead, it relied on a respondent survey and simulated elections, and then plugged the results into their theoretical model, with glaring flaws in both the respondent survey and model.

Instead of RCV, the authors prefer a rare electoral system called Condorcet voting, which uses a different method for counting ranked ballots. The authors' paper used survey data to simulate a RCV election for Alaska's lone US House of Representatives seat rather than using the actual real-world election data from either the August 2022 or Nov 2022 RCV races for that seat. Then, extrapolating from the results of their Alaska modeling, the authors applied their model to a national sample of over 50,000 voters across all 50 states to analyze the prospective effects of adopting RCV in every state.

The model is where it departs from common sense. For people in each state, they were assigned a partisanship score from -0.5 to +0.5, with negative being left-leaning and positive being right-leaning. They then randomly selected four fantasy candidates along this partisanship spectrum and used computer simulations to "tally" elections based on assumptions that each voter would rank the candidates based on how close the candidate partisanship score was to the voter partisanship score. The perplexity here is that this is not how real voters make real election decisions. There have been literally hundreds of RCV elections across the country – dozens in Alaska alone for governor and state legislature in addition to the US House seat – but the authors decided to make up votes and candidates and throw it all into a computer to see what the computer spit out.

In the *actual* election, moderate Native American Democrat Mary Peltola beat controversial celebrity right-wing Republican Sarah Palin and another conservative Republican, Nick Begich, by winning a RCV majority that included many votes from the vast number of independent Alaska voters - some of whom might often vote for Republicans, but not as a rubber stamp. Despite these real-world results, the paper's abstract claims, "While reformers hope that IRV can ameliorate extremism and political polarization, this paper presents empirical evidence that undercuts these hopes." In actual fact, their paper showed *just the opposite* – their computer simulations found that IRV (Instant Runoff Voting, another name for RCV) actually *did* produce more moderate winners, however they claimed that RCV produced fewer moderate winners than their preferred system, Condorcet Voting (Condorcet uses all the possible pairings of candidates in head-to-head matchups to see who wins the most pairs). In an inexplicable gap in their scholarship, the authors made no attempt in their computer simulations to try and compare RCV to the current plurality "highest vote-getters win" method, which is the most widely used method in the US. Instead, they compared it to another method that has such viability challenges that is not used in any government election nor virtually any private association election, despite first being proposed by Condorcet in the 18th century.

The authors suggest that RCV in Alaska was a failure, according to their criteria for electing moderate candidates, but in actual fact – again, in the real world – a moderate candidate *was* elected to the US House seat and one who governed from the center based on the incentives created by Alaska's system. To head off this obvious inconsistency, the authors portrayed the winner, Native Alaskan Democrat Mary Peltola, as a liberal, Palin as the conservative and Begich as a centrist. This is not close to on-the-ground reality. Both Begich and Palin were conservative MAGA Republicans (Palin was supported by Donald Trump in 2022, while Begich was the Alaska Republican Party's endorsed candidate in 2022 and supported by Trump in his 2024 rematch with Peltola). On the other hand, Peltola has been a member of the centrist Bush Caucus when serving in the state legislature and was endorsed by Republican US Senator Lisa Murkowski in the 2022 general election.

Peltola in fact was the moderate in the race. No liberal candidate advanced from the primary because this was a statewide election for Alaska's only U.S. House seat, and Alaska is a conservative state with a strong independent streak (60% of Alaska voters are registered as one type or another of "independent"). All that the authors revealed was ignorance of Alaska politics and the local context.

Indeed, the authors begrudgingly admit: "Given that both Murkowski and Peltola had espoused moderate views relative to Tshibaka and Palin, Alaska's 2022 experiment with RCV appears to have been a success in combating the extremist tendencies of plurality rule." But they then ignore their own conclusion and suggest Alaska was a failure anyway because in one of Alaska's four statewide RCV elections in 2022, including the governor's race and Senator Murkowski's re-election, what is known in academic circles as the "Condorcet winner," as they have defined it, got elected in only three out of four races. They do consider that this one non-Condorcet outcome occurred in the late August special election when the turnout was 50% less than in the November elections. A mere two months later in the November general election, when there was much higher voter turnout, the Democrat Peltola won again and this time was the Condorcet winner, which the authors concede.

Finally, the authors revealed how much their computer simulations were divorced from reality when they reported that their model shows "IRV selects the Condorcet winner in 60% of elections." But in the *real* world, with *real* elections, IRV has consistently selected the Condorcet winner 99% of the time. A study by Nicholas Stephanopoulos, Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, titled "Finding Condorcet," found that in RCV elections in the US, the Condorcet winner was elected in 181 of 183 races over the last couple of decades (Stephanopoulos, 2024). Examining IRV elections in Australia and Scotland, the author found that the Condorcet winner was elected in 191 of 193 races. Quoting from Stephanopoulos's Twitter stream, "These are very high rates: about 99%. Therefore the gains from switching to a Condorcet-consistent method that's guaranteed to elect the Condorcet winner are small. From a Condorcet efficiency perspective, IRV is already excellent…Contrary to the fears of public choice theorists, [with RCV] there's almost always a single candidate whom most voters prefer to any other candidate (in a head-to-head matchup)."

A study by FairVote found similar results. Of the nearly 500 single-winner RCV elections in the United States between 2004 and 2021 in which researchers had sufficient ballot data for an assessment, all but two were won by the Condorcet winner. That's a mere two races – 0.4% -- in which the so-called "Condorcet winner" lost. Or to put it another way, in actual RCV races in the US over a 17 year period, the RCV winner was also the Condorcet winner 99.6% of the time.

The bottom line is that Atkinson, Foley and Ganz, using computer simulations and modeling rather than easily available real world data, came to conclusions that are contradicted dramatically by actual real world elections as well as the results from *their own study*. What this study revealed, more than anything, is the unreliability of mathematical models if not based on realistic assumptions and sound methodology.

2. *Electoral Systems Affect Legitimacy Gaps and Affective Polarization* *by Sean Fischer, Amber Hye-Yon Lee, and Yphtach Lelkes*. New America. (Fischer et al., 2021*).*
This study was web-hosted and funded by New America's Political Reform Program and its Electoral Reform Research Group. This is another flawed study, not published in any peer reviewed academic journal, focused on RCV and polarization with unconventional methodology divorced from the reality of real-world elections. This study claims to examine how different electoral systems -- RCV, proportional representation (PR) or plurality elections-- affect perceived legitimacy of the system and inter-party animosity and polarization. The methodology used game theory simulation, in which participants voted for "teams" and received bonuses based on their distance from the winning team, and let people decide to share with a random partner whose number and vote they knew. The participants played a modified "dictator game," which provided behavioral measures judging interparty animosity, based on how much each bonus was shared, and asked people if they thought the election

was legitimate. The study found more perceived *legitimacy* for proportional and RCV methods, and less *animosity* for plurality. Based on the "inter-party animosity" score, the authors concluded that RCV and PR were more polarizing than plurality. This experiment is too far removed from actual RCV, PR or plurality elections in the real world to give it any weight. It is also contradicted by Studies 5-13 below, which show less polarization with RCV in real world elections.

3. *Politics Transformed? Electoral Competition under Ranked Choice Voting by Peter Buisseret and Carlo Prato.* Yale University. (Buisseret et al., 2023).
This non-peer reviewed study compares plurality elections and RCV, finding that "RCV can intensify candidates' incentives to target their core supporters at the cost of a broader appeal," even more than plurality. "When RCV encourages broad campaigning strategies, so does plurality, but the reverse is not true; and, when plurality encourages candidates to target their bases, so does RCV in contexts either of polarization or low baseline participation." The authors don't show this by analyzing any actual election results, but instead they deployed a dense mathematical model based on a number of theoretical assumptions that don't reflect what actually happens in the real world. The mathematical model is too complex and convoluted to describe, but here's an example:

Finally, group-C voters prefer a over b if and only if

$$u^C(p_a) + \tau - \theta \geq u^C(p_b) - \tau - \theta \iff \tau \geq \frac{u^C(p_b) - u^C(p_a)}{2} \equiv \tau^C_{ab}(p_a, p_b). \tag{17}$$

Given a profile $p = (p_a, p_b, p_c)$, candidate a's total second preferences are therefore:[9]

$$\begin{aligned} v^s_a(p,\tau) \equiv\ & \alpha\phi \max\{0, u^A(p_a) + \tau - \rho\}\mathbb{I}\{\tau^A_{ac}(p_a,p_c) \leq \tau < \tau^A_{ab}(p_a,p_b)\} \\ & +(1-\alpha)\phi \max\{0, u^B(p_a) + \tau - \rho\}\mathbb{I}\{\tau^B_{ac}(p_a,p_c) \leq \tau \leq \tau^B_{ab}(p_a,p_b))\} \\ & +\gamma\phi \max\{0, u^C(p_a) + \tau - \theta - \rho\}\mathbb{I}\{\tau^C_{ab}(p_a,p_b) \leq \tau < \tau^C_{ac}(p_a,p_c)\}. \end{aligned} \tag{18}$$

Their conclusions are contradicted by many other studies (see Studies 5-13 below, none of which are cited by the authors) as well as real-world experience in RCV and plurality elections over the past 20 years. Donald Trump is the ultimate "plurality candidate," not looking to broaden his appeal in a plurality election because he's focused instead on simply winning more votes than any other candidate. Many other MAGA Republican candidates have successfully followed this strategy. In the real world, meanwhile, in San Francisco's mayor election in 2024 elected by RCV, four major candidates competed, none of them close to reaching a majority of first rankings. Each of those candidates adopted a different RCV strategy, three of them trying to broaden their appeal (one of them using an explicit "ranking exchange strategy" with the fifth-place candidate), and the incumbent mayor declining to use any RCV strategy. These kinds of complexities in a real-world election can hardly be captured by a mathematical model, and so it's not surprising that the results of this study don't resemble the real world.

Nevertheless, some RCV critics have cited Buisseret and Prato's modeling as evidence that, rather than facilitate coalition-building, RCV will amplify candidates' incentive to focus on their core supporters and reject broad campaigning strategies. But this conclusion is contradicted by many other studies as well as real-world experience with RCV and plurality elections over the past 20 years. These kinds of complexities in a real-world election can hardly be captured by a mathematical model, and the results of this study don't resemble the real world at all.

4. *Does Ranked-Choice Voting Reduce Racial Polarization? by Yuki Atsusaka and Theodore Landsman.* New America. (Atsusaka et al., 2022).
This study was web-hosted and funded by New America's Political Reform Program and its Electoral Reform Research Group. This paper provides another example of how the research based on mathematical or theoretical models all-too-often rely on shaky assumptions and non-real-world scenarios that are too divorced from reality. This non-peer reviewed study on RCV and polarization used real election data but applied odd and unconventional methodology to determine levels of "racially polarized voting."

Levels of racially polarized voting is a common measure in voting rights lawsuits, and a well-defined methodology is used to determine it. In the authors' alternative theoretical model, they imagine "ethnic parties," by which they mean political parties for each ethnic group, which is odd since the elections being studied are nonpartisan RCV races. But then they make an even odder acknowledgement, namely that race and ethnic characteristics of voters were not available, so the authors tried to infer that information based on who voters selected and the racial make-up of voters in each district. They clustered voters in assumed ethnic groups based on which candidates they voted for as 1st, 2nd, 3rd etc. rankings. There is no description of how the authors categorized the candidates' ethnicity, which was used as part of the estimates for the voters' ethnicity. This is vague and ambiguous guesswork dressed up with a bunch of mathematical equations used to give it a veneer of scientific appearance.

Based on this questionable methodology, the authors concluded that RCV doesn't reduce racial polarization. But the premise of this study misses an obvious and more real-world way to measure racial polarization: to test whether voters choose to rank at least one candidate not of their race more than when limited to a single choice. If a RCV election incentivizes more candidates to run and results in more diverse fields of candidates, one would *expect more racially-polarized voting* in voter's top rankings, *not less*, because more voters would have someone on that ballot who represents their racial or ethnic identity and more freedom to vote for their real first choice. It should be acceptable for people of different races to vote differently, especially if it's because these traditionally under-enfranchised voters finally have an actual opportunity to elect someone from their community. The real measure is what voters do with their additional rankings – do they consider other candidates and vote "for the best of the rest"? Readily available data shows this is common in RCV elections, and candidates act on this knowledge by engaging with voters outside their racial group.

The studies cited above based on mathematical or theoretical models have proven to be some of the least credible. The researchers often based their study on shaky assumptions and non-real-world scenarios that are frequently divorced from reality.

Many other studies draw opposite conclusions about RCV and polarization

These studies on polarization ignored the many other studies that *were* based on real-world election data and came to dramatically different conclusions about polarization and related themes. Such as:

5. *Alaska's New Electoral System: Countering Polarization or "Crooked as Hell"? by Benjamin Reilly, David Lublin and Glenn Wright (2023).* California Journal of Politics and Policy. (Reilly et al., 2023).
This study was validated by a double-blind peer review process. Based on actual election results, the academic authors concluded about the use of RCV in Alaska: "We find the reform was both consequential and largely beneficial, promoting greater choice for voters, more accommodative campaigning, and generally more moderate outcomes than likely under the old rules." All of those findings speak directly to the question of the impact of RCV on polarization.

6. *Cross-Country Trends In Affective Polarization by Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro.* National Bureau of Economic Research. (Boxell et al., 2020).
This research found in their cross-national study that the US, which uses a plurality voting system for nearly all elections, from president to Congress to state and local elections, is one of the worst for polarization. In fact, the US had the largest increase in polarization of all OECD countries over the past 40 years. Meanwhile Australia, which uses RCV elections (both single-seat and multi-seat) for all elections at federal, state and local levels, was one of only six countries in which polarization declined.

7. *Campaign Civility under Preferential and Plurality Voting by Todd Donovan, Caroline Tolbert and Kellen Gracey.* Electoral Studies. (Donovan et al., 2016).
Related to polarization, a number of political scientists have found that candidates and their campaigns are more civil to each other under RCV than plurality. For example, this study found that people in cities using preferential voting (another name for ranked choice voting) "were significantly more satisfied with the conduct of local campaigns than people in similar cities with plurality elections. People in cities with preferential voting were also less likely to view campaigns as negative, and less likely to respond that candidates were frequently criticizing each other." In fact, voters in places using preferential voting were "twice as likely to report campaigns were 'a lot less negative'" and were "less likely to respond that candidates were frequently criticizing each other."

8. *Using Campaign Communications to Analyze Civility in Ranked Choice Voting Elections by Martha Kropf.* Cogitatio Press, Politics and Governance. (Kropf, 2021).
This study cleverly examined actual candidate tweets on Twitter and newspaper articles in RCV cities versus plurality cities. This was the first published study to use direct campaign communication data to study RCV elections and campaign civility. It found that candidates were more likely to engage with each other in cities with RCV elections than in cities with plurality elections. The Twitter analysis shows "evidence of bargaining and accommodation" in RCV cities, including in Minneapolis, where "many of the candidates referenced each other." Additionally, some candidates retweeted posts from their supporters about which other candidates they planned to rank. Kropf's newspaper article analysis demonstrates that "articles in RCV cities use significantly more positive and fewer negative words, which supports the hypotheses predicted by the theory of RCV civility."

Other studies of note on related themes include:

9. *Measuring The Effects Of Ranked Choice Voting In Republican Primaries by Center for Campaign Innovation.* (Center for Campaign Innovation, 2022).
RCV resulted in a more positive Republican congressional primary conducted by the Republican Party of Virginia, according to a survey of Virginia Republican primary voters who voted using RCV in 2022. That finding was in sharp contrast to results from a contested Republican congressional primary without RCV, instead using plurality elections. With plurality, the study found significant adverse effects from negative campaign attacks, both on the nominee's chances in November as well as the losing candidates who the study found were weakened for future elections. This shows that when primary candidates are incentivized by plurality voting to trash one another, nobody wins. That finding contrasts starkly to the finding that RCV resulted in a more positive primary.

10. *Rating Rankings: Effect of Instant Run-off Voting on Participation and Civility by Eamon McGinn*. Eamonmcginn.com. (McGinn, 2020).
According to this 2020 working paper by an Australian researcher, candidates in debates in RCV races referred to their opponents in more positive terms rather than negative or neutral words.

11. *Santa Fe Voters Support Ranked Choice Voting and Have High Confidence in City Elections* *by FairVote*. (FairVote, 2018).
First-time RCV voters in Santa Fe in 2018 reported more positive campaigning. 67% of poll respondents believed the tone of the mayoral election was more positive than prior mayoral elections, while only 3% responded that the tone was more negative.

12. *Socioeconomic and Demographic Perspectives on Ranked Choice Voting in the Bay Area* *by Sarah John and Caroline Tolbert*. FairVote. (John et al., 2015).
Voters in RCV cities were more satisfied with the conduct of campaigns and perceived less candidate criticism and negative campaigning compared to voters in non-RCV cities, according to a 2013 and 2014 survey by the Rutgers-Eagleton Institute of Politics. Virtually every demographic group reported less negativity in RCV cities.

13. *Content Analysis of Campaign Tone in Newspapers and Twitter Feeds in 2013 RCV Elections* *by Sarah John*. FairVote. (John, 2015).
Media coverage in RCV cities was 85% more positive than negative, according to a 2013 analysis. By contrast, 77% of news coverage in non-RCV control cities was positive.

That's nine studies which, each in their own way, refute the first four studies' conclusions that RCV is negatively correlated with higher levels of polarization. Three of those four outlier studies all used theoretical/mathematical models instead of plentiful real world election results, while the fourth study (Atsusaka et al., 2022) used real election data but then applied a questionable methodology that made their results also questionable. Anti-RCV critics citing these studies are being disingenuous – not only cherry-picking the negative studies based on flawed methodologies, but also ignoring all the positive studies and those based on real world RCV election results.

Is ranked choice voting confusing for voters?

14. Voter Information Search and Ranked Choice Voting by Theodoros Ntounias. Election Law Journal. (Ntounias, 2023).
This is a study in which the author uses survey data to replicate an election, instead of real-world data from a real-world election. The study is based on a false assumption. It presumes that voters in a RCV election need to do more research on candidates because of the assumption that RCV is complex, since it gives voters the option to rank more than one candidate. Why assume more voter research is needed than in many current plurality elections? One of the most widely used plurality elections method is for multiple seats, and voters benefit by selecting multiple candidates (e.g., pick 4 candidates in an at-large election for a city council or school board). Also, in single seat elections where voters are presented with multiple candidates from the same party, voters usually do some research to determine who is their top choice while often trying to factor in that candidate's viability.

Besides false assumptions, there are other problems with the premise of this study. First, like so many other studies, instead of asking actual voters in actual RCV elections if they did more research, the author relies on an odd survey experiment conducted on Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (a crowdsourcing marketplace). Voters are presented with "simulated candidates." One group of respondents are told they will vote in a plurality "highest vote-getter wins" election, and the other group is told they will vote in an RCV election, with very brief descriptions of each electoral method. The descriptions are far too meager for any respondent to really understand the difference between these two methods.

The respondents then are given various data about fictional candidates, and an informational questionnaire is used to determine how much of the data about the candidates was actually read. Participants are paid bonus incentives for responding "correctly" to this informational section, a whopping $0.75 for survey completion, another bonus of $0.10 per correct response in a selected set of questions, reaching a total possible payout of $2.15. Common sense suggests that paying respondents a paltry sum will not provide meaningful data.

Each ballot has a Republican, a Democrat, and two independents. The responses to the survey are used to determine if voters were seeking out more information about the candidates. In the results, no difference was found between plurality and RCV, and so the author concludes that voters in RCV elections do not seek out more information about the candidates, supposedly undermining a benefit of RCV. Based on this "study" the author concludes: "Hasty expansion of promising electoral reforms can lead to unintended consequences. The results presented in this article should conditionally caution about RCV as an experiment for the improvement of American elections."

This study, both its methodology and its conclusions, is flawed for two reasons. First, a survey like this in no way mimics a real-world election, in which candidates campaign for many months, appear before organizations to ask for endorsements, engage in outreach to individual voters, are reported on by the media, knock door to door and shake hands, and much more. In this survey, voters know next-to-nothing about any of the fictional candidates and are not invested in them (beyond perhaps just backing the major party they typically support). This is in no way equivalent to a real-world election in which most voters know something about the main candidates, and may have heard of and be curious about third party candidates. That is especially true for a primary, nonpartisan election, or Alaska-type open primary system where there may be more than one candidate of a major party.

Second, there are many elections throughout the US, including non-RCV elections, in which voters have the option of selecting more than one candidate. For example, the plurality at-large system, which is the most widely used method in the US, deployed in thousands of local and some state elections across the country, allows voters to vote for a field of candidates to elect multiple winners in the same contest. Sometimes voters do not use all of their votes and instead strategically engage in what is known as "bullet voting" – voting for only one or two candidates who they strongly prefer and not voting for other candidates, since a vote for a voter's lesser-preferred candidates could actually contribute toward defeating their most-preferred candidates.

With RCV, there is a line of criticism that suggests that if voters don't rank all their candidates in a contest then voters must be confused or poorly informed. But in fact many voters only like a single candidate, or maybe a second candidate. That's why ranking is an *option*. A voter pleased with the incumbent, for example, may only rank that candidate. There are lots of reasons that voters don't rank all candidates. And yet this study assumes that if voters don't use all their rankings then that is a failing; and based on that erroneous assumption, further assumes that voters must do more research on candidates in a RCV election.

The author never contemplates that most voters rank candidates they are already familiar with, and so they don't necessarily need to do more research on the candidates. The author doesn't engage with the very real difference between a plurality election, in which voters can only vote for one candidate and say nothing about the remaining candidates, and RCV elections where studies have found that more than 80% of voters in contested RCV mayoral elections use their rankings and where the top two candidates grow their vote totals by more than 30% in races going to multiple rounds of counting.

So the very premise of this study is false, and reflects a deep misunderstanding of how elections work, not just RCV elections but also the thousands of plurality at-large elections used all over the US. Certainly in a RCV election, a voter's vote via a ranked ballot can always be more expressive than is possible with plurality voting, and in fact gives the voter an advantage because it allows voters the freedom to consider other candidates since a voter's lower-ranked candidates cannot help defeat their higher-ranked candidates. With RCV, voters are liberated to vote for the candidates they really like without fear of spoilers and split votes, which is not true for plurality elections. None of these real-world conditions are reflected in this study.

This study, like many other critical studies of RCV also lacked a comparative context, such as showing how the critique advanced against RCV applies *even more* to other electoral systems, such as plurality, two-round "delayed" runoff, approval or fusion voting. For example, the author criticizes RCV for "ballot exhaustion" but fails to point out that, with plurality elections, the voter has only *one chance* to "get it right" and have their vote count for a winning candidate. With RCV, the voter has *multiple rankings* to get it right, which is why RCV winners end up with so many more votes than winners often receive in plurality elections or in traditional two-round runoff elections.

As a powerful real-election data point, a FairVote analysis of the Democratic presidential primaries in 2020 (Otis, 2020) found that in Washington State's primary, in which voters were allowed to vote for only a single choice, a majority of voters cast a ballot well before the primary, and more than a third of those voters backed a candidate who had withdrawn recently from the race. So their ballot was effectively tossed out. Among the rest of the ballots, barely one in twenty were cast for a withdrawn candidate. This contrasted with FairVote's separate analysis of the four states where all voters cast ranked choice ballots in the 2020 Democratic primaries; among those voters, 90 percent of those ranking a withdrawn candidate as their first choice ranked a backup choice for an active candidate – a percentage that, if applied nationally that year, would have meant more than 2.5 million more votes cast for active candidates. With plurality voting, it's very easy for a voter to "guess wrong" about how best to cast your ballot.

Ntounias' article is a great example of an academic study that failed to include any comparative context that would have provided a crucial perspective on the value of each method. Many researchers seem to forget that the question isn't, "Is ranked choice voting a perfect electoral system?" but "Is ranked choice voting better than what we use now?" Instead, these researchers often gauge RCV against a standard for elections that they fail to apply to other methods.

15. *Sincere, Strategic, or Something Else? The Impact of Ranked-Choice Voting on Voter Decision Making Processes by Alan Simmons and Nicholas W. Waterbury.* Sage Journals. (Simmons et al., 2024). This flawed study tries to evaluate the impact of RCV on voter decision-making and how voters decide which candidates to support, i.e. "whether they prioritize their personal preferences or consider who can beat the opposing candidate." This survey covered only a single election, which is another frequent mistake that a number of researchers have made, trying to take the results of a single election and universalizing it for their general conclusions. Based on one election, the researchers conclude that "voters in the RCV treatment are less likely to vote sincerely than those in the FPTP [First Past The Post] treatment" and "a statistically significant increase in voters who have an unclear voting strategy amongst those who receive the RCV treatment, compared to those who receive the FPTP treatment."

The authors' methodology consisted of conducting a survey among voters in a primary for a federal Senate election in Missouri, which does not use ranked choice voting but instead uses plurality voting.

They had the survey's voters pick from the actual candidates in the Senate race by voting for them with both RCV and plurality. Then they asked respondents how they decided which candidate to vote for. So there were no candidates actually "campaigning" in this faux-RCV election, and no media articles were saying "this is a RCV election, you have an option of ranking your ballot." There were no political organizations or newspapers endorsing candidates or informing voters, "Here are our recommended rankings." In short, there were no voter information vehicles activated that you would see in a normal election. Also there are no elections in Missouri at local, state or federal levels that use RCV, there is no culture there for ranking candidates, and there has never been a public education campaign about RCV. Yet the authors compared that to a plurality election, which Missouri voters have been using, in one form or another, for over 200 years.

In fact, the authors state "RCV is used nowhere in Missouri, making it a useful case to study the effects of RCV." But it's hard to imagine how the authors thought that their mock election results told the world anything meaningful about what actually might happen in a real-world election using RCV during which voters would be saturated with info about RCV. In reality, all this study showed was that a voter education campaign is needed when initially adopting a new election system, and that this kind of study using data from a single election, as well as an election-by-survey with candidates who are not actually campaigning in a real RCV election, is not a legitimate study.

Studies about the impact of RCV on voter understanding and satisfaction

A number of studies purported to assess voters' level of "understanding" and/or "satisfaction" when they used ranked choice voting. Unfortunately these studies used flawed methodology, poor design and missing context, thereby resulting in conclusions that too often lacked any common sense or understanding of politics.

16. Choosing to "Vote As Usual by Andre Blais, Carolina Plescia, and Semra Sevi. New America. (Blais et al., 2021).

This study was web-hosted and funded by New America's Political Reform Program and its Electoral Reform Research Group. This non-peer reviewed study used two surveys in which respondents completed ballots for simulated elections using plurality, approval, RCV and point (Score) voting. In both cases the authors provided the respondents with only minimal explanation of each method. For example, the entire explanation for RCV was "For this vote, rank the candidates from your first to your last choice (you do not need to rank them all). This is called the ranked vote." The study doesn't provide any information about how ballots are tabulated, so there's no context or explanation for survey respondents about why she/her might want to rank multiple candidates. Participants were not even told that ballots would be tabulated using an "instant" runoff, not to mention any description of RCVs ability to eliminate the spoiler effect or liberate voters to rank their favorite candidates without fear of helping the "greater evil" candidate to win. That's like taking an iPhone back in time to 1970 and asking someone if they like it better than their rotary phone without explaining how it works.

The authors also never revealed their sample size, which is a puzzling omission since sample size is crucial in assessing the credibility and reliability of their findings. Their first survey targeted states that held 2020 Super Tuesday Democratic primaries and used the real candidates' names in the survey; the second was nationally representative with fictitious candidates. In other words, they surveyed respondents who had only participated in plurality elections, had no history or background with using RCV or any of the other methods, and may not have had any clue about how the alternative methods would be tabulated and then asked them "How satisfied are you with using each system?"

The winner was, of course, plurality elections – the system they have been using, year after year, all their voting lives. With so little explanation of RCV and its impacts, this study is simply not credible in discovering anything useful about real world RCV elections. It merely shows that a basic voter education campaign is needed when adopting a new election system. Additionally, the result contradicts many other post-election surveys following *real* RCV elections, asking opinions from voters who had just participated in a RCV election, that showed a great deal of satisfaction with RCV (see details on that in Studies 22-25 below, as well as the four studies cited in the review for Study 28).

Other studies on "satisfaction" and "understanding" make similar mistakes, in terms of basing their surveys on inadequate explanation to respondents and lack of education about context. How could any survey ever hope to measure accurately, in essence simulate a real-world election, without actual campaigning candidates, the media writing about those candidates, organizations endorsing candidates and voters being inundated with crucial information? More than anything, what these "studies" based on surveys show is that if you ask voters about something they don't know very much about, and fail to adequately educate them, their responses will unsurprisingly reflect their confusion.

17. *Ranked-Choice Voting and Political Expression: Voter Guides Narrow the Gap between Informed and Uninformed Citizens* *by Cheryl Boudreau, Jonathan Colner, and Scott MacKenzie*. New America. (Boudreau et al., 2021).
This study was web-hosted and funded by New America's Political Reform Program and its Electoral Reform Research Group. This is another non-peer reviewed survey which found that respondents who were asked to vote in a simulated RCV election, with minimal explanation of RCV or how it works, displayed less evidence of being informed about how to use RCV effectively, with the least informed voters ranking fewer candidates. As pointed out under Study 16, in a real election voters are informed by a wide variety of methods, including public education by the election administration, by interested political groups, the media, and the candidates themselves who benefit from voters being aware of how to vote in the new system. Certainly one credible conclusion from this research is that voters need to be adequately educated about RCV or any electoral change whenever it is used for the first time.

18. *Ranked-Choice Voting is an Acquired Taste* *by Joseph Anthony and David C. Kimball*. New America. (Anthony et al., 2021).
This study was web-hosted by New America's Political Reform Program and its Electoral Reform Research Group. This is also a non-peer reviewed survey using a simulated election comparing plurality to RCV, with minimal explanation to survey respondents, or respondents having any previous experience with RCV elections, and finding that plurality was considered fairer and easier to use than RCV. As pointed out under Studies 16 (Blais, 2021) and 17 (Boudreau, 2021), in a real election voters are informed by a wide variety of methods. This paper's survey also contradicts other surveys which show high levels of voter satisfaction and understanding after real RCV elections (see studies 22-25 below, as well as the four studies cited at the end of the review for Study 28).

19. *Ranked-Choice Voting, Runoff, and Democracy: Insights from Maine and Other U.S. States,* *by Joseph Cerrone and Cynthia McClintock.* New America. (Cerrone, 2021).
This study was web-hosted and funded by New America's Political Reform Program and its Electoral Reform Research Group. This non-peer reviewed survey tried to determine whether RCV, plurality or two-round runoff elections provided greater voter satisfaction. They conducted a survey asking if voters were satisfied with a fictional newspaper report of an election, with three different versions given to respondents – plurality, runoff and RCV with variations of Republican/Democrat winners and variations of "come-from-behind" winners or not. Again, a minimal explanation of RCV or how it works was given, and the survey showed that respondents had the greatest unfamiliarity with RCV

than the other methods. The result? Respondents were much more satisfied with come-from-behind victories in a traditional runoff election than in RCV. As pointed out under Studies 16, 17 and 18, in a real election voters are informed by a wide variety of methods, but in this survey respondents were substantially lacking any crucial important information.

The greatest dissatisfaction with RCV results was by Republican respondents. The dissatisfaction with RCV compared to plurality and runoff disappeared for those who were more familiar with RCV. In fact, among those respondents who were "very familiar" with RCV, they were equally satisfied with RCV, runoff and plurality. It is hardly surprising that voters will need to adjust to a new way of voting, but that over time they will accept the new rules just as much as sports fans have grown used to three-point shots in basketball and the designated hitter in baseball. What this study reveals, more than anything, is the inadequacy of the explanation for RCV given by the authors of this study. These last four studies, 16-19, are more examples of inadequate political "science."

20. *Ranked-Choice Voting is No Refuge for Extreme Candidates* *by Melissa Baker.* New America. (Baker, 2021).
This study was web-hosted and funded by New America's Political Reform Program and its Electoral Reform Research Group.This non-peer reviewed study was composed of a survey presenting extreme and moderate candidates, and asking respondents which of these candidates had a better chance of being elected, under either plurality or RCV systems. The description of RCV was minimal. For example, it did not even include a description of RCVs ability to eliminate the spoiler effect or eliminate extreme candidates who only win a small amount of support, which was the point of the survey. Naturally, the uninformed respondents, likely confused by the lack of explanation or actual real-world experience, tended to report no meaningful differences between RCV and plurality.

21. *Support for Ranked-Choice Voting across Race and Partisanship* *by Joseph Anthony, David C. Kimball, Jack Santucci and Jamil Scott.* New America. (Anthony et al., 2021).
This study was web-hosted and funded by New America's Political Reform Program and its Electoral Reform Research Group. This was a non-peer reviewed survey with respondents of different parties and races voting in simulated plurality and RCV elections, and then indicating their satisfaction with each voting method. Instead of using real world election results, the authors fall back on the easier, less reliable academic research methodology of making up mock elections. As with the other studies, little explanation was given of how RCV works or what its implications might be (electing majority winners, for example). As pointed out under the previous studies, in a real election voters are informed by a wide variety of methods, including the election officials, endorsing organizations, the media and the candidates themselves. Unsurprisingly, this study finds that respondents were not very satisfied with RCV. The study proves the point that actual education of a new method like RCV is needed to obtain voter satisfaction. When the authors added an explanation that RCV elects more women and people of color, they found that this greater explanation increased the preference for RCV. The more voters are familiar with it, and the more they understand potential positive impacts, the more they are open to switching away from the status quo.

As previously mentioned with other studies, the results from this study are thoroughly contradicted by a number of other studies (for example, see Studies 22-25 below, as well as the four studies cited at the end of the review for Study 28) whose data was obtained from *real* RCV elections, asking opinions from *real* voters who had just participated in a RCV election. Those studies of real elections show a great deal of satisfaction with RCV. Here are some examples of those studies:

22. *Exit survey analysis finds Santa Fe voters strongly support ranked choice voting, have high confidence in city elections by Rich Robinson.* FairVote (Robinson, 2018).
After Santa Fe, New Mexico implemented RCV in 2018, this survey of actual voters in RCV contests conducted by a University of New Mexico professor found that 94% of respondents said they were satisfied with their voting experience, while only 4% said they were unsatisfied. More than 84% said the new RCV ballot was not confusing, while only 6 percent said it was very confusing. 71% said they support using ranked choice voting in future elections, and nearly nine-in-ten voters reported ranking more than one candidate. Voter turnout was the highest it had been in the previous four mayoral elections. This was only a non-peer reviewed study of one election, and data from future elections should be collected to give a longer-term view. But still, this study at least deserved a mention, in the interest of full representation of the research and data, yet the other studies cited above did not cite it (Notably, as will be discussed below, this same Santa Fe exit poll was interpreted in a peculiar way in Study #30 to attack RCV),

23. *Self-Reported Understanding of Ranked-Choice Voting by Todd Donovan, Caroline Tolbert and Kellen Gracey.* Social Science Quarterly. (Donovan et al., 2019).
This peer reviewed article found similar levels of reported understanding by voters of RCV as in "winner-take-all," "plurality," and the "top two" system. The surveys were conducted in cities that already have been using RCV, and thus voters were familiar with it. Several previous studies had found patterns that raised concerns about a potential racial/ethnic bias in who understands RCV, but as the authors stated, "Our evidence is not consistent with this." Their results did not report lower levels of reported understanding of RCV compared to the other methods by race, ethnicity or educational level. Instead, the authors concluded, "We found no differences within RCV cities between whites and people of color in reports of understanding voting instructions. Furthermore, we found no differences in RCV cities in how whites, African Americans, and Latinx respondents reported understanding RCV. We did find women and Asians in RCV cities less likely to report they understood RCV elections, but we also found women and Asians less likely to report they understood a range of different elections."

24. *Demographic differences in understanding and utilization of ranked choice voting by Todd Donovan, Caroline Tolbert and Samuel Harper.* Social Science Quarterly. (Donovan et al., 2022).
This peer reviewed article assessed whether there were different levels of understanding and utilization of RCV across demographic groups by using data from a survey conducted during the New York City's first RCV election in 2021, and compared those results to other RCV cities. The authors concluded: "We find no systematic differences by race/ethnicity in terms of reported understanding of RCV in NYC or the other samples. We also find no systematic association between age and reported understanding of RCV. Respondents with more education were more likely to report understanding RCV in each sample. People of color were less likely to report ranking multiple mayoral candidates in NYC and California, and respondents with more education were more likely to report ranking in two samples. Apart from these important differences in utilization, our search for race/ethnic differences largely produced null results, suggesting RCV may not produce bias in who engages with it." The authors noted that in plurality elections, certain voting errors (overvotes and undervotes) and reports of less understanding of election systems have been found to be associated with voters of color, older voters, and less-educated voters, so RCV is not different in that regard.

25. *Exit Surveys: Voters Love Rankced Choice Voting by Deb Otis.* Fairvote. (Otis, 2025).
Numerous exit polls that asked voters who had just finished voting in a RCV election their opinion of that method were conducted. The results are illuminating, and completely debunk the "voters don't understand RCV" fiction put forward by so many of these academic "studies." In a number of places that have used RCV, exit polls found voters finding RCV "easy" at levels of 85% or higher in places as

diverse as Alaska (85%), Boulder (86%), Minneapolis (88%), New York City (95%), Santa Fe (94%) and other locations. Exit polls are valuable tools for gaining insights into voter behavior, but their accuracy can be affected by sampling issues, biases, and other logistical challenges. Still, none of these exit surveys were cited as another data point in the recent studies critical of RCV mentioned above.

II. STUDIES BASED ON REAL-WORLD ELECTIONS

The second category of studies are ones actually based on real-world election results. These studies at least are using a methodology that isn't based on questionable assumptions and hypothetical scenarios. But oftentimes the authors use other types of erroneous design choices or make outright mistakes, including making broad, universal conclusions after a single election, or plucking election results out of context, or coming up with nonsensical interpretations that are not supported by the election data. As a general matter they appear to be "cherry-picking," that is, elevating negative findings and discounting positive findings even when the positive findings affect far more votes and election outcomes than the negative ones. They also rarely factor in whether a jurisdiction engaged in best practices involving ballot design and voter and candidate education.

26. *Deficiencies in Recent Research on Ranked Choice Voting Ballot Error Rates* *by Alan Parry and John Kidd.* Institute for Mathematics and Democracy. (Parry et al., 2024).

This one positively stands out, as it shows political scientists holding each other accountable for flawed research. In this study, researchers Alan Parry and John Kidd of Utah Valley University analyzed two other studies of RCV elections and showed how these studies have serious methodological and analytical flaws. One of these non-peer reviewed studies (number 27 below), by University of Pennsylvania researchers Stephen Pettigrew and Dylan Radley, broadly asserted that ranking candidates by order of preference increased ballot error rates, claiming that ballot marking errors increased ten times. Dr. Parry and Dr. Kidd found these claims to be baseless and largely out of context, as discussed below. Yet the Pettigrew-Radley study has been used extensively by anti-RCV activists opposing RCV ballot measures in Colorado, Nevada and elsewhere, citing this flawed research widely in traditional and social media. Here is a more detailed analysis of the UPenn study.

27. *Ballot Marking Errors in Ranked-Choice Voting* *by Stephen Pettigrew and Dylan Radley.* SSRN. (Pettigrew et al., 2023).

Previous to this study, several other studies had indicated that ballot errors in RCV elections largely follow the same patterns as errors in non-RCV elections, with RCV marginally higher in some races. (Kimball and Anthony, 2016), (Coll, 2021), (Neely and McDaniel, 2015), (Maloy and Ward, 2021) and (Maloy, 2020). However, this study by Stephen Pettigrew and Dylan Radley from the University of Pennsylvania claimed that RCV actually *increases* ballot error rates by large percentages.

Instead, what the authors' study actually revealed is that, charitably, they do not understand ranked choice voting very well or they have an anti-RCV bias, even as RCV opponents have misused their findings. Claims made widely by RCV opponents in Colorado and Nevada deceptively connected two of the claims in the Pettigrew-Radley study. A Nevada television ad suggested that RCV elections resulted in five percent of voters making errors, which in turn led to ten times more ballots being invalidated. The implication was that five percent of ballots are invalidated with RCV. In fact, the authors found that about 0.5% RCV ballots in contests they studied were invalid in contrast to their unusually low estimate of error in non-RCV elections of 0.05%

Probing deeper into the Pettigrew-Radley findings: the authors do claim that 1 in 20 RCV ballots – 5% –were 'improperly marked' in some way. But an improperly marked ballot is not the same as making an error that invalidates that ballot, and "most likely indicate a political expression rather than voter

confusion," observed critics Parry and Kidd in Study 26 above. In fact, Parry and Kidd found that 90% of those improperly marked ballots were in fact counted as intended by the voter. "Claiming that one in 20 ballots were problematic exaggerates that the issue is over 10 times larger than it actually is, and as such, is remarkably misleading," said Parry and Kidd. The overall average rejection rate for RCV elections was 0.53% compared to 0.04% for non-RCV elections. So the difference was 99.96% acceptance rate compared to 99.47%, both very high numbers for valid ballot rates. While the RCV error rates are indeed about 10 times larger than non-RCV, 10 times a very small number is still a very small number.

But even this 0.53% percentage is misleading if we examine all of the more than 400 RCV races with more than two candidates since 2004, not just the ones studied by Pettigrew-Radley. FairVote has published data showing that in more than 400 RCV races since 2004, the median voter error rate in these races was 0.3%. Pettigrew-Radley never pointed out, for example, that voters using absentee ballots in non-RCV elections can see much higher rates, as was found by a 2020 study by MIT's Charles Stewart. That study concluded that in the 2016 presidential elections, as many as four percent (one out of 25) absentee ballots were not counted, which is exponentially higher than the amount of invalid ballots with RCV elections.

Parry and Kidd rightly concluded that "Using sensationalized language of this type to exaggerate the impact of this difference indicates significant bias in the presentation of these results." Indeed, study after study has shown that overall, relatively few ballots in RCV elections contain an error, and even fewer ballots are rejected – *even using the limited sample from Pettigrew and Radley, more than 199 out of every 200 voters cast a valid ballot*. For most ballots containing an error of some type, the voter's intent nevertheless is clear enough that the ballot was able to be counted as intended.

Parry and Kidd also point out the lack of context in the UPenn study by Pettigrew and Radley. If one factors in the massive spike in meaningful votes that occur in an RCV election due to voters' newfound ability to rank multiple candidates, compared to the tiny amount of increased errors, there is no doubt that voters will have much more voice in their democracy with RCV.

Parry and Kidd also point out the lack of comparative context in the Pettigrew-Radley study. Recent research from FairVote ("With ranked choice voting, 17% more votes make a difference," 2024, see Study 40 below, Otis, 2024) found that RCV causes an average of 17% to 30% more votes to directly affect the outcome between top candidates – that is 17% more votes in all RCV races with more than two candidates and 30% when the tally goes to at least a second round of counting. It's important that research about RCV contextualize the impact of RCV more comprehensively, and compare RCV and single-choice voting more carefully.

28. Minority Electorates and Ranked Choice Voting by Nolan McCarty. Center for Election Confidence. (McCarty, 2024).
This much cited, non-peer reviewed study of the use of RCV in New York City's Democratic primary elections in 2021 and Alaska's Top Four primary and general elections in 2022 was funded and promoted by a conservative anti-RCV group, the Center for Election Confidence. The study concludes that "electorates with heavy concentrations of ethnic and racial minorities have substantially higher rates of ballot exhaustion." The study's author, Princeton researcher Nolan McCarty, has targeted RCV for years, including acting as a paid expert witness for a failed federal case brought in 2020 against RCV in Maine where the plaintiffs sought a federal ban on RCV based on McCarty's report alleging that RCV resulted in voter disenfranchisement. Princeton's Sam Wang rebutted McCarty's report, and

federal judge Lance Walker, a Donald Trump appointee to the bench, was scathing in his criticism of McCarty's report in his opinion finding against the plaintiffs.

As with McCarty's testimony in the Maine case, this study was badly flawed, both methodologically and due to its failure to factor in overall context. McCarty's conclusions were disputed by other studies that came to opposite conclusions. Yet McCarty was given a chance to present his findings without a rebuttal at Harvard's Ash Center in January 2025. And his study has been cited by a number of RCV opponents, including both MAGA-related organizations and their allies, and the progressive organizations that opposed RCV when it was on the ballot in Colorado in 2024. McCarty's research also was used by proponents of repealing RCV in Alaska, as well as by opponents of the RCV ballot measures in Idaho and Nevada and by RCV opponents in Maine.

This study claims that racial minority voters in New York City as well as Alaska were disenfranchised by RCV, despite all the evidence to the contrary. For example, McCarty's study fails to mention that *both jurisdictions saw historic increases in their election of racially diverse officeholders* in their first RCV elections. In fact, New York City elected its most diverse city council *ever* in its history – a majority of council members elected by RCV were women of color, and 31 out of 51 councilmembers were women, one of the most racially and gender diverse city councils in the country, especially for a large mega-city. In addition, NYC elected its second Black mayor in the city's history after a hotly contested RCV primary, and Black candidates won two hotly contested multi-candidate primaries for borough president in Queens and the Bronx, where they gained votes in the final instant runoff against non-Black candidates. For the first time in 2022 Alaska elected an Alaska Native woman to its single US House seat, Democrat Mary Peltola.

Besides that lack of local context, the McCarty study also was flawed methodologically and did not find what it claimed – that racial minority voters are more likely to have "exhausted" ballots in RCV contests. It actually found some races where that was true and other races where it was not true – and then invented two new metrics (called "adjusted exhausted ballots" and "potential exhausted ballots") to discount the races where it was not true. That kind of cherry picking undermines the study's overall credibility. McCarty does not acknowledge that oftentimes a ballot that exhausts is a reflection of voter choice – voters aren't forced to rank every candidate on the ballot, or even to pick the "lesser of two evils" candidate. Nonetheless, other studies have demonstrated that RCV actually makes more ballots count, especially when compared to single-choice elections or traditional two round runoffs, in which a voter who picks a less popular candidate, or a voter who fails to return to vote in the second round of a runoff, do not contribute to the final decision between frontrunners.

In any case, IRV/RCV allowed more voters' ballots to count in New York City because IRV/RCV replaced extremely low-turnout "delayed runoff" elections with an "instant runoff" which resulted in NYC's highest voter turnout in 30 years, with nearly a million voters participating. Any number of exhausted ballots in New York City's "instant runoff" is dwarfed by the number of voters who had their voices heard with RCV in an election in which their backup "runoff" choices got counted when their first choice was eliminated, unlike in a plurality election in which if you pick the wrong candidate, you lose.

In fact, McCarty blatantly cherry picks from Study 33 below (Kimball and Anthony, "Voter Participation with Ranked Choice Voting in the United States," which concluded that "RCV helps reduce the substantial drop in voter participation that commonly occurs between primary and runoff elections" by an astounding 32.7 points, primarily due to huge voter drop-offs between the first and second elections which RCV eliminates by holding a single election, usually in November when

turnout already tends to be highest. Instead, McCarty wrote, “Kimball and Anthony (2016) find a four percentage point drop in turnout associated with RCV, although the estimate is not statistically significant on its own.” He also wrote, “I am not aware of any study that finds a boost in turnout associated with switching to RCV from plurality voting.” McCarty would have benefited from reading *all* of the Kimball and Anthony study instead of just the cherry-picked parts.

Also, McCarty’s study failed to mention that other studies of New York’s RCV elections revealed a very different reality, including these key findings:

- In exit polls, over 90% of Black, Latino, and Asian voters found their RCV ballot "simple to complete" in New York City in 2021, and at least 80% of voters across all ethnicities said RCV was "simple" in Alaska in 2022.
- A study by political scientists Erin Carman and Jay Wendland from Daemen College (Carman et al., 2022) based on an exit poll during the first RCV election in New York City in 2021 found that 78% of voters in all demographic groups felt they understood RCV. 84% of voters ranked multiple candidates in the mayoral race, and 70% used multiple rankings in city council contests. 94% of voters said the RCV ballot was “simple” to fill out. Voters of all racial and ethnic groups, ages, incomes, and education levels made enthusiastic use of the ranked ballot. Of the 13 candidates for mayor, four were female, six Black, two Asian, four white and one Latina, with two female and two Black candidates being in the top three. 77% of voters said they support using RCV in future New York City elections (this latter study was funded by the pro-RCV group Unite America).
- The 2021 primary elections in NYC resulted in the highest voter turnout in over 30 years, with nearly a million voters participating and ranking with RCV.
- In peer reviewed Study 24 above, “Demographic differences in understanding and utilization of ranked choice voting,” (Donovan et al., 2022), the authors found no demographic differences in understanding of RCV based on age groups or racial and ethnic groups in NYC or other cities using RCV. The authors concluded: “We find no systematic differences by race/ethnicity in terms of reported understanding of RCV in New York City…our search for race/ethnic differences largely produced null results, suggesting RCV may not produce bias in who engages with it.” The authors noted that in plurality elections, certain voting errors (overvotes and undervotes) and reports of less understanding of election systems have been found to be associated with voters of color, older voters, and less-educated voters, so RCV is no different in that regard. McCarty’s non-peer reviewed study has no citation or reference to this peer reviewed study that offers a contrary perspective to his findings. However, McCarty does include several references to political scientist Jason McDaniel and his discredited Study 29 below.
- RepresentWomen’s comprehensive 2022 report (Lamendola et al., 2022) on RCV’s impact in its first use in partisan city primaries in New York City in 2021 found that women went from 13 seats to 31 seats on the 51-member city council and this remarkable finding: “Although women of color hold the majority of seats (26) on the current council, they have not always been well-represented. Notably, only 33 women of color had been elected to the city council prior to the 2021 elections…20 women of color won for the first time in 2021 alone.”

These numbers do not tell a story of racial minority voters in New York City and Alaska being disenfranchised by RCV. Quite the opposite. Somehow McCarty’s political “science” missed the big story and came to bizarre conclusions that are disputed by other political scientists and researchers who have studied these same elections, even as he claimed that such contrary studies do not exist. In the

end, his deeply flawed study badly misrepresented what actually happened in those New York City and Alaska elections using RCV.

29. *Writing the Rules to Rank the Candidates: Examining the Impact of Instant-Runoff Voting on Racial Group Turnout in San Francisco Mayoral Elections* *by Jason McDaniel.* Journal of Urban Affairs. (McDaniel, 2016).
Jason McDaniel, a political scientist at San Francisco State University, produced a study that was extremely poorly designed and researched, and failed to account for some key dynamics that actually occur in real-world elections. Nevertheless, it has been cited by at least 35 other academic studies, including most of those critiqued in this paper. McDaniel's study shows how a combination of poor methodology, poor understanding of RCV (and elections in general), and lack of context can combine to produce sloppy work that is poor political "science" with no redeeming value. And yet its "life" as research can be extended endlessly by other credulous political scientists who cite it uncritically.

McDaniel's study purported to show that RCV causes reduced voter turnout overall, more voter errors, and a negative impact on "marginal populations," mainly as the result of the complexity of RCV asking voters to rank candidates and having to be familiar with multiple candidates and related dynamics. He reached these conclusions by only examining five San Francisco mayoral elections taking place in odd years from 1995 to 2011. Only the last two elections were conducted using RCV, and only one of these was remotely competitive. No other elections were studied, even though San Francisco elects 17 other offices with RCV, including the 11 seats on the Board of Supervisors and six other citywide offices. So this study could have included at least 34 other RCV races between the years 2004 to 2011 in the analysis, but for unexplained reasons declined to do so.

To understand just how problematic this study is, it's important to know the local context of these five included mayoral elections, with candidates' race being a key factor:

- In 1995, African American Willie Brown, who as the former Speaker of the California state Assembly was extremely well-known, handily defeated white incumbent Frank Jordan by 13 points in a two-round "delayed" runoff election.
- In 1999, Willie Brown won re-election in a two-round runoff election against white candidate Tom Ammiano by a near 20 point landslide.
- In 2003, white candidate Gavin Newsom comfortably defeated Latino candidate Matt Gonzalez by 5.6% in an open seat election that went to a second-round delayed runoff.
- In 2007, in the first mayoral election using RCV, incumbent Newsom won easily in the first round of counting, earning 74% of first choices ahead of the second place candidate with just 6.3% of first choices. It was widely known that this would not be a competitive race.
- In 2011, Asian American incumbent mayor Ed Lee, who had been appointed nine months earlier to fill a vacancy and had a high approval rating, easily won the RCV election by 60% to 40% in the final round of the "instant runoff," in a field where his five strongest challengers were Asian American or Latino.

In sum, the first RCV election in 2007 was effectively uncontested, with nothing else on the ballot driving turnout. In 2011, the election was barely competitive and won by a landslide margin by a recently-appointed yet popular incumbent. These were the only two RCV elections that McDaniel used as the sole basis for his small data set to determine the impact of RCV on voter turnout. He made no attempt to include other RCV races for other offices, or to assess the impact of other real-world conditions that drive voter turnout, including competitive races vs noncompetitive, races with popular

incumbents vs races with open seats, odd year vs even year elections, campaign funding and other crucial factors.

Based on no meaningful data, McDaniel concluded that RCV lowered turnout in those two "instant runoff" races when compared to the previous three mayoral elections using two-round "delayed" runoffs, only one of which was competitive. He also found that turnout in the 2011 RCV race declined particularly among Black voters and white voters, yet he failed to mention that the 2011 mayoral election did not feature any Black candidates at all (while two of the three non-RCV mayoral elections featured the well-known Willie Brown) or any leading white candidates (even as all three non-RCV mayoral contests featured strong white candidates).

Without providing local context, or lacking a data set that included even a single competitive RCV mayoral race, McDaniel declared that RCV lowered voter turnout in 2011. But he ignored, or did not realize, that voter turnout in mayoral elections during 2011 had sharply declined in *all* big cities, including far more steeply in nearby Los Angeles and other cities. In fact, San Francisco's election in 2011 had the second highest turnout of any mayoral election in the nation's 22 largest cities from 2008-2011.

It wasn't until June 2018, after McDaniel's study and after Mayor Ed Lee's sudden death led to a special election, that San Francisco conducted its first genuinely open and competitive election for mayor using RCV. Instructively that contest, which was decided by a margin of one point and was the most competitive mayoral election in several decades, had the second highest turnout in San Francisco history for a local non-November election, and elected its first African American woman mayor, results that contradicted the conclusions of McDaniel's earlier study.

Furthermore, while McDaniel suggested that RCV leads to more overvotes – which is defined as an invalidated ballot in which a voter, in either a non-RCV or RCV race, selects two candidates for a single choice – he failed to address that in the June 2012 US Senate primary contest, which used the typical "one vote" plurality method and did not use RCV, there was more than five times as many overvotes in San Francisco and Oakland than in the RCV mayoral elections in those cities. In the June 2018 special election, more voters skipped the open seat primary for governor than the mayor's race, and there were six times more overvotes than in the mayoral race with RCV. Additionally, turnout had been significantly higher and more representative in RCV elections for the Board of Supervisors and non-mayoral offices as compared to previous "delayed runoffs" for those offices, often higher by as much as 40% in the RCV races.

In short, this was a deeply flawed study whose singular feature was a lack of useful data. But perhaps the most surprising irony was that an earlier study by McDaniel (Study 38 below, Neely and McDaniel, 2015) found that overvotes are often more common in lower income precincts, but that the pattern of overvoting is similar in both RCV and non-RCV contests. So RCV was having no impact on overvotes, effectively rebutting the later finding in this 2016 study by McDaniel.

Despite its numerous flaws, McDaniel's 2016 study continues to be cited today by other political scientists and a number of media outlets. Apparently in other political scientists' rush to tack on citations to legitimize their own studies, they cite sloppy research like this McDaniel study or the previous McCarty study, evidently unaware of the methodological illogic and design shortcomings that render these papers meaningless.

29b. *Electoral Rules and Voter Turnout in Mayoral Elections: An Analysis of Ranked-Choice Voting by Jason McDaniel.* San Francisco State Univ. (McDaniel, 2019).
Not content with producing one shoddy paper, McDaniel produced another one – also non-peer reviewed – a few years later, this time looking at multiple RCV cities and comparing their turnout in mayoral elections to non-RCV cities. He replicated many of the same mistakes as his first study by not distinguishing adequately between competitive races vs. noncompetitive races, races with popular incumbents vs. races with open seats, odd year vs. even year elections, and other real-world conditions that drive voter turnout.

McDaniel also ignored the fact that in Bay Area RCV elections held in even years, the "undervote" (that is, the dropoff from ballots cast for governor or mayor) has declined, which would contradict his thesis about how RCV is a barrier to voters voting. To his credit, McDaniel acknowledged another contradiction in his paper, which found a negative RCV turnout effect in some odd-year elections but not others, admitting that "may present a challenge to the theory that increased complexity [from RCV] will have a marginal negative effect on voter turnout." But he tried to wallpaper over that contradiction by blaming it on an unlikely source -- bad election administration. McDaniels wrote, "This would suggest that the negative impact of RCV on voter participation may be alleviated by high quality election administration," without presenting any data or even anecdotes to support such an unfounded theory. While competent election administration of any election, whether RCV or non-RCV, is certainly important, there is no credible research that supports the far-fetched notion that the quality of election administration has impacted voter turnout in RCV elections.

30. *The impact of voter confusion in ranked choice voting, by Lonna Rae Atkeson, Eli McKown-Dawson, Jack Santucci and Kyle L. Saunders.* Social Science Quarterly. (Atkesom et al., 2024).
In this peer reviewed study, the authors used the same exit poll data from 2018 referenced above in Study 22 (Robinson, 2018) to study voters' reactions to the first RCV election in Santa Fe. They zeroed in on the finding that 16% of voters reported having felt very (6 percent) or somewhat (10 percent) confused, and Hispanic voters were more likely to be confused than white voters. Based on that, they conclude the results "raise questions about RCV's equity, participation costs for voters, ease of use, and longevity."

This study was published in 2024, and since the first election in 2018, Santa Fe has had two more RCV election cycles yet the authors did not include information from those more recent elections nor provide a full account of the 2018 results that in fact were quite positive, as Study 22 above shows. In addition, there is no mention of the fact that city officials in Santa Fe fought RCV implementation, requiring a lawsuit that successfully forced implementation but resulted in a shortening of the voter education time for the first election. The city implemented RCV only three months after the court order. This study by Atkeson et al. did not provide this kind of deep local knowledge and context. Instead, based on that single finding from a single election – the first RCV election in Santa Fe, with a short education period -- the authors concluded that a small number of voters (16%) were "confused."

Meanwhile, FairVote studied that same election, working with Atkeson on an exit survey, and its findings tell a different story: 94% of respondents said they were satisfied with their voting experience, while only 4% said they were unsatisfied, and nearly nine-in-ten voters reported ranking more than one candidate. Voter turnout was the highest it had been in the last four mayoral elections since 2006, 99.9% of voters cast a valid ballot, and about 60 percent of voters chose to rank all five candidates in their very first experience with RCV. 71% of voters said they would support using ranked choice voting in future elections.

Furthermore, the authors did not compare their findings on Latinos to other election methods. Did they study if those same voters felt confused in the non-RCV elections? Maybe these are just easily confused voters, no matter the election method, as Tolbert and Donovan found in their 2013-2014 survey work cited earlier? Studying RCV outside of the comparative context of what happens in non-RCV elections undermines credibility of the research.

Notably a Santa Fe city councilmember reacted to the announcement of the Atkeson study on Twitter by writing: "You cherrypicked an exit poll from a single local election six years ago, and still only 6% of voters said they were 'very confused' by RCV their first time using it. So now the MAGA extremists will cite your 'study' as justification to ban RCV and suppress voters' choices."

31. *The Short-Term Impact of Ranked-Choice Voting on Candidate Entry and Descriptive Representation* *by Jonathan Colner.* New America. (Colner, 2023).
This study was web-hosted and funded by New America's Political Reform Program and its Electoral Reform Research Group. This study is a good example of the type of misleading analysis that can occur when researchers don't know enough about the local context. This author called his analysis "quasi-experimental" as he examined how ranked choice voting affected the number and types of candidates who choose to run for office. Actual election data was collected for 43 cities that have used RCV as well as for similar cities that have not, in an effort to assess whether the number of candidates, the number of viable candidates, the proportion of candidates of color, and the proportion of female candidates was affected by RCV. The author claims to have discovered that, while implementation of RCV boosts candidate entry initially, that effect quickly dissipates.

But this finding seems unremarkable. There are many reasons that the number of candidates fluctuates, including in non-RCV elections, such as the number of incumbents vs open seats, term limits, competitiveness of elections, whether it's a presidential election year and more (the author mentions some of these possible factors in his discussion, but does not resolve them). In looking further into this study, while its scope includes a number of RCV cities, it over-weights data from San Francisco's RCV elections since SF has by far the longest history using RCV in the sample, with 16 election cycles of use while most other RCV cities had only one or a few election cycles of usage. The study indicates a decline in candidates in San Francisco, but the author is clearly unaware that a change was made in the system of public financing for qualified candidates after the 2011 mayoral election, which drastically reduced the number of candidates.

In the first seven years using RCV, it was common to have open seat races in San Francisco's RCV elections with anywhere from 15 to 22 candidates. But that wasn't just because of RCV, it was also due to a generous system of public financing of campaigns for mayor and Board of Supervisors contests. Originally, candidates could receive public money and start spending it nine months before the election. Many candidates started early, only to discover that, by the time the candidate filing deadline arrived, a number of the lesser-known candidates realized they could not beat the better-known candidates. They were inclined to drop out of the race, except for one problem: they had already started spending the public financing for their campaigns, and if they dropped out they were legally required to repay the public funds. So they stayed in the race but mostly stopped campaigning, and became known as "zombie candidates." It was a terrible waste of tax dollars, and contributed greatly to large fields of candidates, especially when there was an open seat.

The public financing system was changed in 2011 so that qualified candidates would not receive any of the public money until after the mid-June candidate filing deadline had closed, so everybody would know who's in the race before they started spending public dollars. That targeted tweak to the public

financing system led to a drastic decline in the number of candidates in open seat races. Since that systemic change, San Francisco has not seen races with more than 8 to 10 candidates, and often much less.

So RCV was not a factor in the drastic decline in the number of candidates, instead the precipitating cause was the changes made to the public financing system for campaigns. And RCV was not the sole factor inspiring the initial large field of candidates, public financing of campaigns played a significant role. Yet this factor was not accounted for at all in this study. The author clearly did not have enough local knowledge about San Francisco elections to factor that in, and consequently made erroneous assumptions. Given that the author was not aware of this non-RCV factor in San Francisco, it's reasonable to wonder how many of the other RCV cities analyzed in this study saw declines in the number of candidates as a result of other local, non-RCV factors. Consequently, this study is not very illuminating or useful, yet it has been cited by critics of RCV.

III. STUDIES BASED ON A COMBO OF SIMULATED AND REAL WORLD ELECTIONS

32. *Where's the evidence supporting Ranked Choice Voting Claims? by Lawrence Jacobs and Penny Thomas.* Google Docs. (Jacobs et al., 2023).

Professor Larry Jacobs is a well-established political scientist at the University of Minnesota, yet in this non-peer reviewed "study" he did little more than cherry-pick a number of academic studies – including several flawed studies criticized in this report, and other studies that actually didn't conclude what Jacobs claimed -- to attack RCV. His study is one of the most error-prone of all the research reviewed for this report, yet it was cited in a number of media articles by the opposition during the 2024 RCV ballot measures in Nevada, Colorado and Oregon.

Jacobs wrote RCV "fails to support four of the advocates' promises for improvements over today's system." First, Jacobs cites "#1 RCV claim: Reduce today's polarization of the political parties" and then tried to rebut it. For his rebuttal, he relied on two non-peer reviewed studies that this paper has analyzed above and found deficient. One of these studies, Study 19 above (Cerrone et al., 2021), was not actually about polarization at all, it was about voter satisfaction. It also did not use data from real-world elections, instead it used an opinion survey with little explanation provided to respondents about the different election methods being studied.

The second study cited by Jacobs, Study 2 above (Fischer et al., 2021), used an unconventional methodology based on game theory, not on real-world elections, which tried to provoke measurable behaviors from the study's human participants who were divided up in teams to judge their interparty animosity. This study was too divorced from the reality of real elections to take seriously, as discussed under Study 2 above. Jacobs is located in Minneapolis, which has one of the longest track records of using RCV in the nation, and next-door St. Paul now uses it too. There have been dozens of RCV elections in Minnesota to actually study for impacts on polarization. Instead, Jacobs's conclusions relied on two studies of dubious credibility with no data from actual elections.

Next, Jacobs examined the impact of RCV on the diversity of elected officials, increased voter turnout, engagement of voters of color and decreased negative campaigning. Regarding an increase in the diversity of elected officials, Jacobs concluded "there is little support for this claim." However, the three studies that Jacobs cited in fact took the opposite viewpoint, presenting compelling evidence for an increase in the diversity of elected officials!

Jacobs cited the study "Election Reform and Women's Representation: Ranked Choice Voting in the U.S." (Terrell et al., 2021), which concluded "As of July 2020, women's average representation is eleven points higher in the California city councils elected using ranked choice voting compared to the average of comparison California cities." A second study cited, "The alternative vote: Do changes in single-member voting systems affect descriptive representation of women and minorities?" (John et al., 2018), concluded that RCV led to not only a 9 point increase in the percentage of minority candidates but also a 16 percent increase in the predicted probability that a female candidate will get elected and a 14 percent increase in the predicted probability that a female minority candidate will get elected. Another study done by the same three researchers and others, *Ranked Choice Voting and Representation of Underrepresented Groups* (John et al., 2016), found that "RCV increases descriptive representation for women, people of color, and women of color." Bizarrely, Jacobs completely misrepresented the conclusions of these three studies.

Jacobs also cited Study 33 below (Kimball and Anthony, 2016), "Voter Participation with Ranked Choice Voting in the United States," which actually didn't analyze diversity at all, it analyzed turnout. Kimball and Anthony concluded that "RCV helps reduce the substantial drop in voter participation that commonly occurs between primary and runoff elections" by an astounding 32.7 points, primarily due to finishing elections in a single November contest which avoids huge voter drop-offs between the first (primary) and second (general) elections. And in a case study of Minneapolis elections – Jacobs' hometown – Kimball and Anthony concluded "we find similar levels of socioeconomic and racial disparities in voter participation in plurality and RCV elections."

So perplexingly, several of the studies cited by Jacobs directly refuted his own conclusion. To support his conclusions on voter turnout and engagement of voters of color, Jacobs cited the thoroughly discredited Study 29 (McDaniel, 2016), analyzed above, yet ignored the Kimball and Anthony study on turnout which he had just finished citing (erroneously) regarding diversity of elected officials. Regarding RCV impacts on negative campaigning, Jacobs emphatically declared "most research found little to no impact or even increased negativity." To support his claim, he cited Study 8 above (Kropf, 2021), writing "Twitter traffic was more negative in RCV cities." But that is the *exact opposite* of what Kropf's paper concluded. Kropf's Twitter analysis found "evidence of bargaining and accommodation" in RCV cities, including in Jacobs' hometown Minneapolis, where "many of the candidates referenced each other," with some candidates actually retweeting posts from their supporters about which other candidates they planned to rank. Jacobs also ignored the other five studies grouped in this report with Kropf's study that showed consistent evidence of less negative campaigning in real world elections.

Jacobs has been an esteemed political scientist for many years, so this poor quality study is puzzling. A number of the studies he cited actually refute his conclusions. Despite the clear flaws and poor reliability of this "study," Jacobs and his study were quoted and linked to in various media articles as part of the opposition messaging during the 2024 RCV ballot measures in Nevada, Colorado and Oregon.

It is additionally illuminating to note that this was not the first time that Jacobs chose to portray RCV in a negative light. In 2013, following RCV elections in Minneapolis in 2009, Jacobs cited from an exit survey following that election to make unsubstantiated claims in an op-ed in the local *Minneapolis Star Tribune* titled, "New Minneapolis rules could diminish voting equality." Jacobs claimed that RCV "may widen disparities" because "Minneapolis *voters* indicated that they understood RCV better than those *who did not vote.*" Which seems like an unremarkable conclusion, since non-voters in general are more confused by elections than actual voters, which is one reason they don't vote. Most actual voters take at least some time to study the candidates, while non-voters generally do not. Stretching a thin

reed of logic, Jacobs then went on to suggest that "RCV kept people from voting who didn't feel confident about their understanding of the complicated system," even though he sideways acknowledged that low turnout in 2009's mayoral election reflected the fact that the incumbent held a large lead in opinion polls and easily won with 74% of the vote.

Moreover, in his survey, he found that non-voters have lower levels of interest, confidence and belief in the fairness of the election than voters, which is certainly true of nonvoters versus voters in general. Certainly these are some reasons nonvoters don't vote. But Jacobs then tried to suggest that, in this first Minneapolis election in 2009 using RCV, the reason nonvoters felt this way was because they were confused by RCV. But it could just as likely have been that the same nonvoters also found non-RCV elections unfair and unrepresentative, and that's why they didn't vote. After all, patterns of non-voting are typically developed over many years. Jacobs presented no data from his survey that teased out the reasons why nonvoters don't vote, whether in RCV or non-RCV elections, and without that his viewpoint was mere speculation.

Jacobs also did not accurately describe how RCV works when he wrote that RCV may give some voters "three votes" and "is eroding…'one person one vote'." In actuality, RCV is a runoff system that only gives each voter a *single vote*, which is transferable to lower choices in each round of the "instant runoff" if a higher choice is eliminated (each Minneapolis voter had three rankings to indicate which single candidate a voter supported in each runoff round). Also, Jacobs apparently was unaware that four years before in 2009, the Minnesota state Supreme Court had upheld the constitutionality of RCV, including as it pertains to the "one person, one vote" standard, in *Minnesota Voters Alliance v. City of Minneapolis*. Without presenting any factual data, Jacobs worried that RCV would hurt elected diversity, yet failed to acknowledge that seven out of 13 (53.8%) of the RCV-elected city councilors in that 2009 election were women.

Ten years after Jacobs's 2013 op-ed, as he was publishing the "study" that this paper analyzed above about the impacts of RCV with his warning that it may hurt diversity, Minneapolis voters in the 2023 local elections used RCV to elect candidates of color to nine out of 13 (69%) city council seats, including Blacks, Latino, Muslim and Somali elected officials, and women to eight out of 13 (62%) seats. In the 2021 elections, women candidates won a majority of seats, candidates of color won 62%, and Minneapolis enjoyed its highest voter turnout in local elections in 45 years. An exit poll found that 88% of voters found RCV easy to use, and 76% liked and wanted to continue using RCV.

So Larry Jacobs' warnings about RCV not only are unsupported by the very studies he cites, but also not by actual real world election results. And not just in Minneapolis. Its Minnesota neighbor St. Paul, along with New York City and Salt Lake City, all recently elected their most diverse city councils ever with RCV, including an all-women city council and majority women of color in St. Paul, and a majority women of color city council in New York, the nation's largest city. Exit polls and post-election surveys from Maine to Alaska and many places in between consistently have found that voters like and understand RCV by overwhelming margins.

IV. STUDIES SHOWING RCV BENEFITS THAT OFTEN DON'T GET CITED BY CRITICS

While these academic critics of RCV have published flawed, mostly non-peer reviewed research with little quality control, many other political scientists are generating credible research on RCV using sound methodologies based on real-world election results. We have cited a number of them earlier in this report (for example, see Studies 5 through 13 and 22 through 25 above) and summarized their findings. Below are several more.

33. *Voter Participation with Ranked Choice Voting in the United States* *by David Kimball and Joseph Anthony.* University of Missouri-St. Louis. (Kimball and Anthony, 2016).
This national study examined the impact of ranked choice voting (RCV) on voter turnout in 26 American cities across 79 elections. Kimball and Anthony used real-world elections data to provide a much fuller picture of RCV and voter turnout than previous studies. Their work included studying turnout in seven US cities that had been using RCV, including Minneapolis, St. Paul and San Francisco, both before and after adoption, and comparing those to turnout in non-RCV cities in the West, Midwest and Northeast.

Kimball and Anthony's study found that, compared to the primary and runoff elections two-round cycle that RCV eliminated, the difference in voter drop-off in RCV cities (13.1%, due to exhausted ballots and overvotes) and plurality cities (45.8%, due to voters not returning for the second election between the primary and general elections) is 32.7 points. The authors concluded: "RCV substantially reduces the drop in votes between the first and last rounds…RCV increases turnout when compared to plurality runoff or primary elections." In a more detailed study of the impact of RCV in the city of Minneapolis on turnout among different demographic groups, the researchers found that the socio-economic and racial disparities in voter participation are similar in non-RCV and RCV elections (note: that is the *opposite* of what University of Minnesota political scientist Larry Jacobs concluded in Study 32, despite Jacobs's lack of evidence and despite Jacobs citing this very Kimbal and Anthony study as part of his own research).

34. *Demographic Disparities Using Ranked-Choice Voting? Ranking Difficulty, Under-Voting, and the 2020 Democratic Primary* *by Joseph Coll.* Cogitatio Press, Politics and Governance. (Coll, 2021).
The results of this study challenged the belief that ease of using RCV differs by demographic groups, including racial, ethnic or socioeconomic groups. The study used a nationally representative sample of likely Democratic primary voters, based on an internet survey conducted by YouGov (N = 1,000). Although it was an online survey, it asked respondents to rank actual Democratic presidential primary candidates whom many respondents would have prior knowledge about. This study found that a large majority of respondents from most demographics found ranking to be easy. The author concluded that "little to no evidence of differences in difficulty were found among racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups, contrary to arguments made elsewhere…Younger voters were found to be more likely to under-vote…[but] for many voters, under-voting may be a choice."

35. *Does Ranked Choice Voting increase voter turnout and mobilization?* *by Eveline Dowling, Caroline Tolbert, Nathan Micatka and Todd Donovan*. Electoral Studies. (Dowling et al., 2024).
This study utilized a large, unique dataset from administrative voter turnout records. The authors concluded "We find significant and substantially higher probabilities of turnout in places that use RCV, and find evidence that campaigns in RCV places have greater incidences of direct voter contact than in similar places that do not use RCV." Since this is a relatively new study, it will be interesting to see if it is cited as frequently as the deeply flawed research of Jason McDaniel and Nolan McCarty.

36. *Ranked Choice Voting and Youth Voter Turnout: The Roles of Campaign Civility and Candidate Contact* *by Courtney Juelich and Joseph Coll.* Cogitatio Press, Politics and Governance. (Juelich, 2021).
This study examined individual level voter turnout for seven RCV and fourteen non-RCV local elections, and found that younger voters were more likely to vote in RCV cities because RCV acts as a positive mobilizing force through increased campaign contact with young voters.

37. *Ranked choice voting elections benefit candidates and voters of color: 2024 update* *by Deb Otis and Sabrina Laverty.* FairVote. (Otis et al., 2024).
This comprehensive report examined how communities of color experience RCV elections, using data from 448 real-world RCV elections. The findings include that voters of color tend to rank more candidates than white voters; that candidates of color are not hurt when they run against other candidates of the same race/ethnicity, and in fact it tends to help them because when a candidate of color is eliminated, ballots are more likely to transfer to other candidates of the same race/ethnicity; and that candidates of color see larger increases of up to 15% in their vote share after the transfer of votes, compared to white candidates whose vote share increases by only 12%.

38. *Overvoting and the Equality of Voice under Instant-Runoff Voting in San Francisco* *by Francis Neely and Jason McDaniel.* California Journal of Politics and Policy. (Neely and McDaniel, 2015).
This study found that overvotes are often more common in lower income precincts, but that the pattern of overvoting is similar in both RCV and non-RCV contests. "[Overvote] errors appear to be a function of complexity in general and not IRV *per se*…. the pattern of overvoting is similar in both IRV and non-IRV contests." And "As for the overall rate of IRV overvotes, the new comparison to non-IRV elections is instructive… while we knew from the earlier work that some voters more than others were likely to submit voided IRV ballots, we learn now that similar discrepancies occur in non-IRV contests. Even among votes cast in a top-of-the-ticket race like U.S. Senate, overvoting occurs in an uneven fashion. In regard to overvotes, then, these two findings reveal IRV as less of an outlier and more in line with other portions of the ballot" (note: IRV is the acronym for instant runoff voting, which is the same method as ranked choice voting).

This study not only refuted one of McDaniel's conclusions in his Study 29 above (McDaniel, 2016), but it also was an important corrective for one of the most frequently made mistakes made by anti-RCV political scientists – a continual failure to provide crucial context by pairing an analysis of real world RCV elections with real world plurality or other electoral methods.

39. In Ranked Choice Elections, Women Win *by Cynthia Richie Terrell and Courtney Lamendola.* RepresentWomen. (Terrell et al., 2020).
This study by RepresentWomen includes a survey of the success of women and candidates of color in RCV elections. Cities with RCV have better overall electoral outcomes than plurality elections for women and people of color. At the time of this study, nearly half of all mayors (46%) and city council seats (49%) decided by RCV were held by women. By comparison, women comprise only 23% of mayors in non-RCV jurisdictions. In the San Francisco Bay Area, in the four cities using RCV (San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley and San Leandro), of the 53 seats elected using RCV, women held 51% (27) of seats, people of color held 64% (34), and women of color held 28% (15) of these seats. Oakland, San Francisco, and San Leandro each were led by RCV-elected women mayors in 2020. Before RCV, Oakland had not elected a woman mayor in its 160-year history. Now it has elected three in a row, two of them Asian American. In neighboring Bay Area cities using non-RCV elections, women held only 44%, people of color 33%, and women of color 16% of the available seats.

40. *With ranked choice voting, 17% more votes make a difference* *by Deb Otis.* FairVote. (Otis, 2024).
FairVote analyzed the results from over 400 single-winner RCV elections in the US with three or more candidates since 2004. The analysis found that, compared to single-shot plurality elections, RCV causes an average of 17% more votes to directly affect the outcome – equivalent to millions more voters casting a meaningful vote. FairVote compared the vote share for the top two finalists in the first round of the RCV count to the vote share for the same two candidates in the final round. The additional votes counting for finalists in the last round reflected extra voters who cast a meaningful vote because

of RCV. Across all contests, the average increase in votes counting for finalist candidates was 17%, including contests won on the first round where no additional votes were counted. Notably, in contests that went to a multi-round RCV count in which backup rankings had a chance to count, the average growth in effective votes was 30%.

V. THE UNVIRTUOUS CIRCLE OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

In reviewing dozens of academic studies on ranked choice voting, what became apparent is that not only are so many political scientists producing deeply flawed and in some cases sloppy research, but then they cite each other's flawed research as the academic substrate that legitimizes their own flawed research – an unvirtuous circle. As previously noted, Jason McDaniel's discredited study has been cited by at least 35 other studies and continues to be cited in academic studies today. It causes one to wonder if these political scientists, often in a rush to finish their own academic papers and submit them to journals as part of their never-ending quest for tenure and/or relevance, actually even read the very research papers they are citing in their own work. Many of the studies analyzed in this paper have a kind of "cut and paste" quality to them, as the authors fill out their Introduction and Methodology sections of their papers by citing the same previous dubious research such as the McDaniel, McCarty or Jacobs studies. In this way, bad research perpetuates bad research.

Surprisingly, outside of the peer review process – which most of these anti-RCV papers either never submitted to or did not pass – it turns out there is limited quality control in political and social science over what gets published or even which papers are cited in new academic papers. Various websites that publish huge volumes of academic papers, such as Social Science Research Network (SSRN), ArXiv, SocArXiv, OpenReview.net and PeerJ, do not peer review submissions. Instead, they function as a repository where authors can self-publish their own research papers without undergoing a rigorous review process.

Unfortunately, these easy publishing venues have resulted in the spread of questionable studies and scientific results in a number of academic disciplines. For example, in July 2023, little-known Korean researchers claimed in two ArXiv publications to have invented a room-temperature superconductor and the news quickly went viral on mainstream and social media. Yet by mid-August these claims had been debunked by papers from major labs.

Platforms like the Social Science Research Network (SSRN), which publish a lot of political science papers, also exert little quality control over the research it publishes on the internet. SSRN makes it extremely easy, its website saying, "It is actually very simple to start sharing your research at SSRN. All you need to do so is your paper, and a free SSRN User Account is required to submit a paper." SSRN engages in a light vetting process, reviewing submissions for basic scholarly merit and some minor formatting requirements. But it has no process for gauging the accuracy of the research and data, or the quality of the analysis. The SSRN eLibrary has grown voluminously, hosting over 380,000 authors and over 800,000 abstracts, according to SSRN.

Seen in the best of light, this repository role of SSRN and the others is useful for sharing early-stage research, fostering collaboration, and providing visibility to work that may eventually undergo peer review. However, due to the blog-like nature of these platforms and its lax standards for quality, this publishing platform can facilitate the blurring of the lines of credible research. It has served to inadvertently contribute to a dilution of academic rigor, especially when its publication process is misunderstood by the public as the equivalent of peer reviewed publications.

Active promotion of flawed anti-RCV studies

Many of the studies analyzed above that show defective methodology and distorted conclusions, and that differ dramatically in their conclusions from other studies based on real-world RCV elections, were web-hosted and funded by the Electoral Reform Research Group, which is an ad hoc committee headed by New America's Political Reform Program and joined by American Enterprise Institute, the Unite America Institute and Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. This research consortium has been led by Lee Drutman, senior fellow with New America's Political Reform Program.

Drutman, once a prominent and staunch supporter of RCV, since 2021 has become a consistent and vocal RCV critic as he has switched his reform preference to a method known as fusion voting and to non-RCV forms of proportional representation. He has frequently used his public platform to cite and promote the discredited research papers featured in the New America series as well as other dubious studies analyzed in this paper. And this flawed research in turn was cited by Drutman as part of his active opposition to the RCV ballot measures in 2024, especially Proposition 131 in Colorado.

For example, Drutman published a tweet to his 22,000 Twitter/X followers announcing the publication of Study 1 above, "Beyond the Spoiler Effect: Can Ranked Choice Voting Solve the Problem of Political Polarization?" (Atkinson, Foley et al., 2024). Drutman tweeted, "Sophisticated modeling analysis shows that RCV elections are likely to make extremism worse. The case for RCV as a force for moderation in our highly polarized politics continues to collapse as scholarship grows." But as our previous critique of that paper showed, there was nothing sophisticated in the convoluted modeling for their non-peer reviewed study, nor in the conclusions that were riddled with contradictions and clashed greatly with data from actual real-world elections.

There have been literally hundreds of RCV elections across the country – dozens in Alaska alone, which was one of the focuses of their study – but the authors decided instead to make up votes and candidates and plug them into a flawed computer model to see what the computer came up with. That paper claimed to present "empirical evidence" that RCV does not in fact reduce political polarization, yet the paper *actually showed just the opposite* (see pages 3-5 above for more details). This study was too removed from reality to have any value at all. Yet Drutman, who previously had written, based on studies of Australian elections, that RCV was in fact a moderating force, now saw this deeply flawed study as evidence of the opposite. Upon this flimsy foundation he based his observation that the case for RCV as a force for moderation "continued to collapse as scholarship grows."

Another "study" promoted by Drutman and analyzed above is Study 14 above, "Voter Information Search and Ranked Choice Voting," (Ntounias, 2023). Drutman commented "Interesting. RCV does NOT lead to voters learning more about candidates, study finds." As the analysis in this paper showed, this was another flawed study in which the researcher used survey results, this one with respondents found on Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk, who were offered bonuses of no more than $2.15 to respond to questions about simulated candidates running in either a plurality or RCV system, with just brief explanations of each electoral method. These "candidates" engaged in no real campaigning, there were no endorsements to guide voters, there was no actual voter engagement. This poorly designed research could never provide meaningful analysis or information, especially when compared to results from hundreds of actual RCV elections across 20 years in the US, or 100 years in places like Australia and Ireland. It is baffling that Drutman would cite such a study.

Drutman has also cited and promoted several other flawed studies analyzed in this report and featured on his New America website, including Study 3 above,"Politics Transformed? Electoral Competition

under Ranked Choice Voting" (Buisseret et al., 2023) and Study 31 above "The Short-Term Impact of Ranked-Choice Voting on Candidate Entry and Descriptive Representation,"(Jonathan Colner, 2023).

As his support for fusion voting has grown and Drutman has tried to position fusion as a competitor with RCV – a pity, since they actually could be complementary reforms -- Drutman has not cited or promoted any of the research and studies that have found so many positives about RCV, including the studies analyzed in this report. Instead, in an online video debate last November over the Colorado ballot measure for ranked choice voting (combined with a top four primary), Drutman once again promoted this defective research, saying "This is something that keeps showing up in academic studies, is that lower income communities tend to find RCV more confusing, tend to make errors, tend to get their ballots miscounted at higher rates… On balance the studies do find that."

No, the studies do *not* find that, at least, not the credible ones. Studies 5-13, 22-25 and 33-40 analyzed in this report – a total of 21 studies – in aggregate find the exact *opposite* conclusion. Real political science motivated by a search for the facts that reflect the real world would seem to require a balanced citation of pro and con research. Yet somehow political and social scientists like Drutman and many others never cite or promote any of those 21 studies, or other studies with similar conclusions, or even list them as resources in their own research studies. Program.

VI. WIDESPREAD SUPPORT AMONG MANY POLITICAL SCIENTISTS AND RESEARCHERS FOR RANKED CHOICE VOTING

Despite the flawed and discredited academic research by a number of political scientists highlighted in this paper, many other political scientists, scholars and academic experts have expressed their support for ranked choice voting, or in their studies of RCV have found that it has lived up to many if not all of its "good democracy" claims. A small sample of the studies from some of these academics is included above in this report, see Studies 5-13, 22-25 and 33-40. In addition, several reputable commissions have endorsed ranked choice voting, including:

- The Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, largely composed of academics, produced a report that recommended RCV for federal elections.
- The Delegates of the Democracy Constitution, a group of leading academic scholars who evaluated the changes they would like to see in the Constitution, recommended RCV in their proposed changes.
- The Constitution Center also conducted a Constitution drafting project, in which leading scholars broke into ideological groupings which all recommended RCV.

A long list of noteworthy academics, including Nobel Prize and Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science winners, have endorsed ranked choice voting, such as Francis Fukuyama, Robert Keohane, Arend Lijphart, Jane Mansbridge, Robert Putnam, Rein Taagepera, William Nordhaus, Robert Shiller, Angus Deaton, Danielle Allen, Larry Diamond, Richard Pildes, William Galston, Alex Keyssar, Richard DeLeon, Lawrence Lessig, Jack Nagel, G. Bingham Powell and many others.

VII. CONCLUSION

Many political and social scientists analyzing RCV and its impacts have produced admirable research. But as this report has demonstrated, some of the most frequently touted and cited research papers on ranked choice voting have been dubious in their methodologies as well as in their findings and conclusions. As we reviewed the 40 studies on RCV, many of which have been cited in public debates over RCV reforms, the most obvious conclusion was that the most reliable studies were the ones grounded in real-world election data. The other glaring certainty was that many of the studies

critiquing RCV relied on flawed survey methods and abstract models that failed to accurately simulate what happens in real-world elections. Despite the availability of over 700 RCV elections since 2004 - spanning 16 million voters across 50+ jurisdictions - many studies neglected empirical election data in favor of speculative or unrealistic simulations.

Moreover, many critiques of RCV often lacked comparative context, failing to assess how alternative electoral systems (e.g., plurality, runoff, Condorcet, approval, fusion) performed according to similar metrics. Moreover, many critiques of RCV often lacked comparative context, failing to assess how alternative electoral systems (e.g., plurality, runoff, Condorcet, approval, fusion) would perform on similar metrics, and not analyzing or mentioning that oftentimes the critique advanced against RCV applied *even more* to these other electoral systems. Other studies made sweeping claims based on a small sample size and limited evidence, in some cases only a single election. Many of these studies also lacked peer review and exhibited selective cherry-picking of data, undermining their credibility.

The RCV research that used actual election results consistently showed positive or neutral impacts regarding representation, voter error, turnout, demographic participation and more. Nevertheless the flawed studies became influential due to being uncritically and repeatedly cited by other researchers, journalists, political scientists promoting their own preferred electoral system, and anti-RCV activists.

Certainly studying politics and the impact of specific reforms is challenging. Politics is, after all, a reflection of human behavior, which often exhibits more chaotic gyres than the weather. Like many political phenomena, the cause and effect behind electoral behavior, especially when it comes to electoral systems, can be hard to tease out and sometimes raises an eyebrow. The art of analyzing politics lies in balancing methodological rigor with a willingness to embrace its unpredictability – the right data is never static, it must evolve with the research questions, tools, and ever-shifting political and cultural landscapes as political science aspires to rise above the irascible pandemonium of politics to deliver meaningful insights.

The hopeful goal of this report is that our critique of existing RCV research will lead to much improved scholarship, and a greater understanding of ranked choice voting/instant runoff voting.

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