

Covering Elections Under Ranked Choice Voting

A Hands-On Workshop for Journalists, by Journalists • June 15, 2024

The workshop is hosted by the Agora Journalism Center,
in collaboration with North Star Civic Foundation and the Sightline Institute.

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Covering Elections Under
Ranked Choice Voting

Reporting on Ranked Choice Voting in Portland's 2024 Elections

Resources for journalists and editors.

Journalists who have reported on ranked choice voting elections around the country have identified best practices and common pitfalls in reporting on this method of voting. In June 2024, Sightline collaborated with the Agora Journalism Center at the University of Oregon and North Star Civic Foundation to offer a [training](#) for journalists covering Portland's first use of ranked choice voting this November. This resource guide, containing both official dates and unofficial tips, was introduced and modified during the event.

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Photo by Fred Joe/SOJC (University of Oregon SOJC Portland — Panel discussion organized by the Agora Journalism Center about media coverage of ranked choice voting, in the Papé Forum Saturday June 15, 2024. Portland journalists and elections officials meet with journalists from around the country who have experienced covering ranked choice elections. Used with permission.)

Quick background

In November 2022, **Portland voters approved [Ballot Measure 26-228](#) to move to a new form of government**, changes recommended by a volunteer Charter Commission.

In November 2024, Portlanders will use their new voting system for the first time:

- *single-winner* ranked choice voting to elect the city-wide Mayor and Auditor and
- *multi-winner* ranked choice voting to elect three city councilors in each of four new geographic districts.

The new form of government will be in place by January 1, 2025.

Point of interest

Ranked choice voting is already used in more than 50 jurisdictions nationwide, but **Portland will be the largest city in the United States to use *multi-winner* ranked choice voting** to elect its city council members. (Cambridge, MA, has been using it for some time, as have a few smaller elected bodies in cities including Minneapolis, MN.)

Key dates

November 5, 2024 (election night), 8:00 pm: Multnomah County, which tabulates results for its cities, including Portland, plans to report preliminary round-by-round results for all City of Portland ranked choice voting contests at multco.us/elections.

Just like the prior system of “choose-one” elections, we will not know the final winners of close ranked choice voting races until all ballots are counted. However, some races may be called as early as election night.

November 7, 2024: The next update of round-by-round results is expected by 6:00 pm. Regular updates will be released thereafter.

In previous Multnomah County elections, typically [97% of ballots](#) have been counted in the first couple of days after the election. This year, administrators expect early results to take longer since the counting and tabulation process is slightly more complex.

December 2, 2024 (27 days after the election): Election results are certified.

For multi-winner City Council races, the election threshold is 25% of ballots plus one vote; for the single-winner Mayor’s and Auditor’s races, the election threshold is 50% of ballots plus one vote (see below for more on this).

Multnomah County’s data reporting format

The general format of election results will be similar to that of other jurisdictions that have managed ranked choice voting elections (including some with the same voting tabulation software as Multnomah County, [RCTab](#)). Results will be provided in three formats:

1. Detailed tabular reports, similar to reports that New York City produces for its ranked choice voting elections (example: [New York City Primary Results - Council Member 9th District](#)).
2. Simplified tables, modeled after the ones used in Arlington, Virginia (example: [2023 Democratic Primary Results](#)).
3. Clickable bar charts, modeled after charts that the City of Minneapolis produces (example: [2020 Special election results: City Council Ward 6](#)).

Best practices for reporting ranked choice voting results

Exercise caution in reporting early results

Acknowledge that final results may not be available immediately, which is true of most elections (not unique to ranked choice voting).

Multnomah County Elections will be releasing preliminary round-by-round data, but the tabulation and rounds may change as more ballots are counted. Do not report first-released data as if it is final, and remember to account for ballots that have “exhausted” their rankings and write-ins. As with other contests, the results will not be final until December 2 (certification day). While outcomes may start to become clear before then, no winners will be officially declared before that date.

Use clear and simple visuals

Keep visualizations simple. Tables and stacked bar charts can be useful visualization tools. [Ranked Choice Voting Visualizations \(rcvis.com\)](#) can help you create neat, comprehensible graphics.

The [Center for Civic Design has a report](#) on best practices for more detailed results displays, including the checklist to the right:

FairVote also has a brief primer on [how to display RCV election results](#) (and a [multi-winner version](#)). North Star Civic Foundation will be offering an elections data dashboard in the coming months to compare outcomes of the 2024 election in Portland with outcomes in other cities and with Portland’s historical election outcomes.

Checklist
Designing RCV Media Results Displays

- Talk to your local election officials to understand local procedures

Does your results display include:

- Both a written and visual explanation
- Name the winner or leader in both the headline and visual
- An explanation of or link explaining the RCV counting process, [like this Ranked Choice Voting Facts video by FairVote](#)
- Link to more information about the candidates
- Link to round by round count
- Definitions of eliminated candidate, transferred or redistributed votes, % to win, and inactive ballots
- Results for all candidates in the contest

Does your visualization include:

- A photo of each candidate
- Both vote totals and percentages
- Numbered tabulation rounds
- “Eliminated in Round n” next to eliminated candidates

For Preliminary or Incomplete Results only:

- Cautious language about the leader
- Candidates are in 1st-round order

For Complete Results only:

- Winner is at the top of the visual, followed by other candidates in order of elimination
- Last round label updated to say “Final Round / Round n”
- Multiple final results indicators (See [Page 19](#) for a list)

Context

RCV impacts: Trends to watch from existing research

Shifted campaign styles | Candidates tend to campaign differently because they are seeking second-choice support as well as first choices, so they are often less negative about their opponents. Some candidates with similar policy positions may cross-endorse each other or form alliances. (See [Central Park 5's Yusef Salaam scores cross endorsement in Harlem council race from NYC Assemblyman Al Taylor | NYPost.com](#).)

Increased voter outreach | Candidates sometimes reach out to more voters, again to seek second-choice votes. (See [How a bipartisan governing majority emerged in Alaska | Alaska Beacon](#).)

More representative candidate pools and outcomes | Research shows that more women and people of color run and win when a jurisdiction switches to ranked choice voting, in part because they are not deterred by inadvertently being a spoiler candidate for another candidate with similar viewpoints. Voters can also choose their favorite candidates without fear of spoiling the election for someone else. (See [St. Paul likely to welcome historic all-women City Council after Tuesday's election | MPR News](#).)

Possible increase in voter turnout | A variety of factors typically impact voter turnout, such as the number of high-profile races or issues on the ballot, levels of voter enthusiasm or distaste for specific candidates, the size of voter education efforts, and whether it is a mid-term or presidential election year. [Recent studies](#) indicate that there is higher voter turnout in places using ranked choice voting, but effects vary and often take time to appear. However, there will likely be higher voter participation in some Portland City Council races compared to the city's prior two-round system (when voters elected some candidates during a low-turnout May primary and others in November), since Portland's electoral changes include eliminating the May primary races for city offices.

Explaining RCV to voters

General good practices

As much as possible, use **analogies**, real-life everyday **examples**, **sample ballots**, and **visualizations**.

Offer a simple explanation of how it works whenever you bring it up.

Use **voter-centric terms** like “single-winner ranked choice voting” and “multi-winner ranked choice voting,” rather than more jargon-y terms like “instant runoff” and “proportional RCV,” to orient readers to the races for Mayor and Auditor and for

Portland City Council, respectively. Link to city resources that demonstrate how the ballot will appear and common voting errors.

Note that the **voter experience is the same** for single-winner and multi-winner ranked choice voting races.

Avoid reinforcing the claim that “it’s too complicated.” In Alaska and other places with RCV, polls show that [voters find ranked choice voting easy to use](#).

Practices to avoid

Rather than describing Portland’s new voting method as novel, untested, or complex, it can be helpful for voters to know that many places have used ranked choice voting, including multi-winner ranked choice voting, for decades. In the United States, ranked choice voting is currently used in cities such as San Francisco, CA; Boulder, CO; Cambridge, MA; Salt Lake City, UT; New York City, NY; as well as the states of Alaska and Maine. In Oregon, it’s already in practice in Corvallis and Benton County.

Lengthy, mathematical explanations of the ballot tabulation process can confuse some readers, as can acronyms and jargon. Where you do need to offer these details, be sure to define them upfront and include or link to examples.

For single-winner ranked choice voting (Portland mayoral race)

Official language: The [City of Portland’s description](#) of how ranked choice voting works.

Analogy / Real-life example: “When you’re out to dinner, if the restaurant has run out of your favorite thing on the menu, you still eat. You would look at the menu and decide on the next best option or (if need be) the third. We rank things every day, and we can do the same when electing the public servants who will represent us in government.”

Sample ballot: A book club might use ranked choice voting for its next book selection.

Example usage: An editorial board could offer ranked candidate endorsements themselves.

Visuals: Use charts, graphs, and other collateral, like short video explainers, embedded in articles. Examples include:

- Video: [What is Single-winner Ranked Choice Voting? \(youtube.com\)](#) | RCV Resource Center
- Video: [Ranked Choice Voting: Here's How It Works In Alaska \(youtube.com\)](#) | Alaska Division of Elections
- Multnomah County Elections is also preparing a video explainer.

For multi-winner ranked choice voting (Portland City Council races)

Emphasize majority representation: In contrast to the previous winner-take-all elections, at least 75% of voters will elect at least one candidate of their choice (since three candidates must each get 25%).

Explain how many votes a candidate needs to win: In multi-winner ranked choice voting elections, the number of votes a candidate needs to win (also known as the “election threshold”) is based on the number of seats. In Portland, city councilors will be elected from three-member districts, so candidates need to earn more than 25% of the vote (since only three candidates can get more than 25%). This allocation means the three strongest candidates win.

Use caution when explaining the surplus vote transfer: Stick with the simple election threshold explanation for general audiences. For instance: “In the second round of counting, Candidate X reached the 25% needed to win and has been elected as one of the councilmembers from District 1.” Videos and graphics can supplement for a more detailed discussion. Make it clear to readers that the voter experience on the ballot is identical for single-winner and multi-winner ranked choice voting elections, regardless of the multi-winner fractional transfers behind the scenes.

If explaining the process of fractional transfers, make sure to include *why* the votes transfer: to ensure that voters are represented proportionally. If a very large group of voters are aligned on a set of issues and are able to elect one seat, they may be a large enough group to influence another seat in the race too. Example language: “With multi-winner elections, a popular candidate might not need your full vote to reach the threshold, so a portion of it would count towards your next favorite. That way, you aren’t penalized for voting for someone with a lot of support.”

The transfer math is basic division: the extra votes divided by the total voters for that candidate. For example: “If a candidate needs 500 total votes to win but receives 750 votes, each voter only needs to spend two-thirds of their vote to get that candidate over the finish line (two-thirds of a vote multiplied by 750 votes = 500 full votes)---and the remaining one-third of each vote can contribute to another candidate.¹ With this method, your single vote can be more expressive: it will always work to elect your favorite candidate, but you can rank additional candidates, knowing that you’ll continue to have a voice if your first choice gets more support than they needed to win.”

Since surplus votes transfer, there will be no “margin of victory” to report. Instead, note which round each candidate won their seat: earlier rounds means that candidate received more top-choice votes.

¹ Math details: $(750-500) / 750 = 250 / 750 = 1/3$ of each vote that transfers.

Analogy / Real-life example: You hold a party at a pizzeria: Four tables can order 3 pizzas each to suit the group sitting there. They rank their preferences. So, most people get a slice they love or like, and the outlier who puts an anchovy pineapple pizza (yikes) at the top of her list still likely gets her second or third choice.

Sample ballot: A city might have residents use ranked choice voting to name its four new snowplows, five garbage trucks, or other plural low-stakes investments.

Example usage: Editorial board members could rank the candidates for their respective districts.

Visuals: Use charts, graphs, and other collateral, like short video explainers, embedded in articles. Examples include:

- Video: [How does Single Transferable Vote Work in Portland, Oregon? | Rose City Reform](#)
- Video: [Proportional representation, or why US elections only give you two choices | Vox](#)
- Video: [Proportional #rankedchoicevoting Explained | FairVote](#)
- Embedded graphs: [Proportional RCV improves diversity in Albany, and voters embrace it | FairVote](#)

More resources

Examples of RCV coverage

Election results

[What Alaskans can expect as election officials tabulate ranked choice results Wednesday - Anchorage Daily News \(adn.com\)](#)

[Alaska U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski wins reelection - Anchorage Daily News \(adn.com\)](#)

[Maine's pioneering ranked-choice election likely to catch on nationally \(pressherald.com\)](#)

[Republicans hold majority in Alaska House after benefiting from ranked choice voting \(kdlg.org\)](#)

[How Boulder's first-ever ranked choice mayoral race played out – Boulder Daily Camera](#)

[The Polls Are In: Hating Bike Lanes Is Not A Winning Electoral Strategy - Streetsblog Massachusetts](#)

RCV legislation

[Oregon becomes the latest state to put ranked choice voting on the ballot – NBC News](#)

[Bill seeks to expand Maine's ranked-choice voting to presidential elections \(pressherald.com\)](#)

Upcoming ballots

(Video) [Voting in the Maine primary? Here's what you can expect on the ballot | newscentermaine.com](#)

[What you need to know about voting and following election results in Minneapolis \(and St. Paul\) - MinnPost](#)

Organizations

Advocacy organization [FairVote](#) has compiled data and other resources about ranked choice voting.

The [Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center](#) has a library of resources. Its experts offer resources for administering ranked choice voting resources, including hardware and software needs.

Sightline Institute has extensive research on ranked choice voting in Northwest states and Alaska, including a [full series](#) on Portland's system. It also compiled [this list](#) of how community groups can help educate their members about ranked choice voting.

Data and visualization tools

[Ranked Choice Voting Visualizations \(rcvis.com\)](#) can help you create neat, understandable graphics.

The [Center for Civic Design](#) offers best practices for results displays.

Offer mock elections with [Rankedvote.co](#) (contact City of Portland if you would like a license).

Create your own [Sankey diagram](#) if desired.

Local contacts

Multnomah County Elections: Will tabulate ballots and present results.

- Leah Benson, Ranked Choice Voting Project Manager (leah.benson@multco.us)
- Tim Scott, Elections Director (tim.scott@multco.us)

City of Portland: Will officially call the election.

- Deborah Scroggin, Elections Manager (deborah.scroggin@portlandoregon.gov)

Sightline Institute: Connects ranked choice voting experts and research with local context.

- Shannon Grimes, Democracy Researcher (shannon@sightline.org)

North Star Civic Foundation: Connects local leaders with data, analysis, and discussion to support timely and collaborative leadership on elections, democracy, and economic issues.

Marina Kaminsky, Research Manager (marina@northstarcivic.org)

Agora Journalism Center, University of Oregon: Supports journalist learning.

- Andrew DeVigal, Endowed Chair in Journalism Innovation and Civic Engagement (adevigal@uoregon.edu)

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