


Ranked Choice Voting in the 2021 Primary Election

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF TURNOUT, CANDIDATE DIVERSITY, AND VOTERS' IMPACT ON RESULTS

In 2019, New Yorkers voted to adopt a new election system called Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). For years, reformers have been advocating to introduce Ranked Choice Voting, also known as Instant Run-Off election, highlighting its benefits in increasing turnout and diversity while reducing expenses. The 2019 Charter Revision Commission, which recommended putting this ballot proposal before the voters, considered several possible improvements that this system can bring¹. Among them:

- RCV would save the City money by eliminating the cost associated with administering run-off elections.
- RCV would prevent a significant drop-off in voter turnout common to run-off elections, typically held four weeks after primary day.
- RCV would increase voters' "say" in the election, allowing them to vote without the risk of "wasting" their vote.

¹ Final Report of the 2019 New York City Charter Revision Commission, New York City Charter Revision Commission, August 2, 2019. https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/coib/downloads/pdf2/charter_revision/2019-charter-revision-final-report.pdf

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- RCV might reduce negative campaigning and encourage candidates to collaborate.
 - RCV would increase the number of female candidates and candidates of color and increase the probability that they would win elections.
 - RCV elections would make it more feasible for military, overseas, and absentee City voters to fully participate in elections that move to run-off elections, who typically get an extremely short time frame to mail their ballots.

Before the 2019 referendum and during the months leading to the 2021 primary election, some elected officials and community groups expressed concern that Ranked Choice Voting would have more of a negative impact than a positive one. Among others, opponents of Ranked Choice Voting feared that,

- RCV would be too confusing for voters and would therefore depress turnout.²
- RCV would hurt communities of color that have traditionally been powerful voting blocs.³
- Government agencies would not be prepared on time to implement RCV and educate the public about the system.⁴

The New York State Assembly Elections Committee has scheduled a hearing to review the Ranked Choice Voting process in the 2021 New York City primary. This report is meant to support the discussion by members of the Committee.

This study uses data on turnout and candidates from the New York City Board of Elections to examine whether Ranked Choice Voting achieved some of the above goals by comparing the 2021 primary election to the 2013 primary, the last large competitive city election. 2021 data is based on BOE's RCV report of July 13.

² December 2020 lawsuit against the New York City Board of Elections, *New York City Council Member v City Of New York* (New York Supreme Court 2020).

<https://iapps.courts.state.ny.us/nyscef/ViewDocument?docIndex=xCzHafmDne2Dikeq2oWBQg==>

³ Black, Latino and Asian Caucus of the New York City Council comes out against ranked choice voting, City & State New York, November 1, 2019.

<https://www.cityandstateny.com/politics/2019/11/black-latino-and-asian-caucus-of-the-new-york-city-council-comes-out-against-ranked-choice-voting/176761/>

⁴ RCV Implementation Letter from the Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus to Corey Johnson, November 19, 2020. <https://www.scribd.com/document/487637656/RCV-Implementation-Letter>. Minority pols seek to delay NYC Ranked Choice Voting law, The New York Post, November 22, 2020.

<https://nypost.com/2020/11/21/minority-pols-seek-to-delay-nyc-ranked-choice-voting-law>



Key Findings

(See Appendix A for data)

The number of "wasted" votes decreased significantly in all levels

Using Ranked Choice Voting, New Yorkers were able to have more say in the result of elections and to avoid having their vote "wasted" on candidates who were less popular with voters overall. For example, in the Democratic mayoral primary of 2013, more than 228,600 people – or 33% of voters – cast their ballots for candidates who were not among the top two vote-getters. In 2021, only 140,167 voters – or 14.9% – did not participate in the final round of RCV, meaning they did not include Eric Adams or Kathryn Garcia in their ranked ballots ("inactive ballots" on the last round).


A sharp decrease in "wasted" ballots is observed in almost every race. The Democratic primary for Queens Borough President had three candidates in 2013 and in 2021: in the former, 21.5% of voters did not vote for the top two candidates; in 2021, under RCV, only 6.2% of voters missed out on the top two candidates. The largest decrease in "wasted votes" occurred in East New York and New Lots (Brooklyn) in the primary election for Council District 42. In Bed-Stuy's 36th Council District, more than 40% of voters "wasted" their votes in 2013 compared to only 15.9% under Ranked Choice Voting; turnout in this district increased by over 60%.

The number of female candidates almost tripled

Under Ranked Choice Voting, 152 women ran for city offices, compared to 52 female candidates in 2013. The difference is even bigger when looking at the more competitive races for "open seats," where incumbents are not running for re-election. In 2013, only 35 women ran in open-seat races; in 2021, that number was 116 – 231% higher.

More women and people of color won elections

The next City Council would likely be the most diverse in New York City's history. Women are poised to hold at least 28 of the 51 seats in the Council, as opposed to



14 seats after the 2013 election. According to Gothamist⁵, around 35 Democratic primary winners in highly Democratic districts (candidates who are all but certain to win the November election) identify as people of color, up from 26 in the current Council. That includes a record 10 Latinas and six Asian-American⁶.

The total number of candidates soared

The 2021 primary had more than double the candidates of the 2013 primary – 372 people ran for local office this year, compared to 172 in the last large competitive city election. On average, 7.5 people ran for every open seat in 2021 compared to 4.1 people in 2013.

Voter turnout increased significantly

In total, turnout across the city increased by almost a third (29.2%) between 2013 and 2021⁷. Nearly a million people voted in the June primary, compared to 772,241 voters in 2013. 2021 turnout was higher in 41 out of the 44 races that were contested in both elections. The Democratic primary for mayor saw a 36% increase in votes cast; the Queens Borough President primary, a 67% increase. In some City Council races, turnout rose by 70% to 90%.


Democratic benefits occurred across the five boroughs

The positive effects of RCV on voter turnout, the number and diversity of candidates running, and levels of "wasted" ballots were observed in neighborhoods throughout the city, with no notable differences between the five boroughs. For example, the lowest rate of wasted ballots across the five boroughs was in the Bronx: an average of 14% in Council Races and only 9% in the race for Bronx Borough President. Other boroughs had an average of 15% to 20%. The Bronx also saw more than double the number of female candidates and an average 28% increase in voter turnout compared to the 2013 primary election. Queens, which had just six female

⁵ The Next City Council Set To Be Most Diverse, Progressive, And Hold First-Ever Female Majority, Gothamist, July 7, 2021. <https://gothamist.com/news/next-city-council-set-be-most-diverse-progressive-and-hold-first-ever-female-majority>

⁶ A historic 6 Asian American candidates win in City Council primaries, City & State New York, July 13, 2021. <https://www.cityandstateny.com/politics/2021/07/historic-6-asian-american-candidates-win-city-council-primaries/183724/>. Latinas poised to be a force on the City Council, City & State New York, July 13, 2021. <https://www.cityandstateny.com/opinion/2021/07/latinas-poised-be-force-city-council/183716/>

⁷ Voter turnout rate in the 2021 primary was similar to 2013, holding at 23% of registered Democrats and Republicans. Among Democrats, 2021 turnout was close to 25% compared to roughly 22% in the 2013 Democratic primary. However, the small change in percentage is only due to the expansion of the electorate, in large part because of intense efforts in recent years by City government and civic groups to register more people to vote. In 2013, there were roughly 3.3 million eligible primary voters; in 2021, the number was 4.3 million.



candidates in 2013, had 41 female candidates running this year and an average of 49% more voters per council seat⁸.

New York avoided run-off elections

Due to the introduction of Ranked Choice Voting, the city did not hold run-off elections in July 2021. In the last 20 years, run-off elections were held after the primaries of 2013 (Public Advocate), 2009 (Public Advocate and the Comptroller), and 2001 (Mayor and the Public Advocate). In these run-off elections, there was a significant drop in voter turnout compared to the primary election, with the 2013 Public Advocate run-off seeing a 61% drop in votes cast⁹. With larger fields of candidates and a smaller share of the vote for each one, one of the citywide elections would have likely ended up in a run-off election as no candidate would have reached 40%¹⁰. Ranked Choice Voting ensured that these run-off elections would happen instantly, with significantly higher turnout rates.

Voters embraced Ranked Choice Voting and navigated the system well

According to exit polls conducted after the June 2021 primary, voters found Ranked Choice Voting to be easy and straightforward, with 95% of voters stating that they found their ballot simple to complete. The response was similar across different ethnic and age groups. Additionally, most voters ranked three or more candidates in the mayoral primary, including two-thirds of Black and Hispanic voters. Notably, 77% of voters said they want Ranked Choice Voting to be used in future local elections. The highest approval rate was reported by Asian-American voters (82%) and Hispanic voters (79%), demonstrating the successful rollout of the new system amongst communities of color¹¹.

⁸ In 2021, there were 20 primary elections in Queens. In 2013, there were nine primaries in Queens, and the rest were uncontested.

⁹ Final Report of the 2019 New York City Charter Revision Commission, New York City Charter Revision Commission, August 2, 2019. https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/coib/downloads/pdf2/charter_revision/2019-charter-revision-final-report.pdf

¹⁰ It is very difficult to say with certainty what each election contest would have looked like without RCV given that the dynamics of the race would be entirely different, but in past election cycles run-offs have been quite common, especially in primaries with no incumbent.

¹¹ Rank The Vote NYC Releases Edison Research Exit Poll On The Election, June 28, 2021. <http://readme.readmedia.com/rank-the-vote-nyc-releases-edison-research-exit-poll-on-the-election/17989282>



Council District Spotlight

In elections throughout the city, RCV had clear benefits, allowing a broader and more diverse swath of candidates to take part in contests that saw increased voter turnout and enthusiasm. For example, **Council District 27**, which covers Cambria Heights, Jamaica, and Southeast Queens, was highly competitive in 2013, with six candidates vying for the seat. Of the six candidates in this race, all were people of color, but only two were women. 16,353 people voted in that 2013 primary election, with the winner receiving 24.3% of the vote and the runner-up receiving 21.5%. Consequently, 54% of voters did not impact the contest between the top two vote-getters, and their vote was "wasted."

Under Ranked Choice Voting, the size of the field doubled in 2021: 12 candidates ran to represent the 27th Council District, all of them people of color, including five women. Turnout in the June primary increased by 25%, with more than 20,000 people coming out to vote. In this crowded race, the top vote-getter Natasha Williams received 36% of first-choice votes. After RCV round-by-round elimination was calculated, Williams received 73% of the vote, giving her a substantial mandate from voters. Under Ranked Choice Voting, only about 20% of voters "wasted" their ballot by not ranking either Williams or the runner-up in that race. This marks 62% fewer votes were "wasted" under RCV than under the previous system in 2013.

Another election that showcased the impact of Ranked Choice Voting was the race for **Council District 46** in southeast Brooklyn. The racially diverse district encompasses Canarsie, which is over 80% Black, and neighborhoods like Bergen Beach, Georgetown, Marine Park, Mill Basin, and Gerritson Beach, which are majority white. It was never represented by a person of color before. In the last three decades, the seat was held by Herbert Berman, Lew Fidler, and incumbent Alan Maisel. Two candidates ran for this position the last time the seat was open, the 2013 Democratic primary election, with 14,064 people coming out to vote.

In the 2021 June primary, however, eight candidates sought this position, seven of them people of color, including six women. Over 18,400 people cast their vote in this crowded race, with 76% of voters ranking one of the top two vote-getters somewhere on their ballot. Half of the voters who voted for another candidate as their first choice moved their vote to the top two candidates by the final RCV elimination round. Mercedes Narcisse, who would most likely become the first woman of color to hold the position, received 63.7% of the vote in the last round.



Conclusion

The 2021 primary election cycle was marked by a significant and broad increase in civic participation across New York City, noted by higher voter turnout rates and a larger and more diverse field of candidates and winners.

Of course, this shift cannot be solely attributed to the introduction of a Ranked Choice Voting system. Voter turnout in the city has been trending upwards in recent years, and the electorate is more attuned to local and state elections than before. New York City's generous public campaign finance system was also a contributing factor in allowing a broader spectrum of candidates to run for office, as well as the many civic and community groups who encouraged political newcomers to run. But Ranked Choice Voting provided the democratic infrastructure for increased participation.

Contrary to pre-election concerns that Ranked Choice Voting would cause confusion, frustration, and discourage people from voting, especially in communities of color, the July 2021 primary election proved otherwise. Thanks in large part to robust public education and outreach programs by the Campaign Finance Board, New York City Board of Elections, and countless community groups, voters had no problems navigating the new system, and by ranking their preferred candidates, they achieved a bigger impact on the results of the election. The winning cohort of candidates is more diverse and more representative of New York City communities.

Data in this report is based on the most recently available results, the July 13th RCV Round by Round Elimination Report ("third RCV report"), published by the New York City Board of Elections. In-depth analysis of how exactly voters used Ranked Choice Voting, including how many choices voters ranked and in what areas, will be possible only after the Board of Elections releases the anonymous, electronic records of every voter's ballot selections, known as Cast-Vote Records.

Appendix A

- 2021 turnout and votes data are based on the New York City Board of Elections July 13th, 2021, Ranked Choice Voting Round by Round Elimination Report ("third RCV report").
- All races refer to Democratic primary elections unless stated otherwise.
- 2013 wasted ballots: Votes cast to all candidates other than the top two vote getters.
- 2021 wasted ballots: Inactive votes in final Ranked Choice Voting round.

Race	2013: Open / Not open	2021: Open / Not open	2013: # Candidates	2013: # Male candidates	2013: # Female candidates	2021: # Candidates	2021: # Male candidates	2021: # Female candidates	2013: Turnout	2021: Turnout	Difference in turnout	2013: Wasted votes #	2013: wasted votes %	2021: Wasted votes #	2021: Wasted votes %
Mayor (Dem)	Open	Open	9	8	1	13	9	4	691,801	941,796	36.1%	228,616	33.0%	140,167	14.9%
Mayor (Rep)	Open	Open	3	3	0	2	2	0	61,111	59,886	-2.0%	4,011	6.6%	No RCV rounds	
Public Advoc.	Open	Not open	5	2	3	3	3	0	530,089	818,507	54.4%	160,591	30.3%		
Comptr.	Open	Open	2	2	0	10	7	3	603,106	867,862	43.9%	Only two candidates		211,428	24.4%
BP Bronx	Open	Open	2	2	0	5	3	2	76,704	101,449	32.3%	Only two candidates		9,104	9.0%
BP Brook.	Open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			12	8	4	Uncontested	289,413		Uncontested		92,707	32.0%
BP Man.	Open	Open	4	1	3	7	4	3	157,909	237,725	50.5%	57,879	36.7%	50,352	21.2%
BP Queens	Open	Not open	4	3	1	3	2	1	117,069	195,467	67.0%	25,204	21.5%	12,213	6.2%
BP SI (Rep)	Not open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			4	3	1	Uncontested	19,489		Uncontested		1,167	6.0%
BP SI (Dem)	Not open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			5	4	1	Uncontested	28,413		Uncontested		3,257	11.5%

Race	2013: Open / Not open	2021: Open / Not open	2013: # Candidates	2013: # Male candidates	2013: # Female candidates	2021: # Candidates	2021: # Male candidates	2021: # Female candidates	2013: Turnout	2021: Turnout	Difference in turnout	2013: Wasted votes #	2013: wasted votes %	2021: Wasted votes #	2021: Wasted votes %
1	Not open	Open	2	0	2	9	3	6	15,024	21,831	45.3%	Only two candidates		3,995	18.3%
2	Not open	Not open	2	1	1	2	0	2	15,329	21,342	39.2%	Only two candidates		No RCV rounds	
3	Open	Open	2	1	1	6	3	3	19,816	28,556	44.1%	Only two candidates		4,725	16.5%
4	Not open (uncontested)	Not open (uncontested)	Uncontested			Uncontested			Uncontested	Uncontested		Uncontested		Uncontested	
5	Open	Open	3	3	0	7	3	4	16,367	25,436	55.4%	2,434	14.9%	3,868	15.2%
6	Open	Open	7	5	2	6	3	3	28,749	39,399	37.0%	14,593	50.8%	No RCV rounds	
7	Open	Open	10	8	2	12	8	4	18,010	23,189	28.8%	7,448	41.4%	6,533	28.2%
8	Not open	Not open	6	2	4	4	1	3	10,567	11,722	10.9%	2,827	26.8%	No RCV rounds	
9	Not open	Not open	2	1	1	13	7	6	18,412	25,626	39.2%	Only two candidates		7,696	30.0%
10	Not open	Open	3	1	2	8	4	4	14,344	19,583	36.5%	968	6.7%	2,316	11.8%
11	Open	Not open	2	2	0	7	4	3	11,751	17,004	44.7%	Only two candidates		1,523	9.0%
12	Open	Not open	4	3	1	3	1	2	15,061	17,393	15.5%	1,561	10.4%	1,161	6.7%
13	Not open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			5	1	4	Uncontested	9,960		Uncontested		No RCV rounds	
14	Not open	Open	2	2	0	6	3	3	5,992	9,385	56.6%	Only two candidates		1,541	16.4%
15 (Dem)	Open	Not open	6	4	2	8	4	4	7,675	8,204	6.9%	3,263	42.5%	1,531	18.7%
15 (Rep)	Open	Not open	Uncontested			2	2	0	Uncontested	159				No RCV rounds	
16	Open	Open	7	5	2	4	3	1	10,332	10,109	-2.2%	4,039	39.1%	No RCV rounds	
17	Not open	Not open	2	1	1	2	1	1	6,842	9,048	32.2%	Only two candidates		No RCV rounds	
18	Not open	Open	2	1	1	8	6	2	8,832	13,984	58.3%	Only two candidates		2,513	18.0%
19 (Dem)	Open	Open	5	4	1	6	5	1	9,379	13,077	39.4%	3,729	39.8%	1,338	10.2%
19 (Rep)	Open	Open	Uncontested			2	1	1	Uncontested	3,419		Uncontested		No RCV rounds	

Race	2013: Open / Not open	2021: Open / Not open	2013: # Candidates	2013: # Male candidates	2013: # Female candidates	2021: # Candidates	2021: # Male candidates	2021: # Female candidates	2013: Turnout	2021: Turnout	Difference in turnout	2013: Wasted votes #	2013: wasted votes %	2021: Wasted votes #	2021: Wasted votes %
20	Not open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			8	6	2	Uncontested	10,632		Uncontested		3,025	28.5%
21	Not open (uncontested)	Not open	Uncontested			5	3	2	Uncontested	6,847		Uncontested		No RCV rounds	
22	Open	Open	3	3	0	6	3	3	8,003	16,235	102.9%	1,751	21.9%	1,727	10.6%
23 (Dem)	Not open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			7	4	3	Uncontested	16,522		Uncontested		3,361	20.3%
23 (Rep)	Not open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			2	2	0	Uncontested	1,564		Uncontested		No RCV rounds	
24 (Dem)	Open	Not open	3	2	1	4	3	1	8,246	13,402	62.5%	1,405	17.0%	No RCV rounds	
24 (Rep)	Open	Not open	Uncontested			2	2	0	Uncontested	807		Uncontested		No RCV rounds	
25	Not open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			8	5	3	Uncontested	14,900		Uncontested		3,001	20.1%
26	Not open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			15	7	8	Uncontested	17,883		Uncontested		5,856	32.7%
27	Open	Open	6	4	2	12	7	5	16,353	20,373	24.6%	8,850	54.1%	4,181	20.5%
28	Not open	Not open	4	3	1	3	2	1	10,420	14,025	34.6%	1,890	18.1%	No RCV rounds	
29	Not open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			9	6	3	Uncontested	17,110		Uncontested		5,061	29.6%
30	Not open (uncontested)	Not open	Uncontested			2	2	0	Uncontested	9,605		Uncontested		No RCV rounds	
31	Not open	Not open	3	3	0	3	0	3	13,103	15,990	22.0%	1,645	12.6%	No RCV rounds	
32 (Dem)	Not open	Open	2	2	0	6	3	3	6,296	10,264	63.0%	Only two candidates		1,337	13.0%
32 (Rep)	Not open	Open	Uncontested			2	1	1	Uncontested	2,899		Uncontested		No RCV rounds	

Race	2013: Open / Not open	2021: Open / Not open	2013: # Candidates	2013: # Male candidates	2013: # Female candidates	2021: # Candidates	2021: # Male candidates	2021: # Female candidates	2013: Turnout	2021: Turnout	Difference in turnout	2013: Wasted votes #	2013: wasted votes %	2021: Wasted votes #	2021: Wasted votes %
33	Not open	Open	2	2	0	8	4	4	18,518	29,224	57.8%	Only two candidates		3,359	11.5%
34	Open	Open	4	3	1	4	3	1	12,358	16,437	33.0%	1,602	13.0%	No RCV rounds	
35	Open	Open	5	2	3	7	3	4	20,859	34,909	67.4%	7,929	38.0%	4,213	12.1%
36	Open	Open	5	5	0	5	4	1	14,413	23,238	61.2%	5,941	41.2%	3,689	15.9%
37	Open	Not open	4	3	1	6	4	2	7,716	10,874	40.9%	1,719	22.3%	1,503	13.8%
38	Open	Open	2	1	1	6	4	2	7,326	12,111	65.3%	Only two candidates		1,576	13.0%
39	Not open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			7	4	3	Uncontested	36,086		Uncontested		8,052	22.3%
40	Not open	Open	4	2	2	11	6	5	12,974	22,339	72.2%	1,902	14.7%	5,449	24.4%
41	Not open	Not open	3	1	2	2	0	2	11,469	15,446	34.7%	1,578	13.8%	No RCV rounds	
42	Open	Open	7	4	3	4	3	1	13,615	15,631	14.8%	4,369	32.1%	788	5.0%
43	Not open (uncontested)	Not open (uncontested)	Uncontested			Uncontested			Uncontested	Uncontested		Uncontested		Uncontested	
44	Not open	Not open (uncontested)	2	2	0	Uncontested			7,401	Uncontested		Only two candidates		Uncontested	
45	Not open	Not open	3	3	0	3	2	1	13,506	19,289	42.8%	1,500	11.1%	No RCV rounds	
46	Open	Open	2	1	1	8	2	6	14,064	18,472	31.3%	Only two candidates		4,444	24.1%
47	Open	Open	3	3	0	4	4	0	7,048	8,026	13.9%	1,815	25.8%	817	10.2%
48	Open	Open	5	4	1	5	3	2	9,542	9,204	-3.5%	3,313	34.7%	1,251	13.6%
49	Not open (uncontested)	Open	Uncontested			9	6	3	Uncontested	13,719				3,197	23.3%
50 (Rep)	Open	Open	2	1	1	5	4	1	5,590	8,420	50.6%	Only two candidates		1,382	16.4%
50 (Dem)	Open	Open	2	1	1	Uncontested			5,187	Uncontested		Only two candidates			
51 (Rep)	Not open (uncontested)	Not open (uncontested)	Uncontested			Uncontested			Uncontested	Uncontested		Uncontested		Uncontested	

	2013: # Candidates	2013: # Male candidates	2013: # Female candidates	2021: # Candidates	2021: # Male candidates	2021: # Female candidates
Total candidates (not counting uncontested races)	172	120	52	372	220	152
Total candidates, only for open seats	123	89	35	284	168	116
Avg candidate per open seat	4.1	3.0	1.2	7.5	4.4	3.1
Open seats		30			38	
Total turnout		772,241			998,000	