

Ranked Choice Voting: Who's the real winner?

Brendan Magill

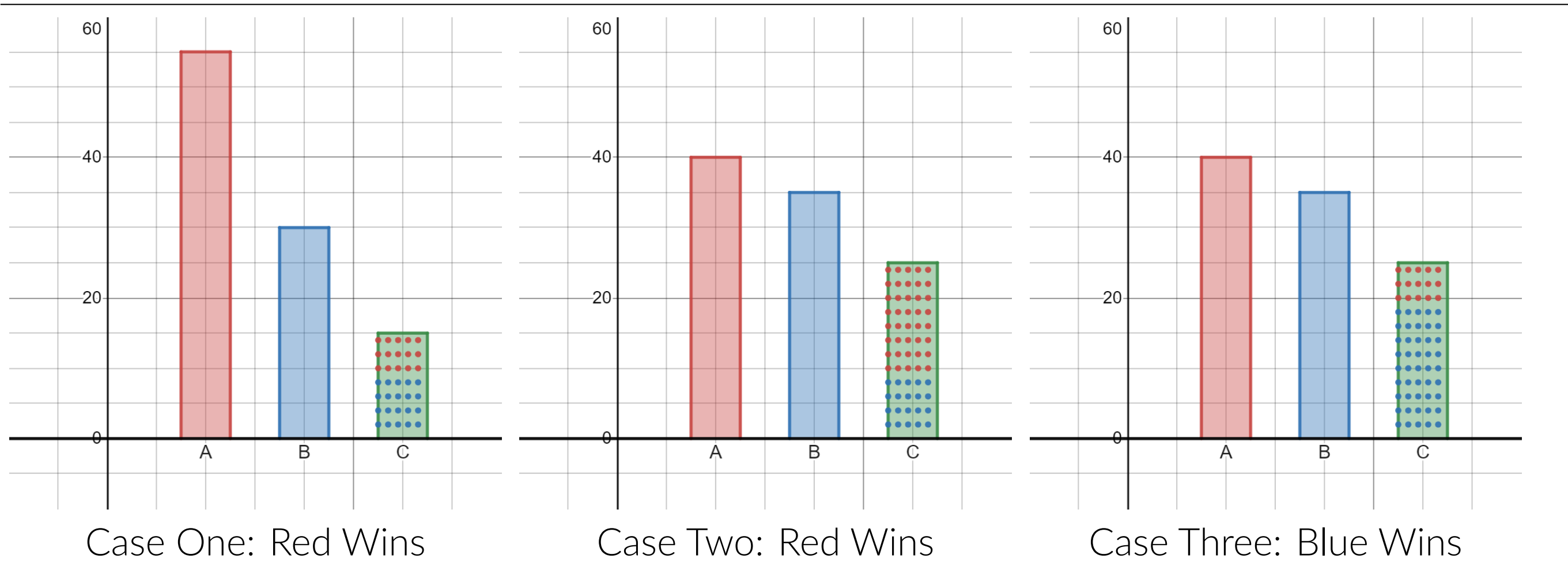
Hamilton College

What is ranked choice voting?

Ranked choice voting is a voting system in which voters rank candidates in order of preference. The winning candidate is determined by eliminating candidates and reassigning their votes until one has a majority. Specifically, for elections with one winner, the process works as follows:

1. Voters rank each candidate in order of preference; first choice, second choice, etc.
2. If a candidate has a majority of first choice votes, they are named the winner.
3. If no candidate has a majority, the candidate with the fewest first choice votes is eliminated.
4. All ballots have their choices reassigned considering only the remaining candidates.
5. The process is repeated until a candidate has a majority of first choice votes.

Let's try it! A few scenarios with three candidates.



What do we notice?

- In case one, the red candidate got a majority of first place votes and is immediately declared the winner.
- In case two, no candidate got a majority of first place votes. After considering the second choice of voters who preferred the green candidate, red is declared the winner.
- In case three, no candidate got a majority of first place votes. After considering the second choice of voters who preferred the green candidate, blue is declared the winner, despite initially having fewer first place votes than red.
- In two of the three cases, the candidate with the most first place votes was ultimately declared the winner.
- In case three, the blue candidate was able to overcome an initial vote deficit because they were viewed more favorably by the green candidate's voters.
- Unlike traditional voting, there are no “wasted votes” - voters who preferred the green candidate still have a say in the final results when their vote matters.

Why do we care?

Democratic elections are meant to provide each voter with an equal say in elections. In reality, the traditional voting system does not always provide this opportunity:

- Votes for third-party and independent candidates have no effect on the outcome of the most elections.
- Voters are pressured to choose between a “lesser of two evils”, rather than vote for their preferred candidate.
- Candidates with a devoted but narrow fanbase have an advantage, even when they are disliked by broad contingents of voters.
- Candidates with similar platforms are in direct competition, giving more polarizing candidates an advantage

These effects are visible on all levels of U.S. democracy, especially in important, contentions elections. Presidential elections, for example, often have voters choose a candidate simply to prevent the other from winning. Votes for third-party candidates have the same effect as not voting at all, preventing these candidates from garnering support. And in presidential primaries, candidates with similar platforms must drop out and endorse each other rather than continuing to spread their message.

How is ranked choice voting different?

Ranked choice voting is not an instant solution to having egalitarian democratic elections. But it does provide an alternative that remedies some of the traditional system's shortcomings:

- Voters who prefer third-party and independent candidates can still impact the results for mainstream candidates, making no vote a “wasted vote”.
- For this reason, there is no pressure to vote for a candidate simply to prevent another from winning.
- Candidates who appeal to a wide range of voters have an advantage over those with a narrow, polarizing base.
- Candidates with similar platforms are not disadvantaged, even working together on issues where their platforms overlap.

What if? The 2000 presidential election

The 2000 presidential election in Florida was decided by just 537 votes. The plurality candidate, George W. Bush, was declared the winner. But what if ranked choice voting had been used?

In total, ten candidates received votes in that election. There were 138,067 votes cast for third-party candidates, clearly enough to effect the final result using a ranked choice system. Of these third-party votes, 97,488 were cast for green-party candidate Ralph Nader.

Using ranked choice voting, this election likely would have been decided based on which candidate, Bush or Al Gore, was preferred by a greater number of third-party voters. If 50.2% or more preferred Gore, he would have won Florida and the electoral college.

Is this more fair? More democratic?

Ranked choice voting provides solutions to some of the fundamental issues with traditional voting. But is it more fair? Should it be instituted in American democratic elections?

Case For

Ranked choice voting is a better representation of “one person, one vote” than the traditional system. There are no wasted votes, and voters truly get to cast a ballot based on who they prefer, rather than who they dislike least. The winning candidate is the candidate who appeals to the majority of voters, even if they aren’t the first choice for the most voters. This leads to more cooperative politics and less polarization than the current system.

Case Against

Ranked choice voting does not elect the candidate who is primarily preferred by the largest number of voters. This is not a true representation of “one person, one vote”, and it does not elect the most popular candidate. Instead, it elects a candidate who appeals to a wide range voters, even if they are not the first, or even second choice for a majority of voters. It benefits centrist candidates, and disadvantages non-mainstream candidates, even if they have strong support.

Real life examples

Ranked choice voting is currently being used in elections across the country. Mayoral elections in San Francisco, Oakland, Minneapolis, and St. Paul have used it for several cycles, and it has been recently implemented for the New York City mayoral race and for federal races in Maine and Alaska.

In reality, most elections with ranked choice voting result in the same winner as traditional elections: the plurality winner has ultimately prevailed in about 94% of recent U.S. elections.

The New York City Democratic mayoral primary is one such example, with Eric Adams winning both the plurality and the ranked choice majority.

Two races have been won by a candidate who was in third place after the first round: San Francisco's 2010 election for the 10th district, won by Malia Cohen, and San Francisco's 2020 election for the 7th district, won by Myrna Melgar. In both cases, these candidates were *Condorcet Winners*, meaning they would have won a head-to-head election against any other candidate.

In only one case has the winner of a ranked choice election not been a Condorcet candidate: The Burlington, Vermont 2009 mayoral election, in which Condorcet candidate Andy Montroll was eliminated despite having overwhelming second choice support from all other candidates.

References

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