Ranked Choice Voting:

A threat to our electoral process

Michigan Fair Elections Institute

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Ranked Choice Voting:

A Threat to Our Electoral Process

A review of proposed policy and summary of objections

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Testimonials

Michigan Fair Elections Institute has published a spectacular white paper detailing concerns about Rank Choice Voting. The MFEI's white payer on the RCV issue is timely for Michigan because of proposed constitutional ballot questions in 2026 on the topic. Rallying against RCV constitutional amendments in Michigan is our patriotic duty.

---Erick G. Kaardal, election integrity attorney
Partner, Mohrman, Kaardal and Erickson, P.A.

Ranked Choice Voting is an elitist scheme that adds unnecessary complexity to our election system, particularly harming minority voters who already face barriers to participation. According to MIT's 2022 Election Data & Science Lab survey, 12.1% of non-voters cited 'not knowing enough about the choices' as their primary reason for not voting. How does adding layers of complexity encourage participation from citizens who already feel uninformed?

Research by Princeton's Nolan McCarty confirms that RCV's ballot exhaustion problem is 'concentrated in minority electoral precincts,' meaning minority voters lose influence precisely when the system claims to help them. We need voting systems that welcome all Americans to participate, not complicated schemes that drive hardworking citizens away from the polls and silence their voices in our democracy."

--Cleta Mitchell, Esq., Founder / Chairman
Election Integrity Network

I have worked with groups all over the country and this white paper about Ranked Choice Voting is one of the best pieces of work I have seen. I highly recommend reading and distributing this to all of Michigan and beyond. It is well researched and highly credible. Ranked Choice Voting would be a disaster in Michigan.

--Phil Izon, Author
Ranked Choice Voting repeal effort in 2022-2024 in Alaska.

As a former Maine Town Clerk, I witnessed RCV's pitfalls in 2018—a costly, confusing process that required secure transport of ballots to Augusta for days of centralized tabulation, raising chain-of-custody concerns and eroding voter trust. Despite promises of majority wins and positive campaigns, RCV increased costs, fostered confusion, and discarded votes. With states like Florida and Tennessee banning RCV, Michigan would do well to consider this report and preserve transparent, trustworthy elections.

--Sharon P. Bemis, President
Election Integrity Network

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Preface

The Ranked Choice Voting Gimmick

As the chief election official for over 122,000 residents in my county, I cannot support a system that discards some voters' ballots to create a winner.

After the Michigan's November 2022 General Election, different campaigns petitioned for recounts of Proposals 2 and 3 in targeted precincts throughout the state, including four in Allegan County. Following the statewide recount request, the County Election Division performed post-election audits including a hand count of votes from five jurisdictions (some randomly chosen, some specifically requested by stakeholders who had questions about results). Between the recounts and the post-election audits, more than 14,000 ballots were hand counted and reviewed with the naked eye. Among the 14,000, there was a discrepancy of only one vote from the Election Night tabulation and the hand counts.

This achievement demonstrates the reliability of our election procedures. It is testament to our hardworking clerks and the diligence of our very thoughtful election inspectors.

When I certify our election workers, I tell them that their job "is to make sure that every legally registered U.S. citizen who lives in that jurisdiction has the right to cast a ballot and that their vote counts no more and no less than anyone else who casts a ballot in Allegan County."

A proposed amendment to the Michigan Constitution would change that promise. In fact, under the change, some people's votes would count more than others. The scheme is called Ranked Choice Voting (RCV), and coupled with the Instant Runoff Voting movement, it proposes to produce candidates who have a broader base of support (50% +1) versus Michigan's current system that requires a plurality (or first past the post—like a horse race) to win.

RCV supporters claim that your life and mine are adversely affected when a candidate is elected with less than half of the vote. Those supporters are pushing a system that would allow voters to "rank" a ballot's candidates in the order of their preference and allow voting machines to narrow down those preferences to arrive at a candidate who has at least 50% +1 of the vote.

Even that so-called majority, however, is misleading. To have the "majority" of votes, tabulating machines will have eliminated the ballots of anyone whose candidate did not finish among the top vote getters and who did not want to list preferred candidates beyond their number one choice. This elimination of votes (supporters prefer to say your vote was "exhausted" – either way, your vote is not counted) is the Instant Runoff. Voting machines can perform multiple Instant Runoffs in one election to create a winner, so that winning 50% +1 is not a majority of those who originally participated in the election.

As the chief election official for over 122,000 residents in my county, I cannot support a system that discards some voters' ballots to create a winner.

In the 2024 federal election, Michigan voters cast 111,017 votes for candidates from the Libertarian Party, Green Party, Natural Law Party, the U.S. Taxpayers Party, two independents, and four write-in candidates. These voters are sending Republicans and Democrats a clear message. They knew what they were doing when they chose to mark an oval further down on the ballot. Their voices deserve to be heard.

A system like RCV that needs to eliminate the votes of our friends, neighbors, and family members to achieve the illusion of a majority vote is a lie to the electorate that will create more doubts about election results than people already have.

If ranked choice voting sounds difficult to understand, imagine an election worker trying to explain to a voter that he or she can rank multiple preferences beyond their number one choice, but that only one candidate will ultimately win. The potential for mistakes and misunderstandings is significant.

The most complex ballot Michigan voters currently deal with is the August primary ballot in even-numbered years on which voters can vote to nominate candidates from one political party for the general election ballot. If voters crossover and vote for candidates from both parties, they spoil their ballot and none of their votes count. In one Allegan County Absent Voter Counting Board in August 2024, election officials estimated that 40 percent of ballots were spoiled from voters crossing over. RCV would make voting even more challenging.

Complex ballots reduce voter participation. Finally, the more than 14,000 ballots hand counted in public view in Allegan County after the 2022 General Election revealed only one vote that was not properly counted. That recount allowed Michigan voters to exercise their right to see the ballots and markings in person and compare the hand count to the tabulator results.

RCV would compromise that right to a paper ballot recount in your home county and would delay election results. Tabulators would eliminate many people's votes and produce the illusion of a majority winner.

Please educate your family, friends, and neighbors. Talk to your local clerks. Join me in opposing any voting system that eliminates the votes of our fellow Michiganders.

Sincerely,

Bob Genetski
Allegan County Clerk – Register of Deeds

About MFEI

The Michigan Fair Elections Institute, founded in 2022, emerged from citizens' concerns about election integrity and transparency. What began as a grassroots effort has grown into Michigan's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to election oversight and voter education.

Our approach combines rigorous research with practical action. We don't just identify problems—we work directly with local clerks, train volunteers, and implement solutions. From cleaning voter rolls to educating underserved communities, MFEI operates where policy meets practice.

MFEI is strictly nonpartisan, focusing on processes rather than politics. Our 2,000+ volunteers span diverse backgrounds, united in a commitment to transparent, accountable elections. We believe informed citizens are the foundation of our constitutional republic.

As a 501(c)(3) educational organization, MFEI relies entirely on volunteer efforts and donor support. Every contribution directly funds election oversight, voter education, and the tools local communities need to strengthen the integrity of their elections' processes.

Please subscribe to MFEI's website today for daily updates.

No one can do everything. But everyone can do something.

Join our team of amazing volunteers. Become involved.

To volunteer, simply select the role you prefer, then either click the button to complete the Volunteer Interest form or fill in the Volunteer form below the list of roles. Someone will contact you.

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Foreword

In every generation, the preservation of our constitutional republic rests upon the integrity of its elections. Free and fair elections are the lifeblood of self-government, the essential means by which "we the people"—those to whom all political power rightfully belongs—peaceably choose our leaders and hold them accountable under the rule of law. When electoral integrity is compromised, the legitimacy of governance erodes, trust in public institutions collapses, and the delicate balance of ordered liberty envisioned by our Founders is imperiled.

It is within this context that the present work, *Ranked Choice Voting: A Threat to Our Electoral Process*, assumes its significance. The analysis offered here is not a partisan appeal, but a sober examination of a proposed change to our election system that carries profound implications for the durability of constitutional good governance. Proposals like ranked choice voting may be advanced under the banner of reform, but the test of any change must be measured against its effect on core constitutional principles: transparency, accountability, equal treatment under the law, and the free, unimpeded ability of every qualified citizen to cast a meaningful ballot.

Throughout history, America's constitutional order has survived only because citizens—mindful of their responsibility as stewards of liberty—have been vigilant in guarding the processes by which leaders are chosen. The Framers understood that election integrity is inseparable from the survival of the republic. Our political system rests on the "consent of the governed," and that consent can only be maintained when the governed are confident their votes are counted honestly and their voices are heard without dilution or manipulation.

This Report's meticulous research demonstrates that ranked choice voting, far from strengthening the voice of the electorate, introduces unnecessary complexity, diminishes transparency, and increases the risk of disenfranchisement. By obscuring the counting process, elevating candidates without genuine majority support, and weakening mechanisms of accountability, such a system threatens the very consent of the governed upon which our constitutional order depends.

Good governance in a constitutional republic demands election laws that the average citizen can understand, trust, and verify. So-called "reforms" that undermine these virtues, however well-intentioned, weaken the foundation of self-government. As citizens, scholars, and policymakers, we bear a solemn duty to ensure that every structural change to our electoral process fortifies—not fractures—the principles that secure our liberty.

May the pages that follow equip you with the knowledge necessary to assess ranked choice voting with discernment, and may they remind us all that freedom endures only when each generation refuses to surrender the integrity of the vote.

— Hon. William Wagner
Distinguished Professor Emeritus (Constitutional Law)
Former Federal Judge, United States Courts

Executive Summary

Ranked-choice voting is coming to Michigan...again. This report briefly examines the history of ranked-choice voting (RCV) in Michigan, the United States, and Europe, with an eye to the implication of Rank MI Vote's present ballot initiative seeking to enshrine the practice in Michigan's State Constitution.

Ranked Choice Voting: A Threat to Our Electoral Process lays out six key objections to the RCV system and its internal workings. It contains corroborating research, data, and statistics from peer-reviewed academic journals, top policy think-tanks, and research from respected institutions like Harvard University, Cornell University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Chicago, and the London School of Economics.

- ❖ RCV disenfranchises voters and leads to lower turnout, particularly among minority communities, and may lower outcome satisfaction overall.

- ❖ As many as one-in-four ballots could effectively be "discarded" before the final vote is tallied.

- ❖ RCV's internal organization is susceptible to fraud and the establishment of perverse incentives, in addition to compromising the secret ballot. RCV increases the difficulty of conducting traditional manual recounts and makes forensic audits nearly impossible, decreasing accountability and popular trust.

- ❖ A majority of real-world RCV elections do not elect a winner with more than 50% support. In addition, RCV's organization may lead to political polarization and an overall lack of consensus.

- ❖ RCV abolishes the traditional referendum that run-off elections provide, leaving voters fewer ways to express their developing perspectives.

- ❖ Localities that have implemented RCV have experienced higher administrative burdens and greater fiscal costs.

At the end of the day, the paramount political principle of prudence dictates that any attempts to implement RCV should be rejected *prima facie*, considering its innate shortcomings discussed herein. Michiganders deserve honest and fair elections, rather than ranked choice voting's systemic complexity

Introduction and Background

The Michigan Fair Elections Institute (MFEI) is pleased to present this white paper, Ranked Choice Voting: A Threat to Our Electoral Process.

Starting in November 2023, MFEI's Ranked Choice Voting Committee, led by Co-Chairs Darlene Hennessy and Jacky Eubanks met regularly to investigate Ranked Choice Voting. The committee, working hand in hand with experts across the nation, has created resolutions and palm cards, webpages and articles, presentations and now this white paper—all to educate the public on the RCV.

This introduction, important enough to constitute an objection, gives the history and background of ranked choice voting in Michigan, America, and Europe. It also provides an in-depth explanation of RCV's internal mechanism, with an overview of implications to be discussed later.

Believe it or not, ranked choice voting, or RCV, is not a new proposal within Michigan. *Rank MI Vote*, the ballot question committee advocating for an RCV proposal in 2026, first organized in 2021 but ultimately failed to achieve sufficient support to put forward its campaign in time for the 2022 election.[1] But even before then—decades before, in fact—RCV was put to the test locally in Michigan. In 1974, the City of Ann Arbor adopted RCV for mayoral elections thanks to an alliance between Democrats and the outsider "Human Rights Party" in 1974, fearing that Republicans "would get the most votes" otherwise.[2] Residents repealed the unpopular process in the next election cycle (1976), with the support of 62% of voters.[3] RCV's unpopularity in Michigan, however remained. A June 2025 Glengariff survey found that 65% of Michiganders say they oppose the system.[4]

RCV's unpopularity is hardly unique to Michigan. As of June 2025, no less than 17 states have banned the use of RCV in their elections, a remarkable number since the first statewide RCV prohibitions were instituted in 2022.[5] In fact, no bill authorizing statewide use of RCV has been

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[1] Trent England, "Ranked-Choice Voting Stumbles in Michigan," *Honest Elections Project,* https://stoprcv.com/research/ranked-choice-voting-stumbles-in-michigan (May 2025).

[2] (N.A.) "The Failed Experiment of Ranked Choice Voting: A Case Study of Maine and analysis of 96 other Jurisdictions," *The Maine Policy Institute* and *The Alaska Policy Forum*, https://alaskapolicyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020-10-APF-Ranked-Choice-Voting-Report.pdf, (2020), P. 24.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] See https://bridgemi.com/michigan-government/ranked-choice-voting-what-know-about-michigan-ballot-initiative/.

[5] Briana Ryan, "Iowa Becomes the Sixth State to Ban Ranked-Choice Voting This Year," *Ballotpedia,* https://news.ballotpedia.org/2025/06/05/iowa-becomes-the-sixth-state-to-ban-ranked-choice-voting-this-year/ (June 2025).

enacted in any state since Hawaii's adoption of the practice for "certain elections" in 2022.[6] RCV's implementation at a local level across the U.S., however, predates the current debate by more than a century.

The push to adopt the earliest U. S. forms of RCV can be traced back to the Socialist Party platform of 1892.[7] In 1915, Ashtabula, Ohio, became "the first place in the United States to [adopt] RCV."[8] From there, RCV spread quickly throughout much of Ohio, moving on to towns in Colorado, California, Connecticut, New York, and surprisingly, Kalamazoo, Michigan.[9] In Kalamazoo, Progressive activists successfully advocated its implementation in 1918, but in 1919, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled the system "unconstitutional" and allegedly "communist."[10]

By 1947, 24 municipalities had implemented RCV.[11] Enthusiasm for the system quickly evaporated, however, as the system failed to deliver practical results corresponding to its theorized benefits.

Throughout the 1950s, RCV repeals gathered momentum.[12] By 1962, only one city in the entire U.S. retained RCV: Cambridge Massachusetts, where a "coalition initially dominated by Harvard elites and opposed by working-class immigrants" successfully preserved the system as a lone holdout.[13] Then, San Francisco adopted the system and conducted its first RCV election in 2004.[14] [15]

As of July 2025, no less than 39 U.S. localities had reversed their use of RCV after enacting it in prior elections.[16] In Europe, numerous cities and countries have repealed RCV variants in favor of

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[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Aiden Calvelli, "The Lost Left of Proportional Representation," *Harvard University Law Review*, https://lpe.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Aidan-Calvelli-LPE-Writing-Prize-2024-The-Lost-Left-of-Proportional-Representation.pdf (May 2024), P. 21.

[8] *Ibid.* P. 4. Calvelli writes further, "beginning in 1892, the Socialist Labor Party (and later the Socialist Party) endorse[d] Proportional Representation, (the earliest form of RCV in America), in every national convention through the 1930s." The Socialists were joined early-on by "Progressive" organizations, but "local socialists and unions… [remained] key parts of adoption coalitions in nearly every city" that adopted RCV's precursor in the early 20th century America. *Ibid.* Pp. 7, 11.

[9] Aiden Calvelli, "The Lost Left of Proportional Representation," *Harvard University Law Review*, https://lpe.law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Aidan-Calvelli-LPE-Writing-Prize-2024-The-Lost-Left-of-Proportional-Representation.pdf (May 2024), P. 51.

[10] *Ibid,* Pp. 26-7. See also the Michigan Supreme Court majority opinion in *Wattles* v. *Upjohn*, 1919.

[11] *Ibid,* Pp. 37-8.

Ibid.

[13] *Ibid,* P. 24.

[14] *Ibid,* P. 45.

[15] See https://www.sf.gov/ranked-choice-voting, for a historical account of RCV adoption by the city.

[16] See https://ballotpedia.org/Academic_studies_on_ranked-choice_voting_(RCV).

simpler election organization methods.[17] The city of London, England, garnered particular attention when it rejected ranked choice organizing in 2022 in favor of a "first-past-the-post" mechanism, closely resembling Michigan's status quo.[18]

So, if RCV is so unpopular, why do proponents continue to advocate its implementation across the U.S.? Jason Snead, Executive Director of the 501(c)3 Honest Elections Project, has a theory. Snead proposes, "a small group of left-wing megadonors are pushing RCV as a way to drag politics to the left."[19] In 2024, he said, "noted liberal" donors such as "John and Laura Arnold collectively spent $100 million on ballot measures to bring RCV to six new states."[20]

Voters rejected them all, however, defeating ballot issues in the diverse states of "Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, and Oregon." But RCV proponents remain undeterred, having evidently set their sights on Michigan as their next target jurisdiction for implementing RCV.[21]

Setting aside partisan implications, however, the brute fact remains: RCV is detrimental to the functioning of our electoral system. The status quo in Michigan, known as "first-past-the-post" voting, is simple: The candidate—Republican, Democrat, or otherwise—with the most votes cast for him wins the election. The RCV amendment proposed in Michigan would upend this system. Through a mechanism known as instant-runoff voting, IRV, the new system of ranked choice would assemble the "preferences" through a computer tally (e.g., first, second, third, etc., choices of each voter). Then the system runs a tally to determine overall vote allocations to each candidate.

In the event that no candidate receives more than 50% of votes cast on first "preference," (which happens in a majority of real-world cases), the candidate with the fewest votes to his name is dropped from consideration, and the tabulation moves on to a new consideration of voter's second "preferences."[22] This process is then repeated as many times as needed in order to formulate a winner who has more than 50% of votes appearing in the present round of tabulation.

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[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Cf. Neil Johnston, "Voting Systems in the UK: Parliamentary Research Briefing," *House of Commons Parliamentary Library*, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04458/SN04458.pdf (July 2025), P. 21.

[19] Jason Snead, "Safeguarding our Elections: Critical Reforms to Secure Voter Integrity and Rebuild Confidence in American Election," *Honest Elections Project,* https://honestelections.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/February-2025-Safeguarding-Elections-Report.pdf, P. 3.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] Adam Graham-Squire and David McCune, "An Examination of Ranked Choice Voting in the United States, 2004-2022," published through Cornell University's *Arxiv* research outlet, https://arxiv.org/abs/2301.12075#, (2023), P. 11.

The obvious problem with this RCV approach is that, as will be discussed further in Objection II, the final winner of a ranked choice election may only be the second, third, or fourth choice of voters. In addition, RCV also finds itself plagued by susceptibility to the perverse incentives for candidate-splitting and corruption, as well as the fact that sometimes double-digit percentages of ballots are effectively not counted in later rounds of voting. [23] [24]

To summarize, ranked choice voting, RCV, is the name of the system proposed here in Michigan, while Instant-Runoff Voting, or IRV, is the mechanism which the proposed amendment seeks to implement. Both are problematic, and enacted in concert, their impact would be disastrous. Non-majority election winners, lower voter confidence and turnout rates, and higher risk of corruption and moral hazard are only a few of the many downsides that Michigan voters stand to face if RCV is codified in our state. [25]

Objection I: Voters Are Disenfranchised

RCV drives down voter turnout, increases ballot complexities, and disproportionately disenfranchises minority communities while contributing to overall negative effects.

Thanks to the Instant-Runoff mechanism built into the RCV amendment, ranked choice voting as a system of electoral organization tends to suppress voter turnout. This effect is particularly pronounced in minority communities, which many RCV proponents claim to support. San Francisco State University's Jason McDaniel, having assembled arguably the largest body of research on RCV's impact on voter turnout, has published analyses in the field for more than a decade.

In 2015, McDaniel's initial conclusions were published in the *Journal of Urban Affairs*. Based on an analysis of precinct-by-precinct racial group voter turnouts across five San Francisco mayoral elections between 1995 and 2011, McDaniel found that the complexity of RCV, organized via IRV,

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[23] Hans von Spakovsky and J. Christian Adams, "Ranked Choice Voting is a Bad Choice." *The Heritage Foundation Issue Brief* no. 4996, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/IB4996.pdf (2019).

[24] Craig M. Burnett and Vladimir Kogan, "Ballot and Voter 'Exhaustion' under Instant Runoff Voting: An examination of Four Ranked-Choice Elections." *The Journal of Electoral Studies*, vol. 37, (2015). From: https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/u.osu.edu/dist/e/1083/files/2014/12/ElectoralStudies-2fupfhd.pdf, P. 41. See also Nolan McCarty's analysis: https://electionconfidence.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/FINAL-RCV-study-1-10-24.pdf.

[25] For more on how RCV increases in particular "the likelihood of non-majority winners and votes going uncounted in the final tally," see Dana Guterman, "Does Ranked Choice Voting Create Barriers for Minority Voters?" *Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government*, *Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation,* https://ash.harvard.edu/articles/does-ranked-choice-voting-create-barriers-for-minority-voters/, (February 2025). For more on the other claims presented above, see further research in the "objections" section below.

"decreased turnout among [both] black and white voters," but exacerbated in particular "turnout disparities related to age and education in the population."[26] Final results showed "a[n] 18% decline in turnout among black voters," compared with a "16% decline in turnout among white voters" after the adoption of RCV, compared with pre-RCV rates.[27]

In a subsequent analysis presented at a 2019 University of Pennsylvania election reform conference, McDaniel quantified the impact of his initial findings upon voters of all races. Employing a differences-in-differences model to analyze turnout in over 200 cities from the early 1990s up through 2018, McDaniel found that "a significant decrease in voter turnout of approximately 3-5 percentage points [occurred] in RCV cities after the implementation of RCV."[28] McDaniel's research hardly stands alone. Several other academic sources offer additional observations that establish a further causality behind the effects that he observed.

In a February 2025 lecture at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, Nolan McCarty, Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Princeton University, cited disparately high rates of ballot exhaustion, also known as ballot elimination, as a key reason for depressed minority voter turnout even years into the implementation of RCV. As McCarty summarized in presenting his research, "ballot exhaustion was widespread, with…disparities in exhaustion rates across racial and ethnic groups. Districts with high concentrations of Asian, Hispanic, and other racial groups had consistently high exhaustion rates."[29] Nor was this effect primarily due to a lack of familiarity with the RCV system's IRV mechanism. As McCarty continued, "given prior research indicating that RCV's impact on candidate diversity tends to be limited and short-lived…these disparities could pose ongoing challenges for the system."[30]

A second key causality appears in a paper published by the Cato Institute examining the rate of ballot-marking errors occurring in jurisdictions that implemented RCV. Study authors Francis Neely and Jason McDaniel analyzed nearly two million individual ballots, in order to measure "the incidence of errors that disqualify a ballot from being counted after the adoption of ranked choice voting in the

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[26] Jason A. McDaniel, "Writing the Rules to Rank the Candidates: Examining the Impact of Instant-Runoff Voting on Racial Group Turnout in San Francisco Mayoral Elections," *The Journal of Urban Affairs,* 8, no. 3. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1111/juaf.12209. (2016).

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Jason A. McDaniel, "Electoral Rules and Voter Turnout in Mayoral Elections: An Analysis of Ranked-Choice Voting," presented at the University of Pennsylvania's *Election Systems, Reform, and Administration Conference*, July 2019. Available here: https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/web.sas.upenn.edu/dist/7/538/files/2019/07/McDaniel-RCV-Voter-Turnout-Revised-ESRA-2019.pdf.

[29] See https://ash.harvard.edu/articles/does-ranked-choice-voting-create-barriers-for-minority-voters/.

[30] See https://ash.harvard.edu/articles/does-ranked-choice-voting-create-barriers-for-minority-voters/.

sample jurisdiction of San Francisco. Neely and McDaniel found that disqualifying errors were committed "significantly more common in RCV elections than in [first-past-the-post] elections."[31]

The study's authors concluded, "it is highly likely that implementation of RCV will result in higher rates of ballot errors that cause individual ballots to be disqualified."[32] Researchers Stephen Pettigrew and Dylan Radley at the University of Pennsylvania conducted further analysis, and in March 2025 confirmed Neely and McDaniel's findings. "[I]n a typical ranked choice race, nearly 1 in 20 (4.8%) of voters improperly mark their ballot in at least one way."[33]

According to Pettigrew and Radley, votes in ranked choice races were consistently "about 10 times more likely to be rejected due to an improper mark than votes in non-ranked choice races."[34] Nor, in their analysis, did familiarity with the system appear to alleviate this sort of error. They noted San Francisco as an example. There, voters had used RCV since 2004, yet "the rejection rate is higher than in Alaska, where voters used RCV for the first time in 2022."[35]

Whether due to ballot exhaustion, systemic complexity causing rejections based on entry errors, or simple fatigue and lack of trust in the system as a whole, IRV-organized RCV has been shown to depress voter turnout, decrease minority participation, and build voter frustration across the political spectrum. RCV's real-world drawbacks outweigh its proposed theoretical benefits. It has no place in Michigan.

Objection II: Ballot Nullification Increased

If RCV is implemented, a startling number of ballots could be nullified—potentially as high as one-in-four ballots per election—when rates of ballot exhaustion/elimination and error-based rejection are combined. In past U.S. elections, RCV rates of ballot exhaustion alone have reached up to 53%.

The ranked choice voting (RCV) Amendment uses a method called Instant-Runoff Voting (IRV). In this system, ballots can be rejected at higher rates compared to other voting methods. This happens due to a problem called "ballot exhaustion." Ballot exhaustion occurs when a voter's rankings

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[31] See https://www.cato-unbound.org/2016/12/13/jason-mcdaniel/ranked-choice-voting-likely means-lower-turnout-more-errors/ (2016).

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] Stephen Pettigrew and Dylan Radley, "Overvotes, Overranks, and Skips: Mismarked and Rejected Votes in Ranked Choice Voting. Forthcoming in *The Journal of Political Behavior* (2025). Initial results available via https://ssrn.com/abstract=4670677, P. 1.

[34] *Ibid.* P. 1.

[35] *Ibid,* P. 16.

don't align with the system's requirements, causing a voter's ballot to be excluded during the repeated counting process of IRV.

Based on social-science model elections with five candidates, Hans von Spakovsky, Election Reform Manager for the Heritage Foundation, observed that "in races with multiple candidates, many voters do not rank all of the candidates." The impact of this, von Spakovsky explained, was that "in a race with five candidates…voters may rank only two candidates and ignore the three candidates they don't like. But, if the two ranked candidates are eliminated in the first two rounds of tabulation, those voters ballots are done, and they will have no say in the remaining rounds of tabulation."[36] The outcome of this, of course, is that candidates or parties declared "victorious" through ranked choice elections may not be the first, second, or even third choice of a majority of voters.

Von Spakovsky's initial model with five candidates proved quite conservative. Historical examples of RCV elections in San Francisco's 2010 mayoral primary involved 53% of ballots being "discarded" by the final round of tabulation.[37] Recent RCV elections, such as New York's 2021 mayoral primary, have involved more than ten candidates and triggered six rounds of instant-runoff tabulations, more than twice the number in Spakovsky's initial estimate.[38] [39] Accordingly, the problem of ballot nullification, or exhaustion/elimination, could potentially be higher than the initial estimate completed in 2019. In 2023, von Spakovsky arranged another analysis, based on a much larger body of RCV election data. He concluded, "nearly one in three voters do not rank multiple candidates in RCV elections," dramatically increasing the odds that a voter's ballot can be effectively discarded within any election.[40]

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[36] Hans von Spakovsky, "Ranked Choice Voting should be slotted dead last." *The Heritage Foundation,* https://www.heritage.org/election-integrity/commentary/ranked-choice-voting-should-be-slotted-dead-last-election-reform (2019).

[37] Gabrielle M. Etzel, "Ranked Choice Voting: A Disaster in Disguise," *The Foundation for Government Accountability*, https://web.archive.org/web/20220825164335/https://thefga.org/paper/ranked-choice-voting-a-disaster-in-disguise/, (2022).

[38] See https://ballotpedia.org/Mayoral_election_in_New_York,_New_York_%282021%29 for a list of candidates in New York's 2021 RCV election. At the peak of candidate entry, there were 13 Democratic and 2 Republican candidates on the ballot.

[39] The 2021 New York RCV election went on to have eight successive rounds of vote reallocation before a result was achieved. See the following document from the New York Board of Elections for confirmation of this: https://vote.nyc/sites/default/files/pdf/election_results/2021/20210622Primary%20Election/rcv/DEM%20Mayor%20Citywide.pdf.

[40] Hans von Spakovsky, "Ranked Choice Voting should be ranked dead last." *The Heritage Foundation*, https://www.heritage.org/election-integrity/report/ranked-choice-voting-should-be-ranked-dead-last-election-reform (2023). Importantly, this 'one-third' statistic has also been confirmed by the nonprofit FairVote (an RCV proponent), further testifying to its credibility. See https://fairvote.org/resources/data-on-rcv/#research_ballotuse.

Public-policy think tanks are not alone in observing the phenomenon of ballot exhaustion/elimination. Numerous academic researchers have also identified the same flaw. Professors Craig Burnett and Vladimir Kogan reviewed 600,000 votes cast using ranked choice voting in four local elections across the states of Washington and California. They found, "the winner in all four elections receive[d] less than a majority of the total votes cast."[41] Burnett and Kogan also found that the rate of ballot exhaustion was "high in each election, ranging [from] 9.6%–27.1%." Their findings, they said, raised "serious concerns about IRV" that "challenges a key argument made by the system's proponents."[42]

Princeton's Nolan McCarty surveyed 98 past RCV elections. His report, submitted to the U.S. District Court in Maine, concluded that in 15 of the elections surveyed, more than 20 percent of ballots were exhausted/eliminated, with noticeably higher rates of exhausted ballots among electorates with more elderly and non-college-educated voters.[43] Similarly, in Alaska's 2022 Congressional election (the state's first federal RCV election), one fifth (21%) of voters for third-place candidate Nick Begich did not list a second-place pick, meaning their votes did not count in the final results.[44]

A second cause of ballot nullification, individual entry error, also appears frequently in IRV-organized ranked choice elections. Due to the complex nature of RCV ballots, academic analyses report vast increases in the rate of errors occurring in IRV systems. University of Pennsylvania researchers Pettigrew and Radley, conducted a two-year empirical analysis of over "3 million cast-vote records representing over three-quarters of all Americans living in a jurisdiction that uses RCV." Pettigrew and Radley concluded in their final analysis that as of March 2025, "in a typical ranked choice race, nearly 1 in 20 (4.8%) voters improperly mark their ballot in at least one way."[45] In addition, Pettigrew and Radley observed that votes in ranked choice races were consistently "about 10 times more likely to be rejected due to an improper mark than votes in non-ranked choice races."[46] Nor did familiarity with the system appear to alleviate this sort of error. As the study's authors note, in San

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41 Craig M. Burnett and Vladimir Kogan, "Ballot and Voter 'Exhaustion' under Instant Runoff Voting: An examination of Four Ranked-Choice Elections." *The Journal of Electoral Studies*, vol. 37, (2015). From: https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/u.osu.edu/dist/e/1083/files/2014/12/ElectoralStudies-2fupfhd.pdf, P. 41.

42 *Ibid.*

43 See McCarty's final conclusions here: https://electionconfidence.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/FINAL-RCV-study-1-10-24.pdf, especially P. 1.

44 See the Honest Elections Project's case summary of the race here: https://www.honestelections.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/HEP-Ranked-Choice-Voting-Factsheet_2.pdf, P. 2.

45 Stephen Pettigrew and Dylan Radley, "Overvotes, Overranks, and Skips: Mismarked and Rejected Votes in Ranked Choice Voting. Forthcoming in *The Journal of Political Behavior* (2025). Initial results available via https://ssrn.com/abstract=4670677, P. 1.

46 *Ibid.* P. 1.

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Francisco, for example, where "voters have used RCV since 2004, the rejection rate is higher than Alaska, where voters used RCV for the first time in 2022."[47]

Importantly, Pettigrew and Radley's calculated rejection rates "d[id] not include uncounted ballots that were "exhausted" [as] including exhausted ballots would raise the rates reported...considerably."[48] By virtue of simple addition, between improper marking and ballot exhaustion, more than one in four, or greater than 25% of votes cast in an IRV-organized election could potentially have no effect in the final election results—a concerning conclusion that on its own raises significant questions about RCV's suitability for Michigan.

Objection III: Accountability Decreased. Corruption Risk Increased.

RCV, with its proposed instant-runoff voting (IRV) mechanism, has been found to be susceptible to fraud and to potentially create moral hazard through perverse incentives. Additionally, IRV can compromise the secrecy of ballots, potentially allowing votes to be linked individual voters after tabulation. RCV also makes traditional manual recounts and forensic audits more challenging, decreasing accountability and reducing administrative transparency.

The Instant-Runoff Voting (IRV) mechanism used in ranked choice voting (RCV) complicates ballot counting and reduces the transparency of auditing processes. Compared to the existing voting system, RCV may also increase the risk of fraud.

To address first the increased risk of corruption, in 2024, Cambridge University's *Journal of Political Analysis* published a study in which three MIT political scientists found that RCV was susceptible to fraud and manipulation from multiple angles. The study's authors, Jack Williams, Samuel Baltz, and Charles Steward III, focused specifically on the particular instant-runoff mechanism that RCV's proponents seek to implement in Michigan. The researchers concluded that IRV elections "both theoretically and empirically...revealed a security flaw."[49]

The study's analysis demonstrated that RCV instant-runoff elections created the potential to corrupt voting processes. The study also found that, in such a system, "it may be possible to violate the

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[47] *Ibid,* P. 16.
[48] *Ibid.* P. 14.
[49] Jack R. Williams, Samuel Baltz, Charles Stewart III. "Votes Can Be Confidently Bought in Some Ranked Ballot Elections, and What to Do about It." *Journal of Political Analysis* 32, No. 4, (2024). Pp. 463, 481.

secret vote."[50] The study's authors concluded that it was theoretically and practically possible for "a vote buyer [to] pay someone to rank the candidates a certain way and then use the announced election results to verify that the voter followed through," paving the way for a potential new angle of corruption and moral hazard in elections.[51]

The authors went on to substantiate, "using data from real IRV elections," like in San Francisco and Oakland, this new method of corruption could realistically have been used in multiple instances across localities and timeframes.[52]

This "vulnerability" (a significant concern) cannot be separated from the very nature of IRV-organized ranked choice voting.[53] As the study's authors concluded, "this opportunity to leave a unique "fingerprint" on your ballot—*and to thereby sell your vote*—is baked into the rules of IRV."[54] Also, the authors added that they were "not aware of another case where a security issue is baked into the abstract rules *of the ballot format itself*."[55]

The takeaway from Williams, Baltz, and Stewart's analysis is clear: RCV is uniquely risky. It exposes the electoral process to significant moral hazard and risk of corruption, and it has the potential to negate the fundamental protections of the secret ballot.

But this isn't all.

From the standpoint of election administration, RCV drastically reduces accountability and transparency. For one, RCV requires "centralized vote-counting."[56] It would fundamentally do away with Michigan's current decentralized, local-level reporting, an important aspect of local self-government, which is fundamental to American election integrity.[57]

In addition to "open[ing] up the vote counting process to greater risks of fraud and mismanagement," RCV also eliminates the ease of access and transparency, so readily available with single-choice paper ballots when conducting audits and manual recounts.

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[50] *Ibid,* P. 463.
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Ibid,* P. 466, 478.
[53] *Ibid,* P. 467.
[54] *Ibid,* P. 466. Emphasis added.
[55] *Ibid,* P. 467. Emphasis added.
[56] Nicholas Murray, "Ranked Choice Voting Complicates the Voting Process and Distorts the Final Vote." *The Ripon Forum* 55, No. 6. (2021), P. 24.
[57] *Ibid.*

Jason Snead, Executive Director of the Honest Elections Project, explained, "a recount, sometimes by hand, is required to verify the results in close or questionable elections. RCV makes this more difficult, and in some cases could make it impossible."[58] The inherent "complexity" of the IRV mechanism "require[s] multiple rounds of tabulation [which] rely on computers to make adjustments or discard ballots in each round."[59]

These concerns are no longer theoretical. In a 2022 RCV election in California, "a data entry error went undetected, and the wrong winner was certified." Months after the error, a third-party advocacy group caught the mistake.[60]

Despite these significant and fundamental concerns, RCV advocates appear undeterred. In an attempt to mitigate the system's significant faults, they advocate for the implementation of two secondary mechanisms: Risk-limiting audits and adaptively weighted audits of instant-runoff elections. Risk-limiting audits (RLA) "select random ballots and interpret them as evidence for or against the reported result." In Michigan, RLAs can sample three times to achieve the desired results. Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson has used the technique (a questionable audit method) to administer so-called audits to the state's elections.

Adaptively Weighted Audits of Instant-Runoff Elections use algorithms to "adaptively weight"…statistics to "learn" an effective set of [representative] hypotheses" to test the overall outcome.[61] [62] The flaw in both "audit" systems is that neither of them is designed to audit or recount the total sum of votes cast. Instead, they take what they deem to be representative samples. One white paper had the audacity to declare that an optimal audit would involve "the least number of expected ballot checks" to "confirm" the results.[63]

Worthy of additional consideration is the fact that the pioneer research scientists at the University of California, San Diego who "initiated the study of risk-limiting audit procedures" to

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[58] Jason Snead, "The Risks of Ranked Choice Voting." *Honest Elections Project*, https://stoprcv.com/research/risks-of-ranked-choice-voting (2025).

[59] *Ibid.*

[60] *Ibid.*

[61] Michelle Blom, Peter J. Stuckey, and Vanessa J. Teague, "RAIRE: Risk-Limiting Audits for IRV Elections." published by Cornell University's *Arxiv* research outlet, (2019).

[62] Alexander Ek, Philip B. Stark, Peter J. Stuckey, and Damjan Vukcevic, "Efficient Weighting Schemes for Auditing Instant-Runoff Voting Election." Presented at the *9th Workshop on Advances in Secure Electronic Voting*, and published by Cornell University's *Arxiv* research outlet, (2024).

[63] Michelle Blom, Peter J. Stuckey, and Vanessa J. Teague, "RAIRE: Risk-Limiting Audits for IRV Elections." published by Cornell University's *Arxiv* research outlet, (2019).

produce algorithms capable of performing these tasks warned that "both auditing algorithms are potentially far less efficient than the methods to audit other types of voting systems."[64]

RCV advocates continue undeterred in their quest to implement the system across America, but little research has directly refuted the damning conclusions of the initial and subsequent researchers.[65] In fact, of the (only) five scientific articles which the research tool Semantic Scholar catalogues as responding to the initial report, none directly disagrees with the initial report's conclusions or its methodology. Instead, the subsequent authors seem to favor moving forward with IRV-based ranked choice voting despite the inherent and significant flaws in algorithmic modeling identified initially.[66]

Objection IV: Winning Candidates Lack Support and Acceptance

Ranked choice elections often result in a winner who does not attain a majority of all votes cast, potentially fueling political polarization and stunting the development of political consensus.

Proponents offer myriad justifications of RCV, but one of the most popular and oft- repeated claims is that the RCV system "allows for more diverse political representation."[67] The fact that more competitor spots are available on a ballot is supposed to equal a greater range of perspectives, and therefore better representation, compared with the traditional mode of organizing elections. But, laying aside the underlying doubts that rightly accompany the phrase "diversity of viewpoints," RCV proponents commit an elementary fallacy in logic: *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. The system's advocates suppose that better representation will follow simply from a greater number of candidates. However, academic and empirical evidence suggests otherwise.

As Hans von Spakovsky explained, "the ultimate winner in RCV is often not the choice of a majority of voters who participated in the election. Instead, the candidate with an RCV 'majority' may be the first, second, or third choice."[68] As explained in Objection II, since ballot exhaustion occurs regularly within IRV-organized ranked choice voting, the final "winner" may not only fall short of a

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[64] Anand D. Sarwate, Stephen Checkoway, and Hovav Shacham, "Risk-limiting Audits for Nonplurality Elections." *University of California San Diego*, (2011).

[65] *Ibid.*

[66] See the "citations" tab here: https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Risk-limiting-Audits-for-Nonplurality-Elections-Sarwate-Checkoway/c5d02bbc0da056726690a18a29751e6b83dec203#citing-papers.

[67] Cf. https://rankmivote.org/faq/.

[68] Hans von Spakovsky and J. Christian Adams, "Ranked Choice Voting is a Bad Choice." *The Heritage Foundation Issue Brief* no. 4996, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/IB4996.pdf (2019).

majority of total votes cast, as occurs in a majority of instances, but may well carry with them a more-extreme minority viewpoint.[69]

That's not the only contributing factor to such an undesirable result. Writing from a more technical standpoint for the London School of Economics, Professor Brian Gaines asserts that RCV, by its nature, is "non-monotonic." This means that "getting higher rankings can convert a winner into a loser…[with] odd and disturbing reversals of this kind…more likely in races with many candidates of roughly equal strength."[70]

The implication of this observation is that a "perverse" incentive can easily be established in RCV systems, in which candidates actually enjoy greater success by adopting more extreme viewpoints, due to the non-monotonic possibility that "being persuasive and popular harm[s] a candidate."[71] Gaines' particular application of his theory, the (then upcoming) 2025 New York mayoral primary, has since unfolded with results that appear to support his assertions—for, whether one likes or dislikes now-Mayor Zohran Mamdani, one cannot dispute his relatively fringe placement among the spectrum of the ten Democratic candidates opposing him.[72]

Contrary to proponent claims that RCV encourages political harmony, the opposite appears to be the case. RCV may encourage political polarization. Nathan Atkinson, Edward Foley, and Scott Ganz brought empirical evidence of polarization to light when they modeled RCV implementation across the U.S. The three, writing for the *University of Illinois Law Review*, unveiled an empirical analysis based on a "nationally representative sample of over 50,000 voters," analyzing the "prospective effects of adopting IRV in every state."[73]

The study's authors concluded that "IRV tends to produce winning candidates who are more divergent ideologically from their state's median voter" than any other mode of voting. This effect, the authors continued, is most pronounced "in the most polarized states—precisely the electorates for

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[69] Brian J. Gaines, "Ranked Choice Voting is Imperfect, and Could Cean an Unexpected Outcome in the Primary Election for Mayor of New York." *The London School of Economics, Program of American Politics and Policy,* https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2025/06/18/ranked-choice-voting-is-imperfect-and-could-mean-an-unexpected-outcome-in-the-primary-election-for-mayor-of-new-york. (June 2025).

[70] *Ibid.*

[71] *Ibid.*

[72] For an overview of the ideological span of the Democratic primary as well as the general election mayoral candidates, see https://www.cityandstateny.com/politics/2025/07/heres-whos-running-new-york-city-mayor-2025/401994/.

[73] Nathan Atkinson, Edward Foley, Scott C. Ganz, "Beyond the Spoiler Effect: Can Ranked-Choice Voting Solve the Problem of Political Polarization?" *The University of Illinois Law Review,* https://illinoislawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Atkinson-Foley-Ganz.pdf (2024), P. 1654.

which IRV is being promoted as an antidote to existing divisiveness."[74] The authors conclude, "while it has been offered as a solution to polarization, our results show that IRV cannot be expected to effectively lead to [superior] representative outcomes relative to other election systems."[75]

A 2022 Harvard University study published by the University of Cambridge provides further corroboration of the University of Illinois' findings. Peter Buisseret of Harvard University's Government department and Carlo Prato from Columbia University's Political Science faculty together wrote, "RCV exacerbates platform polarization in contexts of low voter engagement, strong partisan attachments, and imbalances in the candidates' share of core supporters...and strong partisan attachments increase the likelihood that the winning candidate receives a minority of votes cast."[76]

Even sources relatively friendly to RCV have observed this effect, while remaining skeptical of its ultimate causation. In a research presentation delivered before Stanford University political science faculty and students, Professor Avidit Acharya concluded that based off multiple models and statistical analyses, "the Maine/NYC systems in which RCV is used in partisan primaries to nominate candidates for the general election are worse...than the [status quo] at electing moderate candidates."[77]

Additionally, regardless of primary/general election usage of RCV, Acharya noted, "RCV's performance in electing moderate candidates relative to [the status quo] declines as the number of candidates increases."[78]

But non-monotonicity and increasing political polarization are not the only drawbacks within IRV which contribute to its divisive nature. As Hans von Spakovsky writes further, because the winner of an RCV election "is often not the choice of a majority of voters who participated in the election...the winner of a multi-round, RCV election will not have a genuine mandate from a majority of voters, which should be an important consideration in a democratic system where more and more voters distrust government."[79]

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[74] *Ibid.*

[75] *Ibid,* P. 1684.

[76] Peter Buisseret and Carlo Prato, "Politics Transformed? How Ranked Choice Voting Shapes Electoral Strategies," https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/piep/files/rcv_20220325.pdf. Final version (inaccessible electronically as of August 2015) published in Cambridge University's *Journal of Political Institutions and Economic Policy* (2022).

[77] For an overview of Professor Acharya's presentation, see https://politicalscience.stanford.edu/events/ranked-choice-voting-primaries-system-and-political-extremism-theory-and-simulations (March 2025).

[78] For an overview of Professor Acharya's presentation, see https://politicalscience.stanford.edu/events/ranked-choice-voting-primaries-system-and-political-extremism-theory-and-simulations (March 2025).

[79] Hans von Spakovsky and J. Christian Adams, "Ranked Choice Voting is a Bad Choice." *The Heritage Foundation Issue Brief* no. 4996, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/IB4996.pdf (2019).

A Cornell University meta-analysis of 182 American ranked choice elections for political office from the years 2004-2022 found that 95 of these-—more than half—demonstrated a "majoritarian failure."[80] In other words, in more than half of the examined RCV elections documented over the past two decades within the U.S., "the winning candidate does not secure a majority of the total votes" cast initially.[81]

The study's authors, who demonstrate a generally favorable position toward RCV, cannot help but admit that such a result "seems concerning," though they devote little substantive consideration to the matter otherwise.[82] At the end of the day, the truth of the matter is evident regardless of the lack of attention paid to it by various expositors: RCV fails to deliver satisfactory results both mechanically and ideologically and represents a potentially dangerous process to introduce within an already contentious electoral system.

Objection V: Traditional Referendums Abolished

RCV abolishes the status quo's referendum provided by delayed runoff elections, leaving voters fewer ways to express their developing perspectives.

Another frequently overlooked negative effect of IRV-organized RCV involves its *de facto* abolition of the status quo's delayed run-off election mechanism. In instances in which the winners of races are indeterminate, the current system often allows for run-off elections. RCV, however, would remove this feature entirely.

In the existing system, delayed run-off elections serve as an effective referendum on one or both of the main political candidates and their parties, allowing voters to refocus debate, crystallize priorities, and collectively refresh themselves before going to the polls to decide (sometimes differently from their initial vote), which candidate best expresses their state of mind at the time of the new run-off election. Perspective increases with time, and within the current system, voters are best equipped to express their developing perspective of a new administration or policy agenda, for example, through the run-off process that the RCV amendment removes.

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[80] Adam Graham-Squire and David McCune, "An Examination of Ranked Choice Voting in the United States, 2004-2022," published through Cornell University's *Arxiv* research outlet, https://arxiv.org/abs/2301.12075#, (2023), P. 11.
[81] *Ibid.*
[82] *Ibid,* P. 17.

Put simply, the instant-runoff mechanism removes a key avenue for voters to express their developing perspectives. As von Spakovsky puts it, "eliminating the several weeks between a general election and a run-off election deprives voters of the opportunity to re-examine the top two candidates, [as well as] for the candidate to re-educate voters about his positions and stance on issues, thereby shortchanging voters from making a fully informed choice."[83]

Eliminating this traditional referendum is not a popular choice among voters either. A relatively pro-RCV paper from the University of Chicago noted recently, "questions remain about perceptions of the fairness of RCV compared to other approaches…[W]hen presented with a vignette where [the status quo] and RCV produce different election results, many U.S. voters appear to prefer the [status quo] result to the RCV result."[84]

Building on this assertion, the study's authors—Georgetown's Laurent Bouton and UChicago's Andrew Eggers, observe with respect to the abolition of traditional run-off elections, that "voters seem to view the same election result as more legitimate on average if achieved through a runoff than if achieved through the RCV elimination process."[85]

This unpopular perception of RCV has been documented even outside of America. In a 2020 paper made available by the London School of Economics, Damien Bol, professor of Political Economy at King's College London, found that in the sample-case country of Belgium, contrary to his and his colleagues' expectations, "voting for winning candidates [via RCV] does not increase voters' satisfaction with electoral outcomes compared with 'party-list' voters."[86] Nor is this less-than-satisfactory perception of RCV limited to voters.

Academic resistance to the system has been building as well. For example, an influential *University of Maryland Law Review* article by Georgetown University professor Scott Ganz and University of Wisconsin Law School professor Nathan Atkinson recently sought to "sound the alarm

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[83] Hans von Spakovsky and J. Christian Adams, "Ranked Choice Voting is a Bad Choice." *The Heritage Foundation Issue Brief* no. 4996, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/IB4996.pdf (2019).

[84] Andrew Eggers and Laurent Bouton, "Democracy Reform Primer Series: Ranked-Choice Voting," *University of Chicago Center for Effective Government, Harris School of Public Policy*, https://blockyapp.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/store/00d2099f18c6a5f7ac01040810a6b3b0.pdf, (2024), P. 15.

[85] *Ibid.*

[86] Damien Bol, "Choosing Winning Candidates in Proportional Systems does not Increase Voter Satisfaction," *London School of Economics*, republished originally from the non-profit organization *Democratic Audit,* https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/108105/1/dit_com_2019_01_07_choosing_winning_candidates_in_proportional.pdf (2020).

that the rush to reform by adopting instant-runoff voting" was ultimately "misguided," treating symptoms rather than the "root causes of democratic disfunction."[87]

Ganz and Atkinson argued that much of the current academic debate over RCV lacks a fundamental grounding in the real-world outcomes that *any* form of electoral organization ought to be organized around: "robust electoral competition [as well as] incentive structures shaping the political positioning of candidate's platforms and the extent to which those platforms reflect the will of the voters."[88]

Based on these metrics, the pair concluded that "the form of RCV spreading across the country comes up short."[89] Indeed, in the minds of many Americans, RCV does just that. Considered as a whole, RCV is unpopular. Its implementation would abolish a key referendum aspect, removing power from voters and reserving it to a complex and opaque electoral system. It is arguably useless as a solution to dissatisfaction with current election systems. Michigan voters will not be served by its implementation, and for this reason alone, it ought to be carefully reconsidered.

Objection VI: Increased Fiscal and Administrative Burden

RCV has been associated with an increased administrative load and higher fiscal costs in municipalities that implement it, potentially straining the resources of local jurisdictions.

In the final analysis of RCV's potential harms, its heavy cost to citizens is no small factor. Proponents such as *New America,* (a non-profit partly funded by Bill Gates and the Rockefeller Foundation), claim that although short-term administration costs may increase due to capital outlays for new equipment, employee training, and voter education, the process will lead to an overall less-expensive process in the long term, due to the elimination of individual recall elections.[90] However, statistical analysis from MIT and the real-world example of Maine both cast doubt on this assertion. RCV's complex mechanisms imply both short- and long-term expenditure increases.

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[87] Nathan Atkinson and Scott Ganz, "Robust Electoral Competition: Rethinking Electoral Systems to Encourage Representative Outcomes," *University of Maryland Law Review*,
https://download.ssrn.com/24/02/15/ssrn_id4728225_code2595303.pdf (2024), P. 1.

[88] *Ibid.*

[89] *Ibid.*

[90] See https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/what-we-know-about-ranked-choice-voting/administration-and-campaign-costs.

The League of Women Voters also observed that higher costs consistently accompany the implementation of ranked choice voting. As Beatrice Keller wrote for the organization, "the ballots and the counting of the ballots will be more expensive," in addition to "requir[ing] a computer system, or [a] labor intensive...count by hand."[91] Of particular interest to the League's admission of higher election costs is the fact that the League declares it "has a position in support of instant-runoff voting," making its analysis even more poignant.[92]

Related research published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) provides additional context. Based on a twenty-year survey of election cost data obtained from seven municipalities which implemented RCV between 2004 and 2011, the MIT study author Christopher Rhode concluded that "there is a statistically significant correlation between the cost of elections and RCV implementation at the local level."[93] In fact, Rhode continued, these municipalities experienced election costs "in excess of five standard deviations greater than what would have otherwise been expected," when contrasted with a control group of seven similar localities.[94]

After adjusting for factors such as population, annual budget size, location, election cycle schedule, jurisdiction in charge of elections, and citizen political affiliation, Rhode concluded that the study could "[n]ot show that implementing RCV has been directly responsible for any financial savings." He added, "in general, RCV jurisdictions are found to spend significantly more on elections overall."[95]

While MIT's analysis does not conclusively identify a single causal factor behind the increased cost observable in communities that implement RCV, the study's conclusion is clear: Implementing RCV is unlikely to yield financial savings in the short or long term.

But there's another significant drawback to RCV: The increased burden that the complex system of instant-runoff tabulation places on administrative resources. In a state like Michigan that currently has highly decentralized elections, RCV would present an increased burden at the local level, in addition to challenges posed by centralized tabulating.

States that have already implemented RCV like in Maine tell a stark story. A 2020 paper from the *Southern Political Science Association* revealed that 90% of Maine's municipal-level clerks said they

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[91] See https://my.lwv.org/vermont/article/pros-and-cons-instant-runoff-ranked-choice-voting.
[92] *Ibid.*
[93] Christopher Rhode, "*The Cost of Ranked Choice Voting*," presented at the *Election Sciences, Reform, and Administration Conference*, published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Election Lab, 2018.
[94] *Ibid.*
[95] *Ibid.*

would favor a state-wide repeal of RCV.[96] An Illinois *Better Government Association* survey in 2019 found that more than two-thirds of the surveyed Maine clerks reported RCV had "increased their administrative burden."[97] And in an op-ed published by the *Maine Wire*, a Colorado clerk warned local officials that per-county adoption of RCV would cost "$340,000 upfront" for a roughly 730,000 person county, with an additional $70,000 required each subsequent year.[98] Adoption for 3.8 million registered voters across 64 counties (barely half of Michigan's 7.3 million registered voters across 83 counties), was estimated to cost $2.4 to $3 million upfront, with an additional $350,000 to $400,000 per year.[99] In the absence of state funding, such costs would ultimately fall to local taxpayers, clerk Charles Broerman warned.[100]

A subsequent *University of Cincinnati Law Review* article corroborated these initial observations. Brandon Bryer, the Law Review's Editor-in-Chief wrote, "although [Maine's] government argues that RCV saves money, it ignores a gaping hole in that argument—the considerable financial costs of RCV itself."[101]

To implement—and more importantly—to maintain RCV, Bryer continued, state governments must "conduct detailed voter education campaigns, print new RCV ballots, and purchase expensive ballot machines."[102] Bryer, returning to the example of Maine, wrote further that RCV clearly "does not alleviate administrative burdens but rather increases the toll on election personnel and resources, [since] implementing RCV increased the state's electoral budget two-fold."[103] The takeaway for Michigan is clear: "if the government ha[s] a sincere interest in preserving money and resources, it should avoid implementing RCV entirely."[104]

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[96] Joseph Anthony, Amy Fried, Robert Glover, and David Kimball, "Ranked Choice Voting in Maine from the Perspective of Election Officials," *The Journal of the Southern Political Science Association,* https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b65db22fcf7fd7d0c65167c/t/5e2b4d9006257268f1a2b448/1579896208373/AFGK+Final+Paper+SPSA20+Maine+RCV.pdf.

[97] See https://www.bettergov.org/2021/05/27/can-ranked-choice-voting-transform-our-democracy (2021).

[98] Charles Broerman, "A Colorado election clerk's perspective on using RCV in his state's elections," https://www.themainewire.com/2020/03/a-colorado-election-clerks-perspective-on-using-rcv-in-his-states-elections/, (2020).

[99] *Ibid.*

[100] *Ibid.*

[101] Brandon Bryer, "One Vote, Two Votes, Three Votes, Four: How Ranked Choice Voting Burdens Voting Rights," *University of Cincinnati Law Review,* 90, vol. 2, (2021), P. 731.

[102] *Ibid.*

[103] *Ibid.*

[104] *Ibid.*

Conclusion

It is MFEI's and Pure Integrity Michigan's hope that this report will be of value and utility to every reader, regardless of political affiliation and preferences. At the end of the day, understanding RCV's significant flaws is a nonpartisan issue and essential to preserving the integrity of Michigan's elections. The pursuit of accountable and effective election administration is a fundamental responsibility of each individual citizen, and it is incumbent upon us all to preserve the rights guaranteed in the founding of our constitutional republic. Understanding the ins and outs of complex and potentially ineffective proposals which may sound appealing at first glance, requires vigilance, so the principles of this great experiment in self-government and liberty may be preserved and protected.

The debate on ranked choice voting doesn't end here. Rather, RCV is only the latest potentially misguided proposal threatening to transform our election system for the worse. While the existing elections system may not be perfect, true election reform ought to occur within the context of this nation's nearly 250 years of time-tested laws and processes. Only through carefully evaluating radical and potentially ill-founded proposals like RCV can productive debate about the improvement and safeguarding of our elections take place in our great state.

Above all, let us be mindful of the admonition of our 40th President: "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction." We at the Michigan Fair Elections Institute are committed to doing everything within our capacity to preserve and enhance transparency, integrity, and accountability in the administration of our elections. We invite you to stand with us.

Audemus Jura Nostra Defendere. "We dare to defend our rights."

Patrice Johnson, MFEI and PIME Chair

Frederick Woodward

August 2025

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"I'm truly impressed by the folks out at Michigan Fair Elections Institute, led by Patrice Johnson. Not only are they trying to do the right thing, but they're trying do it the right way."
-Patrick Colbeck, former Michigan State Senator

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