INTRODUCTION

This report reviews an important aspect of the Democratic Presidential nomination process in 2020: the advantages of increasing early access to voting, and the unintended consequence it creates for some early voters losing the chance to cast an effective vote.

This report lifts up the experience of state parties that avoided that problem by offering ranked choice voting (RCV) ballots. Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas, and Wyoming successfully introduced RCV ballots for all voters, while Nevada used RCV ballots for early voting. This greatly increased the numbers of votes that counted toward candidates earning delegates. Implemented nationally, ranked choice voting ballots likely would have resulted in over four million more Democratic voters having a direct effect on the contest. The Democratic National Committee has an opportunity to support this innovation and ensure votes count in 2024 and beyond.

CROWDED PRIMARY FIELDS ARE HERE TO STAY

Presidential primary elections have historically drawn a large number of challengers, from the party convention era to the modern primary era which began in 1976. While we saw a dip in the number of candidates in the late 20th century, as low as single digits in many cases, recent years have brought a spike in candidates among both parties, particularly in open-seat presidential cycles such as 2008 and 2016, as shown in Figure 1.

The modern presidential primary format and high media interest allows candidates to deliver their message directly to voters, creating strong incentives for more candidates to run in recent years. While this creates increased opportunities for engagement because voters can evaluate candidates representing different aspects of the party, it can also lead to pitfalls when a divided field splits the vote, denying a strong mandate to any single candidate.

Crowded presidential primary fields are most likely here to stay, and this report examines ways to improve the process, thereby improving voters’ ability to handle large fields of candidates and helping the party advance its strongest candidate to the general election.

Figure 1: Primary Candidates Per Year

EARLY VOTING AND MAIL-IN VOTING IN 2020: PROS AND CONS

The 2020 election cycle brought us new insights into the ways early voting and mail-in voting can democratize the primary process. Early voting and mail-in voting have been key components of primary elections in select states for decades, but the rise of COVID-19 and stay-at-home orders beginning in March caused many new states to adopt these policies in 2020. While
boosting participation by increasing access for voters, they had an unintended negative consequence due to a limitation on voters’ power to indicate their preferences.

Prior to the 2020 elections, only three states conducted voting entirely or mostly by mail, while other states offered a variety of policies for limited mail-in voting. By September of 2020, twenty-three states and the District of Columbia changed mail-in voting laws in response to increased demand for socially-distanced ways to vote. Following widespread lockdowns beginning in March, the rate of mail-in ballots varied widely by state, from 6.5% mail-in voting in Nebraska to 83% in Rhode Island.

Early voting also expanded in 2020. While the literature is mixed on whether expansion of early voting increases participation in general, Nevada is an example of a case where early voting was impactful. While Nevada Democrats maintained presidential caucuses in 2020, after DNC rule changes designed to promote inclusion were made in 2017, state legislatures in several other caucus states funded a move to presidential primaries. Nevada made its caucuses more inclusive by adding early voting using ranked choice voting ballots. With the new policy in place, 70,000 Nevada Democrats voted early, and turnout increased by 21% compared to 2016.

Ultimately, expanded mail-in voting and early voting gave voters and election administrators the ability to hold high-turnout presidential primaries even in a very challenging year, and the updated legal landscape provides additional flexibility as states look towards holding post-pandemic elections.

FOUR MILLION VOTES WERE “WASTED”

A key feature of the Democratic party’s rules is that candidates earn delegates in proportion to their vote share as long as the candidate meets a minimum threshold of viability (15%). In practice, however, crowded fields of candidates often lead to a less-than-proportional delegate allocation.

The large field of Democratic candidates in 2020, combined with the increase in early voting and mail-in voting, led to millions of voters voting for a candidate who was no longer active in the race as of election day in that voter’s state. We refer to these as “wasted votes” as a way to indicate they did not affect the outcome.

Early voters and mail-in voters may have cast their ballot before they knew which candidates would be active by election day. For example, in Washington state, FairVote demonstrated that more than a third of early votes went to candidates who had dropped out, and early votes were five times more likely to go towards withdrawn candidates than those cast close to election day. Most of those votes in Washington were for Elizabeth Warren and Michael Bloomberg, candidates who withdrew from the race five days and six days prior to election day.

Nationally, over 3 million Democratic votes went to candidates who had already withdrawn from the race, or 8.2% of total Democratic votes.

An additional source of “wasted votes” occurs when a voter’s first choice fails to achieve the 15% threshold required to earn convention delegates. When delegates are allocated only to candidates who cross a threshold of viability, any voters who select non-viable candidates lose the opportunity to influence delegate allocation in their district or state. More than 1.4 million Democratic voters cast ballots in 2020 for active candidates who failed to earn delegates.

The combined total votes from the two sources above is over 4.4 million votes, or more than 12% of all Democratic primary voters, as shown in Figure 2. If the party wishes to ensure it nominates the most representative candidate, it will need a way to ensure that supporters of non-delegate-earning candidates can still cast a meaningful vote.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Votes for withdrawn candidates</td>
<td>3,010,892</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes for non-delegate-earning candidates</td>
<td>1,448,695</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Democratic primary and caucus votes</td>
<td>36,917,179</td>
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</tbody>
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The five states whose Democratic parties used ranked choice voting (RCV) ballots in presidential primaries and
caucuses in 2020 eliminated the concept of “wasted votes.” An RCV ballot gives voters the opportunity to rank candidates in order of preference. If a voter’s first choice has too few votes to earn delegates, that ballot goes to the voter’s second choice as a backup.

RCV makes more votes count. Nevada used ranked choice voting for early voters, which allowed early voters the same option as in-person caucus goers: to “realign” with a viable candidate. The other four states, Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas, and Wyoming, used RCV for all voters in their primary elections.

While non-RCV states like Washington had a high portion of votes for inactive candidates from early ballots, the RCV states saw almost every ballot count toward the delegate allocation. By April, when the RCV states began voting, only Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders remained active in the Democratic primary. Yet roughly 10% of voters in primaries in April voted for other candidates, meaning none of those votes helped win delegates in non-RCV states.

On the other hand, voters in RCV states used their enhanced power to select backup choices. Of the roughly 10% of voters in RCV states whose first choice was neither Biden nor Sanders, 80% ranked at least one of the finalists as a backup choice. As such, 98% of all ballots in RCV contests counted for a delegate-earning candidate by the final round of tabulation, meaning almost all voters had a say in the portion of delegates which went to each candidate. This is a notable improvement over the rate of impactful ballots in non-RCV states, as shown in Figure 3. And voters handled their first experience with RCV ballots exceptionally well: more than 99.8% of RCV ballots were valid votes.

**Figure 3: Percent of votes counting towards active candidates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Votes</th>
<th>Non-RCV Primary States</th>
<th>Non-RCV Caucus States (Iowa)</th>
<th>RCV States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Ranked choice voting successfully mitigated the issue of votes for inactive candidates which can arise in early voting and mail-in voting, giving voters a chance to participate safely and conveniently while still ensuring their vote was impactful.

**RANKED CHOICE VOTING EASES TRANSITION FOR CAUCUS STATES**

While some caucus states have moved to primaries in recent years, seven states do not have the option to hold a presidential primary. Although primaries enable higher participation, they do lose one advantage of holding caucuses. A key benefit of a caucus over a primary is voters’ ability to realign with a second-choice candidate if their first choice does not clear the delegate threshold (typically 15% of votes). This voting method puts more power directly in the hands of the voters, ensuring each individual can cast an impactful vote for a viable candidate.

Still, caucuses have been criticized for depressing turnout, being less representative of the electorate, and allowing for irregular and untimely results, such as the issues that plagued the Iowa caucuses in 2020. As a result, in 2017 the Democratic National Committee established rules to create more access for voters in caucus states.

The five RCV states all used caucuses prior to 2020, and they added RCV to their nominating contests in 2020 in response to new DNC rules and an ongoing desire to create a smooth process for participants. For these states, RCV preserved the crucial realignment benefit of caucuses, while also allowing states to modernize their process with a more inclusive primary election.

A case study on Colorado will help demonstrate why RCV is beneficial for states transitioning away from caucuses. Colorado switched from caucuses in 2016 to a non-RCV primary in 2020. Their primary occurred on March 3, 2020, just days after the withdrawal of candidates Amy Klobuchar and Pete Buttigieg. Alone among Super Tuesday states, Colorado opted not to count ballots for Klobuchar and Buttigieg.
On the one hand, this decision made delegate allocation among active candidates more equitable because it lowered the threshold for other candidates to earn delegates. On the other hand, it invalidated approximately 14% of ballots, or 150,000 votes, as Colorado treated votes for Klobuchar and Buttigieg as ballots with a disqualifying error. Colorado’s prior caucus method would have allowed those voters to select a backup choice rather than invalidating their votes. Ranked choice voting would have had the same impact, preserving the positive features of caucuses while ensuring more voters have a voice in the nomination process.

**ADDITIONAL BENEFITS OF RANKED CHOICE VOTING FOR PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES**

In 2020, voters overwhelmingly took advantage of the option to rank candidates on their ballots, demonstrating their understanding of RCV and their eagerness to use rankings. Even though Joe Biden had become the presumptive nominee by the first RCV primary in April, a vast majority of voters in each RCV state opted to rank more than one candidate, as shown in Figure 4.

*Figure 4: Voters who ranked multiple candidates*

Additionally, ranked ballots tell us more about voter preferences than “choose-one” elections. Voters, campaigns, and parties can benefit from this more complete information to help understand where coalitions are forming. For example, Figure 5 examines whether supporters of withdrawn candidates ultimately had their ballots counted for Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders or neither.

*Figure 5: Backup choices of voters who supported inactive candidates*

We can also learn how much crossover support existed between the two front-runners, as shown in Figure 6. Notably, roughly half of Biden voters also gave a top-3 ranking to Sanders and vice versa, suggesting less division within the party than some media would have us believe.

*Figure 6: Crossover support between Biden and Sanders*

**ADAPTING RANKED CHOICE VOTING FOR PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY ELECTIONS**

Democratic presidential nomination contests allocate delegates proportionally, so ranked choice voting was adapted to accommodate this need. Just as with single-choice ballots, RCV ballots can be counted both by congressional district and statewide.

With RCV, all ballots are first counted for the candidate...
marked as first choice. If all candidates have crossed the vote threshold (typically 15%), the count is complete and delegates are awarded proportionally.

If the vote total for any candidate falls below the threshold, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and their ballots are added to the totals of each voter’s next choice. This can potentially boost a candidate across the 15% threshold who had not crossed the threshold on first-choices alone.

The process of candidate elimination and vote transfer continues until all candidates either cross the delegate threshold or become eliminated. Delegates are awarded proportionally among the remaining candidates.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2024

As states look towards the 2024 presidential cycle, we recommend encouraging ranked choice voting in all contests, to keep the nominating process democratic, inclusive and efficient.

For party-run primaries and caucuses, state parties should be encouraged to follow the lead of Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas and Wyoming, and adopt RCV ballots with accessible primaries consistent with DNC rules approved in 2017. With an early green light from the DNC, such states can get an early start on planning for and securing funds for their contests.

In state-run primary elections, (the vast majority of contests in the country), the Democratic party should permit states to use ranked ballots, consistent with DNC rules developed for party-run primary states. Maine law now mandates RCV ballots for presidential primaries beginning in 2024.

Ranked choice voting ballots are a simple and necessary improvement to presidential primary elections. We recommend the DNC take steps to enable the remaining 45 states to follow the lead of the parties in Wyoming, Nevada, Alaska, Hawaii, and Kansas and offer voters the option to rank candidates for the 2024 presidential election cycle.

ABOUT FAIRVOTE

FairVote is a non-partisan non-profit organization that seeks to make democracy fair, functional, and more representative. We research and propose common sense changes to strengthen American democracy and ensure all voices are heard and every vote counts in every election. Operating since 1992, FairVote works with scholars, civic leaders, policymakers, journalists and national, state and local reform partners to advance fairer elections.

FairVote
6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 240
Takoma Park, MD 20912

www.FairVote.org
info@fairvote.org
301.270.4616