Ranked Choice Voting for Colorado is Challenging the Two-Party System One City at a Time

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It started as a dare. “It was really a *hold my beer* moment,” Christopher Billman said, laughing as he recalled the discussion he had with a friend on Facebook more than five years ago that started a movement across Colorado. “I was saying there’s no point in voting because the two-party system basically eliminates any sort of thought at all. … And he replied, ‘Well, what are you going to do about it?’”

The two-party system is described as a dichotomous division of the political spectrum with an ostensibly left-wing and right-wing party. The United States is a classic example where members of the Democratic and Republican parties almost exclusively hold power in office. As a result of two parties being at the forefront of politics, most societal tensions are divided into two competing camps.

According to Duverger's law, two parties are a natural result of a “simple-majority” voting system.

Challenged by his friend, Billman scoured the internet for an alternative voting method that could stand up to the two-party system and it wasn’t long before he found exactly what he was looking for in a jungle cartoon, featuring a Queen lion.

Trying to make elections in her animal kingdom fairer, the Queen Lion tests out a new system: ranked choice voting. Instead of putting their vote towards a single candidate, citizens get to rank them by preference. Once the ballots are cast, only the first choice votes are counted.

If the results show that no candidate has the majority of first choice votes (50% or more), then the lowest ranking candidate will be eliminated. However, the citizens that voted for a defeated candidate don’t need to worry since their second favorite candidate will get their vote instead. This cycle repeats, as needed, until the candidate with the clear majority can be determined.

Currently, the electoral process in the United States utilizes the plurality method (also known as first-past-the-post) where the candidate who polls the most votes wins. This is simplistic enough for a two-party race; however, becomes more complicated as the number of candidates increase.

Those who challenge the plurality method will often point out that it doesn't capture the ideological nuances present within a society since the winner can still be determined by the minority of the vote.

Sticking with the jungle analogy; Let's assume that, if every election the largest party, which has five Monkeys, wins continually by 33% of the vote then the interests of four Tigers, three Owls, two Lynx and one Buffalo will be lost. This is rather unsatisfying for the other 67% of citizens who aren't Monkeys and can lead to an animal kingdom that doesn't trust the Jungle Council to make the fairest laws for all.

Knowing what it feels like to be a part of the "other 67%" is what sold Billman on the idea of ranked choice voting and inspired him to get others on board.

"I went ahead and just started hitting the pavement," Billman said. All it took was a Facebook group and some fliers to capture the attention of the other 20-plus Coloradans who joined him before forming the organization that's known across the state.

Most voting rights activists aren't concerned about widespread corruption or election tampering, but rather find fault with methods that fall prey to strategic voting techniques, which often disenfranchise voters and exacerbate political divides.

While not every voter can identify instances of strategic voting, they've likely encountered it through their own observations or personal experience.

It's all too common for people to push their true feelings aside and vote for the candidate they consider "the lesser of two evils" instead. This tactic, also known as the "spoiler effect," is the

natural response people have when their ideas aren't represented by the two political parties that perpetually dominate the discourse, but still want a say.

Denver resident and member of the Green Party, Linda Templin, described this issue as one of the reasons she was drawn to ranked choice voting, "I'm voting, but I'm not always voting how I want to, which isn't freedom."

With the spoiler effect in mind, candidates are more likely to run smear campaigns against their opponents. However, when campaigns turn hostile, policy tends to suffer since the focus becomes what's wrong with their opponent rather than what's right about their own candidacy.

Furthermore, voters question if the winner elected through these means earned their vote based on merit or circumstance.

Research published in the journal of Electoral Studies found that voters surveyed in ranked choice cities were nearly twice as likely to say local campaigns were "a lot less negative" than other recent contests, while people in plurality cities were twice as likely to say candidates criticized each other some or most of the time.

This alone could be a contributing factor to low voter turnout in the U.S. According to FairVote, voter turnout in the United States is much lower than in other countries, hovering around 60% during presidential elections and 40% during midterm election years.

United by mutual frustration, if nothing else, was all it took to bring members from all political perspectives together in the formation of Ranked Choice Voting for Colorado.

That spring was the first time the group met in person at the Jefferson County Library in Arvada ready to debate different voting methods. By 9:30 a.m., more than 20 people were gathered around the giant square table to watch as people presented their arguments for both ranked-choice and approval voting.

Fueled by coffee and bagels, the debate went on for more than four hours before they agreed to take votes – using both methods. Although the race was close, **spoiler alert**: ranked choice came out on top with a margin of three votes.

Known as the "Granola Liberal" and one of founding members, Aicila Lewis, recalled the pride she felt that day, "I felt like anything [that] could bring us all together, in agreement, was worth time and effort."

Ranked Choice Voting for Colorado has been leading efforts to establish the alternative voting method statewide since 2016. The organization contains three branches: the board of directors, a policy committee and a scholars table – all including members from all political perspectives.

Since inception, it has expanded to an organization with 10 board members, over 300 volunteers and an email list of 6,000 that has helped bring ranked choice voting to cities like Boulder, Broomfield and potentially Fort Collins this coming election day.

Although ranked choice voting is starting to catch on, when it comes to financing the effort, "It's pretty hit or miss," Templin admitted, the formerly frustrated Green Party member, who is now the organization's executive director.

As a grassroots organization, aside from the occasional grant, Ranked Choice Voting for Colorado is mostly funded by Templin's husband and the generosity of its donors. Despite running the organization full-time since 2017, Templin said that she hasn't been paid since February.

Pointing out the precarious nature of the nonprofit world, Templin said they have been offered money to do things outside of the organization's mission in the past, but the answer is always the same. "If it's not fair to everybody, we're not doing it," she said.

The organization may have birthed a movement in Colorado, but the concept of ranked choice voting is not new. Starting in the 1860s by the English barrister Thomas Hare, the method was

known as Single Transferable Vote and seen as a way to accommodate majority rule while still giving the minority a voice, according to FairVote.

Since then, ranked choice voting has existed in different states at one time or another and is still practiced overseas today. According to a report by NPR, it has also been used by Australia, Ireland and Malta since the early 20th century. Northern Ireland, New Zealand and Scotland have all adopted it as well.

Most notably, ranked choice voting (or "preferential-voting" in Australian terminology) has existed for more than 100 years in Australia. In 2019, there was an average of seven candidates in house races and roughly 40 parties represented on ballots in total as well as a number of unaffiliated candidates, according to FairVote.

Furthermore, over 50 colleges and universities in the U.S. use ranked choice voting for student elections, including Harvard and now our very own University of Colorado Boulder.

Today, only two states use ranked choice voting as a way to vote in statewide elections and presidential primaries: Alaska and Maine.

It had a profound impact on a 2018 Maine congressional race where the Republican nomination led the Democrat by a couple thousand votes. However, after two independent candidates were dropped from the race, their second choice votes were redistributed and the Democrat won by a few thousand.

Following the election, there was a call to repeal Legislative Document 1083 (LD 1083), which established ranked choice voting for presidential primaries and general elections in Maine. The veto referendum was filed by Demi Kouzounas, chairperson of the Maine Republican Party, but ultimately failed after some of the signatures collected on the referendum were invalidated by the Maine Supreme Judicial Court.

On Aug. 31, Alaska had its first ranked choice voting election for a seat in the U.S. House after Rep. Don Young died earlier this year. Three candidates, two Republicans and one Democrat, competed for the four-month term that ends this November.

The results were remarkable, in that, it was the first time in half a century that a Democrat had earned a seat in Alaska's House of Representatives. Similar to Maine, there has been backlash against the method following the results.

Following the race, Sarah Palin, one of the Republican nominees, posted a statement on Twitter casting blame on newly acquired method for the loss:

"The people of Alaska do not want the destructive Democrat agenda to rule our land and our lives, but that's what resulted from someone's experiment with this new crazy, convoluted, confusing ranked choice voting system," Palin said. "It's effectively disenfranchised 60% of Alaska voters."

Recently defeated Republican nominees are not the only people to challenge ranked choice voting.

Cambridge, Mass. has been using ranked-choice for city council and school committee since 1941 and for many decades remained the only city in the US that used it. Six other Massachusetts towns were using the system by 1947, but all except Cambridge abandoned it due to concerns about Communists being elected, according to a report by the Boston Globe.

"They would rather not have their voice heard as long as they can control voices that they don't like being heard," Billman said, while recounting the events that led up to his decision to leave the organization he'd founded just a year and a half earlier.

After wrapping up what he already considered to be a disappointing presentation for the Libertarian Board of Boulder, Billman was stopped by an angry woman.

"Let me get this straight. So this system is designed so that smaller parties can have representation and have their voices heard?"

"Yep."

"You mean like Nazis?"

Billman insisted he was only trying to get more representation for third party and unaffiliated voters on the ballot, but it didn't resonate. It wasn't the method itself, or even a particular party, but peoples' openness to new ideas that led to Billman's complete departure from politics and society.

"That was a big 'aha' moment for me," he explained.

Ranked choice was used in the 1975 mayoral race in Ann Arbor, Mich. where the first Black mayor, Albert H. Wheeler was elected. However, 62% of voters voted to repeal it in a low-turnout special election petitioned by city Republicans.

Aspen passed ranked choice voting in November 2007. Aspen's first elections with ranked choice voting and the new city council system were on May 5, 2009. The number of voters was the highest in the history of Aspen elections.

However, 168 "spoiled ballots" were tossed by election judges that day, which city officials and the Aspen Times disputed. Despite what some considered a successful first attempt, voters rejected ranked choice voting and returned to the traditional system in 2010.

Many point out the potential for an increase in spoiled ballots as a result of ranked choice voting. Since voters must rank their choices instead of choosing just one, there's more opportunity for voter error that leads to votes going uncounted or "spoiled."

Similarly, some critics argue that its novel and complex nature might exacerbate socioeconomic disparities in voter participation, saying that: “If voters have difficulty understanding how ranked choice voting works, they may be discouraged from participating in ranked choice voting elections.”

Seth Masket, a professor of political science and director of the Center on American Politics at the University of Denver, has mixed feelings about ranked choice voting. “I think the main downside of it is that it actually asks more work from voters and expects them to actually know a bit more about the candidates and to, you know, to be able to rank them,” Masket said.

Both Masket and Templin pointed out that ranked choice voting could also prevent spoiled ballots in some instances, like the 2020 Primaries. It was the eve of Super Tuesday when two candidates from the 2020 Democratic Presidential race dropped out. Millions of mail-in ballots had already been cast, and the voices of those who voted for the dropped candidates were lost.

“And it's not unusual to have candidates drop out on the eve of Super Tuesday,” Templin added.

However, Masket believes that polarization is the greatest threat to ranked choice voting, “If it becomes a partisan issue, that is, you know, if it's generally like Democratic leaning areas that do it out of fairness, and it's Republican areas that reject it as being somehow wrong, that'll really limit it.”

And the truth is, Americans have rarely been as polarized as they are today.

A study from Pew Research from March 2022 notes that Democrats and Republicans are farther apart ideologically today than at any time in the past 50 years. Adding that, both parties have moved further away from the ideological center since the early 1970s.

This makes finding common ground, even in the face of a common enemy, especially challenging – if not impossible. “It's very rare that Democrats take one position and Republicans don’t immediately take the other, and vice versa,” Masket noted.

Race, religion and ideology now align more with partisan identity than in the past, which can make political disagreements begin to feel morally offensive. A recent poll revealed that 48% of respondents said knowing a person's political alliance would be able to decide whether or not someone's a good person.

While there's nothing wrong with disagreement in politics, these "mental shortcuts" lead to snap judgments that replace the need for debate and understanding; as seen in Billman's case being accused of rallying in support of the Nazi Party.

"It definitely stung," Billman admitted. "It stung to the point where I stopped trying to change anybody."

No matter how you feel about Billman's resignation, it prompts us to consider if our stubbornness has grown past the point of no return.

In 2013, *Wired* consulted a variety of psychologists and past studies to answer this question. Its conclusion, in many ways, supported Billman's frustrations. In fact, one study pointed out that challenging political misconceptions with opposing facts can trigger what's called the "backfiring effect," that makes the original belief even stronger.

However, this is not a dead end. As the article noted, change is not impossible – it's just gradual.

"It's a story of planting seeds, but ultimately not tending my garden," Billman said, regarding his decision to exit the fight and leave the grassroots organization behind.

Ranked choice voting, despite misgivings at the national and state level, continues to grow at the local level. Nearly 58% percent of voters said yes to Fort Collins Ballot Question 2C as of Nov. 11, according to Colorado Public Radio.

If the initiative passes, Fort Collins will be the largest city in Colorado to implement ranked choice voting and all regular city elections, including mayoral and city council elections, will be conducted under the new system by 2025.

While the political climate continues to challenge Ranked Choice Voting for Colorado's efforts, its grassroots seem strong enough to ride out the storm.