

Opinion

SEIDMAN: Is Florida blocking a better voting system?

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Ranked choice voting passed in Sarasota in 2007 by a 78 percent margin. But it can't be implemented until the state gives its OK — which isn't likely to happen anytime soon.

Maybe it's a dilemma you've faced: There's a third party candidate you love, but you're reluctant to vote for him or her because, without the backing of a major party, they've got next to no chance of winning. And if your favorite becomes a spoiler, you might be playing a role in electing the very person you'd *least* like to see in office.

So you listen to your head rather than your heart and reluctantly cast your ballot for the lesser of two evils, feeling like you've had to settle for lima beans when what you really wanted was crème brûlée. Shouldn't there be a better way?

Actually, there is. It's called "ranked choice voting" (RCV) and it involves marking a ballot not only with your first choice, but rating in order of your preference as many of the other candidates in the field as you choose. (For a video explanation, go to [youtube.com/watch?v=oHRPMJmzBBw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHRPMJmzBBw)). After a first round count that eliminates the candidate with the least votes, those secondary choices are factored in to come up with a winner who is elected by a majority rather than a plurality.



“The plurality system is the spoiler,” said Adam Friedman of Voter Choice Massachusetts, speaking at a recent local presentation on RCV. “It fails to guarantee majority winners. It fails to eliminate the spoiler effect. It discourages candidates from running and it limits our choice in the voting booth. We’re not as free as we think because there are all sort of twisted things that force our hand.”

Adopting RCV “doesn’t fix everything,” said New College of Florida political science professor Frank Alcock, “but it’s a step in the right direction.”

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“We’ve become hyperpolarized in the country with a two-party dominance and it’s led us to some outcomes that don’t reflect where we are,” he said. “This allows you to express your true preference, it brings a degree of competition we don’t have, and it allows us to hold elected officials accountable.”

Sarasota Mayor Jen Ahern-Koch believes RCV would benefit candidates as well as voters, by eliminating costs for subsequent campaigns and elections and reducing the divisive dialogue heated races can bring.

“One of my favorite things about this is that if there are five candidates and they know people are going to rank them, you, as a candidate, are not going to start dissing the others because that makes you look bad,” she said. “This isn’t a cure-all, but I think it will help candidates stay in their own lane.”

Because RCV has also proven to increase voter turnout and reduce the influence of money on politics, there’s a growing movement around the country to adopt the process. Last month, New York City voted by 74 percent to adopt RCV for local elections and it is already in use or pending in some form in 25 states and 12 cities. Australians have used the system for over a century.

If this all sounds vaguely familiar, it’s because Sarasota voted (by a margin of 78 percent) to adopt RCV for municipal elections back in 2007, when it was known as “instant runoff voting.” The motivation then was to save money by eliminating the need for additional contests when no candidate garnered more than 50 percent of the vote.

That vote was rendered moot for more than a decade because we didn't have the equipment to make it possible. In 2016, however, Sarasota purchased the necessary hardware and software and requested the required certification from the Secretary of State that would make it the first municipal entity in Florida to vote by RCV. That request has been refused based on the current administration's interpretation of the state Constitution, which they believe mandates election by a plurality.

To force a change, Friedman said, will take either a costly battle in the courts or building sufficient political pressure through a grassroots movement, such as the one he ignited in Massachusetts. He believes Florida, a swing state notorious for narrow candidate victories, is "the ideal place" to become "a beacon to the rest of the country."

"Everyone wants to see Florida change and put this whole thing on the map," Friedman said. "It would change voting in America."

John Severini, chair of Rank My Vote Florida, a 501(c)4 that has launched a state-wide campaign for broad adoption of RCV, says the opposition comes from "people who don't really know what RCV is" or who believe the system is "too complicated or too confusing for voters."

But in a recent Democratic primary in Maine, the only state using RCV for statewide elections, there was no increase in error rate, turnout grew by about 10 points and 87 percent of voters chose to rank multiple (or all) candidates. According to exit polls, it also brought a greater sense of satisfaction with the political process.

As one voter put it: "It allows you to vote your conscience — and then also to vote your 'slightly more electable' conscience."

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