Support for Ranked Choice Voting and Partisanship of Voters: Results from a Na ing**CA**Ñ**E**(37)o004**F**0(2hT16.**S**16 1615 Td**(**a**)**6.1 V)6fV-30o00o7 (i)

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Abstract:

This paper presents the results from a national survey experiment that tests how voters evaluate alternative voting rules, like ranked choice voting (RCV). We examine data from the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), which allows for comparisons across racial groups. The ability to have one's vote transfer to a second or third choice candidate is a major selling point of RCV. However, there is little direct evidence indicating whether American voters really like this feature. We find that a short explanation of the vote transfer properties of RCV does not increase public support for the voting rule. Furthermore, when given a choice between the single and ranked voting methods, a large majority among four racial groups prefers the status quo option of the single vote. However, Latino, Black, and Asian American respondents evaluate ranked choice voting more positively and express a stronger preference for RCV than White respondents. Furthermore, communicating that RCV helps elect more women and people of color increases preferences for RCV among Latino, Black, and Asian American voters, but not among White voters. Finally, partisanship is an inconsistent predictor of support for voting rules across racial groups. Jurisdictions adopting ranked choice voting will need sustained voter education campaigns to overcome initial public resistance to new voting rules.

Introduction

presidential candidates. We use a within-subjects design that asks each subject to vote under each voting rule with the same set of candidates. This experience may help voters better understand how voting rules differ.

In this paper, we use this national survey sample to examine whether voters prefer RCV to traditional plurality methods of voting. This study also examines the relationship between voters' race and support for RCV. We find that a long explanation of the vote transfer properties of RCV does not increase public support for the voting rule. We also find that voters prefer plurality voting rules to RCV, regardless of race. However, Latino, Black, and Asian American respondents express stronger support for RCV than White respondents. Furthermore, a message noting that RCV helps elect more women and people of color increases support for RCV among Latino, Black, and Asian American respondents, but not among White respondents. In contrast, arguing that RCV confuses some voters only reduces support for RCV by a small amount that does not vary by race.

Factors Influencing Public Evaluations of Ranked Choice Voting

Electoral Impacts

There are several factors that are likely to influence public opinion toward RCV. Much of the research on RCV examines broader impacts of this method on the political system; these impacts include candidate emergence, campaign strategy, and governance. For instance, scholars have documented a campaign effect or the way that RCV electoral systems impact candidate campaigns. Studies show that RCV elections tend to have less negativity and more civility from candidates, which voters favor (Mauter 2014; Robb 2011; Donovan 2014; Donovan, Tolbert, and Gracey 2016; Kropf 2021). Evidence from

voters have grown accustomed to making one choice under plurality voting rules. Taking full advantage of the ability to rank multiple candidates means that voters need to gather more information about the candidates running in an election. The increased complexity of the ballot and the higher information costs may disproportionately disenfranchise inexperienced low income voters and others lacking in resources. Some are less experienced with the voting process and may not receive proper poll worker assistance, and those voters may be vulnerable to errors when the ballot is confusing.

We have seen this before in American elections using plurality rules. For example, when voting machines or ballots have confusing features, they tend to create more voting errors particularly among low income and minority voters (Herrnson et al. 2008; Kropf and Kimball 2012). Furthermore, other recent election reforms intended to better serve voters, such as expanded early voting, may have worsened socioeconomic biases in voter turnout (Berinsky 2005; Rigby and Springer 2011). Perhaps RCV rules will have a similar impact on voters.

From a broad vantage point, it appears that voters are able to comply with ranked choice voting rules. In places that have adopted RCV rules, a majority of voters typically rank more than one candidate, unless a candidate or party instructs supporters to only rank one candidate (Mauter 2014; Neely and McDaniel 2015; Burnett and Kogan 2015; Alvarez, Hall, and Levin 2018; Gillespie, Levan, and Maisel 2019). Most voters also rank candidates in ways that reflect rational candidate preferences (Alvarez, Hall, and Levin 2019). In addition, in places using RCV voters indicate that they generally understand the voting rules (Neely, Blash, and Cook 2005; Schultz and Rendahl 2010; Mauter 2014; Donovan, Tolbert, and Gracey 2019; Gillespie, Levan, and Maisel 2019). Furthermore, an

Americans do not like confusing or overly bureaucratic rules (Herd and Moynihan 2019), we

hypothesize that arguments about the confusing nature of RCV will reduce public support for the

voting reform (H_3).

Existing Studies on Public Support for Ranked Choice Voting

      The research measuring public support for RCV is limited, given that the use of

survey experiment found that having people participate in a candidate ranking task did not

increase their support for RCV (Nielson 2017). Furthermore, Nielson finds that voters did

not think that RCV rules provided fairer outcomes than a plurality election system. Given

that the initial study in San Francisco only examined voters' opinions in a single

jurisdiction, these findings may be limited by local context. Additionally, the Nielson

study provides an experimental design using fictional candidates in a hypothetical

election; this experimental design is illuminating, though it may not be generalizabl di

simulated elections, Cerrone and McClintock find that voter satisfaction is lowest under

RCV rules. (2021). Therefore, we also

support for RCV across racial subgroups (Blais et al 2021; Anthony and Kimball 2021).

Overall, there do not appear to be major racial differences in voter evaluations of RCV.

Ballot Errors

The evidence on the relationship between race and voter confusion in RCV

systems is mixed. In their study of RCV in San Francisco, Neely, Blash, and Cook (2005)

found that in some elections, low-income and minority voters were less likely to use all

the available rankings (Neely, Blash, and Cook 2005; Schultz and Rendahl 2010). Black

respondents also reported higher levels of confusion and lower levels of knowledge about

RCV systems than white voters (Neely, Blash, and Cook 2005). Some studies also found

higher error rates in minority precincts in San Francisco RCV elections (Neely and Blash

2008; Neely and McDaniel 2015). Another study of Minneapolis RCV elections, however

found no racial or income disparities in overvotes after the adoption of RCV voting rules

(Kimball and Anthony 2016). More recent studies are mixed. Coll (2021) finds no

significant racial differences in abilities to rank candidates, while Maloy and Ward (2021)

find that Asian and Black voters are more likely to make ballot mistakes than white

voters. Studies of voter understanding of RCV rules tend to find minimal differences

across racial groups (Donovan et al. 2019). Given the mixed results, it is possible that

racial and ethnic minorities may be more concerned about the confusing nature of RCV

than white voters.

Representation

There is also some debate about whether ranked choice voting improves political representation of racial and ethnic minority voters. As noted above, John and colleagues (2018) answer in the affirmative. In another study, Gerdus Benadè, Ruth Buck, Moon Duchin, Dara Gold, and Thomas Weighill employ data from judicial elections in four municipalities in the United States. The scholars find that compared with plurality systems, "STV systems tend to elect candidates of choice for people of color (POC) in proportion to POC population" (2021: 1). The study is limited however, in its regional scope, as well as in the fact that voter turnout in judicial elections is lower than other types of elections. On the other hand,

2020). However, the adoption of RCV in some other locations (such as Alaska and Utah),

provide more complicated cases of partisan support for the new voting rules. Existing

evidence is mixed on this hypothesis. Some find stronger support for RCV among

Democrats than Republicans (McCarthy and Santucci 2021; Anthony and Kimball 2021),

while another finds little to no relationship between party affiliation and preferences for

ranked choice voting (Blais et al. 2021). Nevertheless, we hypothesize that Democrats

will express a stronger preference for RCV than Republicans (H_6).

Data and Methods

We continue efforts to use a within-subjects design to evaluate voter preferences for

different voting rules (e.g., Blais et al. 2021). A within-subjects design asks each subject to vote

under each voting rule with the same set of candidates, giving voters a more direct comparison of

different voting rules. This may help voters better understand how voting rules differ.

Our data for this study is from the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey

(CMPS). The CMPS is a large sample survey and includes large subsamples of Latinos, African

Americans, and Asian Americans (with close to 4,000 for each group).[1] One advantage of the

CMPS is that it allows us to examine whether evaluations of voting rules, and voting behavior on

each method, vary across racial and ethnic subgroups. The survey was completed online in a

respondent self-administered format and was in the field from April 2, 2021 to August 25, 2021.

Our set of questions on the CMPS started with a voting task asking respondents to choose among

potential candidates for president in 2024. We used a within-subjects design that asked

respondents to vote using single vote (plurality) and then again using ranked vote methods and

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[1]

then we asked respondents how satisfied they were with each voting method. For each voting method, respondents first completed a task with four candidates, and then they completed a task with ten candidates.

To test whether the description of voting methods influences voter evaluations, we varied the description of plurality and RCV rules before each voting task. Previous survey experiments tend to give respondents simple one-sentence descriptions of each voting rule. We test whether informing voters about how ballots are counted under each voting rule influences their assessments. As summarized in Table 1, one group received short descriptions of plurality and RCV rules (as in many previous studies) while the other group received longer and more complete descriptions of the voting rules. We borrowed language from previous studies and voter guides in the United States for the longer description of RCV.

Table 1. Conditions for First Survey Experiment (CMPS)

Condition	Single vote	Ranked vote
Short description	One way of voting involves a single vote, in which you vote for one candidate.	

Table 2. Conditions for Second Survey Experiment (CMPS)

Message	Preference Question
Control	Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?
Promote diversity	Studies show that the ranked vote helps elect more women and people of color. Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?
Voter confusion	Studies show that the ranked vote is confusing for some people. Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?

Results

We first examine the satisfaction ratings given by respondents immediately after voting

with each rule. Respondents were asked to report their satisfaction on a scale from 0 (not at all

satisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). Table 3 compares the mean satisfaction ratings of each voting

respondents rated the single vote method only slightly less favorably than other subgroups.

Table 3. Mean Satisfaction Ratings of Voting Rules

	Respondent Primary Race			
Voting Rule	**White** (N=3,002)	**Latino** (N=4,006)	**Black** (N=4,005)	**AAPI** (N=3,975)

When we examine the impact of question wording treatments

Table 7 also shows that partisanship is inconsistent as a predictor of preferences for ranked choice voting. We observe the hypothesized relationship only for White and AAPI respondents. Among White respondents, the preference for RCV is 20 points higher among strong Democrats than strong Republicans. Among Asian American respondents, the preference for RCV is 12 points higher among strong Democrats than strong Republicans. However, partisanship is unrelated to voting rule preferences for Black and Latino respondents. Finally, sex and registration status are weak and inconsistent predictors of voting rule preferences.

Conclusion

As more American states and cities consider ranked choice voting rules, it is important to evaluate RCV voting against the existing plurality rules. Multiple surveys show that Americans rate the single vote method more favorably than ranked choice voting. Furthermore, when given a choice between the single and ranked voting methods, a large majority prefer4dd votu10 (e)41 (.)]TJ34.9atu4d

op (e)-6 (t)-2hb4 Tw [(TJ0 -H2P<d78 -1.8 th)2nong AsA1 Tf-26.634 Tw -1.As AsAs

White voters than other racial groups. However, a message noting that ranked choice

voting is confusing, one of the main arguments made by opponents, does not reduce

public preferences for RCV by any more than a small amount.

We also find that a brief explanation of the vote transfer features of ranked choice, and

the non-majoritarian characteristic of plurality rules, does nothing to increase support for ranked

choice voting. It is a challenge to explain to voters, in a sentence or two, the problems associated

with plurality voting rules, like the "spoiler" effect of third-party candidates, or the advantages

associated with alternative rules. Repeated communications are likely needed for this

information to sink in. Thus, building understanding and support for ranked choice voting rules

likely requires a more sustained campaign. For example, a voter education program including

voter guides or other materials which voters can consult multiple times, seems to boost support

for ranked choice voting (Shineman 2016; Boudreau et al. 2020). There is a need for more

comparative studies of ranked choice voting – comparing the experience with RCV to the same

or similar jurisdictions using plurality rules.

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Appendix – Question Wording (2020 CMPS)

Voting Task – Ranked Vote

Q195. "There are different ways of voting, and we would like to know how you would vote with two different ways of voting."

[Short Description]

"One way of voting uses a ranked vote, in which you rank candidates to indicate your first choice, your second choice, and so on."

[Long Description]

"One way of voting uses a ranked vote, in which you rank candidates to indicate your first choice, your second choice, and so on. If a candidate receives a majority of first choice votes then that person wins. If no candidate has a majority of votes then the last place candidate is eliminated and that candidate's first choice votes are transferred to the next choice. So, if your preferred candidate is eliminated then your vote is transferred to your next choice. This process of eliminating candidates and transferring votes continues until a candidate has a majority of votes and that person wins the election."

"For example, if the 2024 presidential election was today which candidate would you choose? Indicate your first choice in the first column, your second choice in the second column, and so on." [Randomize order of candidates]

[4 candidates]

Candidate	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice
Donald Trump, Jr., Republican			
Nikki Haley, former Republican governor of South Carolina and ambassador to the UN			
Andrew Cuomo, Democratic governor of New York			
Stacey Abrams, former Democratic leader in the Georgia House of Representatives			

[10 candidates]

Candidate	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
Donald Trump, Jr., Republican					
Nikki Haley, former Republican governor of South Carolina and ambassador to the UN					
Marco Rubio, Republican Senator from Florida					
Mike Pence, Republican Vice President					
Ron DeSantis, Republican governor of Florida					
Kamala Harris, Democratic Senator from California					
Pete Buttigieg, former Democratic mayor of South Bend, Indiana					
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Democratic representative from New York					
Andrew Cuomo, Democratic governor of New York					
Stacey Abrams, former Democratic leader in the Georgia House of Representatives					

Q196. "On a scale of 0 to 10, how satisfied are you with this way of voting?"

[Widget 0=Not at all satisfied – 10=Very Satisfied]

Voting Task – Single Vote

Q197.

[Short Description]

"One way of voting involves a single vote, in which you vote for one candidate."

[Long Description]

"One way of voting involves a single vote, in which you vote for one candidate. The candidate that receives the most votes wins the election, eve

Q199. Voting System Preference (Split A - no frame)

"Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?"

1. Single vote
2. Ranked vote

Q200. Voting System Preference (positive RCV frame)

"Studies show that the ranked vote helps elect more women and people of color. Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?"

1. Single vote
2. Ranked vote

Q201. Voting System Preference (negative RCV frame)

"Studies show that the ranked vote is confusing for some people. Now that you have used both of them, which way of voting do you prefer?"

1. Single vote
2. Ranked vote

Q202. Participation

"Given your answer to the previous question, would you participate in the following activities if the voting system fit your preference? (select all that apply)"

1. Run for political office
2. Encourage someone you know to run for office

3. Volunteer for a candidate or political party

Table A1. Mean Values for Independent Variables

Variable	White