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# Utah's Experiment with Ranked Choice Voting: Answering the Who What & Why's

Examining the historical origins of Utah ranked choice voting advocacy and implementation - Considering the future of preferential voting in Utah elections.

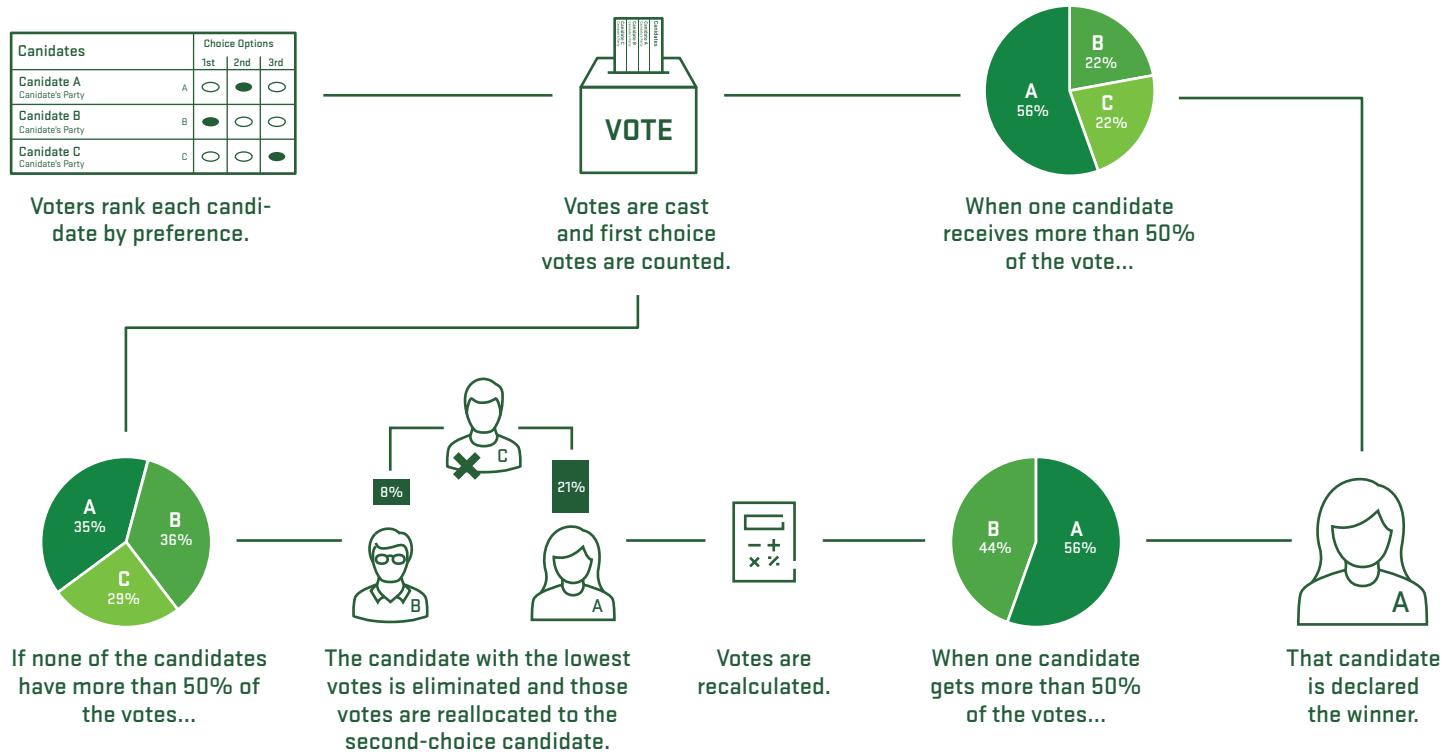
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## WHAT IS RANKED-CHOICE VOTING AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) is an alternative voting method that various localities in Utah have used to elect city officials. RCV is primarily used when more than two candidates are on the ballot. RCV allows voters to rank each candidate by preference. If one candidate cannot claim a majority in the first round of vote counting, the candidate with the lowest number

of votes is eliminated. RCV is unique because of the counting structure it employs. If a voter's first-choice candidate is eliminated, the voter's second-choice candidate is included in the second round of votes. The counting process continues until one candidate claims a majority of votes to win the election.<sup>1</sup>



As ranked choice voting has been piloted in Utah, **each election's realization of positive and negative outcomes has varied.**

## WHY RANKED CHOICE VOTING?

Advocates of this voting method insist that RCV will generally resolve several issues the conventional voting system creates, including reducing the costs of administering elections, restoring civility in political campaigning, and electing a candidate preferred by a majority of voters. As RCV has been piloted, each election's realization of these outcomes varies. Some cities like Salt Lake City and Sandy experienced much

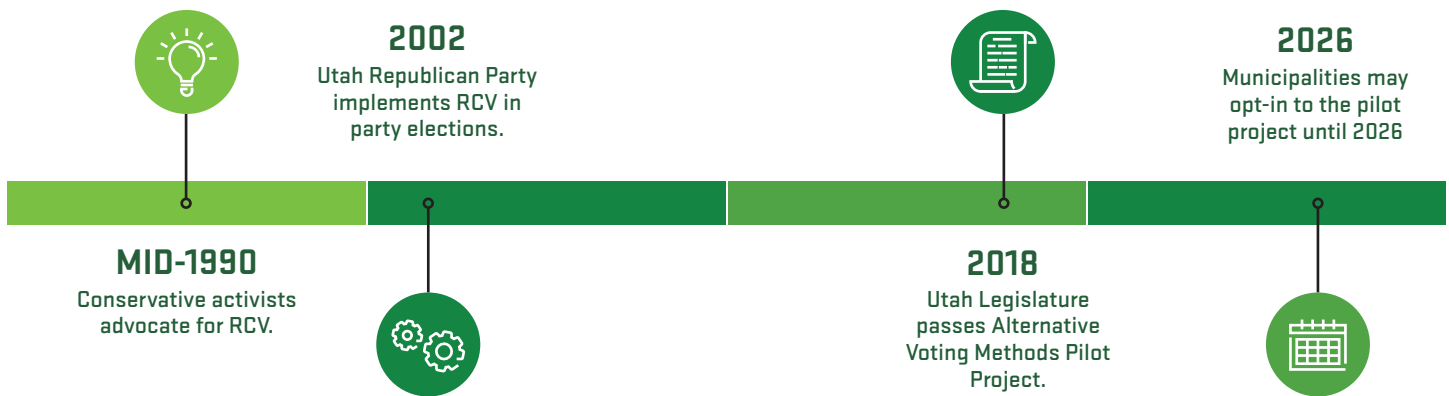
higher costs to administer RCV than a non-RCV election, leaving questions unanswered about future expenses. Sherrie Swenson stated that Salt Lake County "grossly underestimated" the cost of administering RCV, resulting in \$40,000 of unanticipated additional costs.<sup>2</sup> However, election costs were reduced in 2021 for Utah County taxpayers due to the elimination of primary elections by RCV.<sup>3</sup>

## HISTORICAL SUMMARY OF RANKED-CHOICE VOTING IN UTAH

In Utah, RCV was first advocated for in the mid-1990s by conservative grassroots activists before the Republican State Central Committee as a method of running their convention elections.<sup>4</sup> The Utah Republican Party implemented RCV in party elections beginning in 2002. The use of RCV in local elections occurred in 2018 after the passage of HB35 (The Municipal Alternate Voting Method Pilot Project), sponsored by Representative Mark Roberts.<sup>5</sup> The bill, which was floor sponsored by Senator Howard Stephenson, established a process for a municipality to opt into the pilot project and established requirements and procedures for conducting an


election under the pilot program. These included the completion of ballots, the counting of votes, recount provisions, resolving a tie, and canvassing. It also provided a sunset date for the pilot project, which was reduced from 10 to 8 years before the legislature passed the bill.<sup>6</sup> The pilot project allows Utah cities or counties to conduct their local elections using RCV. Until the end of 2026, municipalities may choose to opt-in to the pilot project by May 1, before the fall election of that year, by registering with the Lieutenant Governor's office through written notice.<sup>7</sup>

## TIMELINE OF RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN UTAH




HB35 established requirements and procedures for conducting an election under the pilot program. These included **the completion of ballots, the counting of votes, recount provisions, resolving a tie, and canvassing.**


## MAJOR POINTS OF HB35



Established a process for a municipality to opt into the pilot project



Established procedures for conducting an election under the pilot program



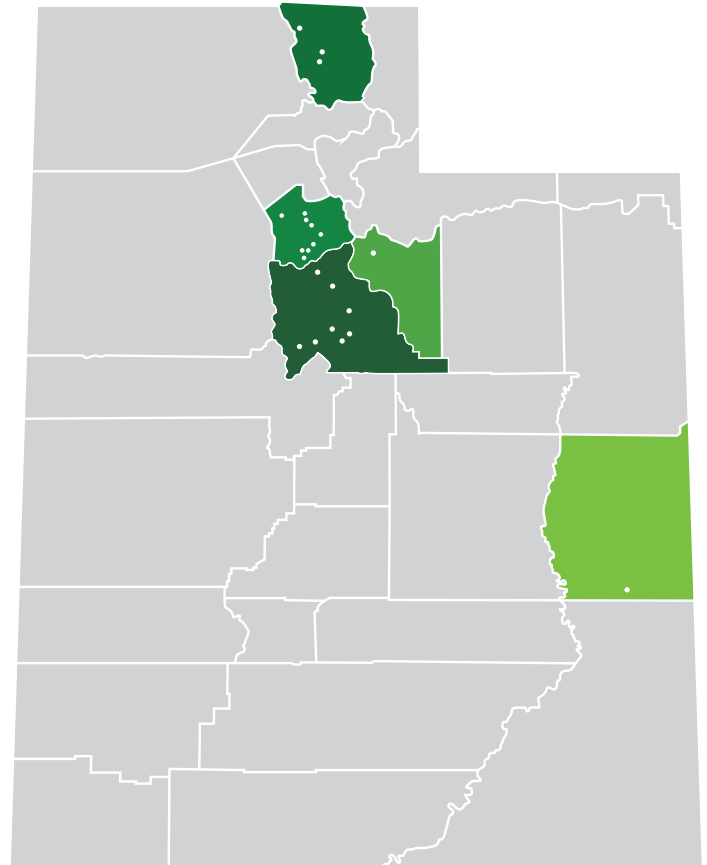
Until the end of 2026, municipalities may choose to opt-in to the pilot project

Provided a sunset date after 8 years

## HAS MY CITY USED RANKED-CHOICE VOTING?

Shortly after H.B. 35 passed, the cities of Payson and Vineyard registered to use RCV in their local elections. During the 2021 election cycle, 20 cities in 5 counties registered and used RCV for the first time.<sup>8</sup> Most of those cities were located in Salt Lake and Utah County. However, several cities in Cache, Grand, and Wasatch counties have opted into the pilot program.<sup>9</sup>

CACHE COUNTY		UTAH COUNTY	
Newton	2021	Lehi	2021
Nibley	2021	Vineyard	2019
River Heights City	2021	Springville	2021
		Payson	2019
		Woodland Hills	2021
		Elk Ridge	2021
		Genola	2021
		Goshen	2021
SALT LAKE COUNTY		WASATCH COUNTY	
Salt Lake City	2021	Heber	2021
Sandy	2021		
Cottonwood Heights	2021	GRAND COUNTY	
Bluffdale	2021	Moab	2021
Draper	2021		
Riverton	2021		
Midvale	2021		
Millcreek	2021		
South Salt Lake	2021		
Magna	2021		



Since 2020, **over 60 pieces of legislation have been put forward to address various aspects of election administration and law.** Most Utah lawmakers are confident in the pilot project, despite growing skepticism within the legislature.

## WHAT'S THE FUTURE OF RANKED-CHOICE VOTING IN UTAH?

There have been recent efforts within the Utah Legislature to make RCV the primary voting method for all state elections. However, those efforts failed in the recent 2021 and 2022 legislative sessions.<sup>10</sup> Utah lawmakers are hesitant to expand the pilot project mainly due to concerns about public confidence in RCV, the fiscal impact of implementation, and procedural holes. Many of these concerns have been experienced by some municipalities since implementation began in 2019. Considering prevalent nationwide claims of voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election, Utah lawmakers have made substantial efforts to tighten election law and administration in Utah, with broad bipartisan support. Since 2020, over 60 pieces of legislation have been put forward to address various aspects of

election administration and law. Most Utah lawmakers are confident in the pilot project, despite growing skepticism within the legislature.

It is unclear what the future of RCV is in Utah, as its expansion has been quietly rejected by the legislature each time it is proposed, resulting in RCV not being codified statewide. Nevertheless, since the pilot project was passed, several bills have been codified to address problems as cities administer this new election method. These are commonly referred to as 'clean-up bills' by lawmakers. They aim to make minor adjustments to existing laws to streamline and simplify regulation and administration procedures.

## WHERE CAN I GO TO GET MORE INFORMATION ON RANKED-CHOICE VOTING?

Your city may be considering using RCV for its 2023 local elections. Contact your city clerk or recorder to find out if your city has opted in. The Herbert Institute has prepared other resources, including a mock RCV election video, to help you

learn about RCV in Utah. You can access that video here. Numerous other resources are made available by the State of Utah, municipalities, and cities to properly understand RCV and how to cast an RCV ballot in an election.

### LINKS

[Salt Lake County RCV Resources](#)

[Utah County RCV Resources](#)

[Salt Lake City RCV Resources](#)

[Sandy City RCV Resources](#)

[Draper City RCV Resources](#)

[Vineyard City RCV Resources](#)

[Lehi City RCV Resources](#)

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Details about Ranked Choice Voting,” FairVote, [https://www.fairvote.org/rcv#where\\_is\\_ranked\\_choice\\_voting\\_used](https://www.fairvote.org/rcv#where_is_ranked_choice_voting_used)

<sup>2</sup> Carter Williams, “Will ranked choice voting return for Salt Lake City’s mayoral race?” KSL.com, August 22, 2022, <https://www.ksl.com/article/50461852/will-ranked-choice-voting-return-for-salt-lake-citys-mayoral-race->

<sup>3</sup> 2021 municipal election costs, Utah County elections division, [https://mountainland.org/static/files/committees/cog/meetings/2021/2021\\_04\\_01/6-Memo%20to%20Mayors%20-%20Cost%20of%20Municipal%20Election.pdf](https://mountainland.org/static/files/committees/cog/meetings/2021/2021_04_01/6-Memo%20to%20Mayors%20-%20Cost%20of%20Municipal%20Election.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Lockhart, S. (2022, August). Record available upon request.

<sup>5</sup> Municipal Alternate Voting Methods Pilot Project, Utah Code 20A-4-6, <https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title20A/Chapter4/20A-4-P6.html>

<sup>6</sup> H.B. 35, 61st Legislature, 2018 Gen. Sess. (Utah. 2018). <https://le.utah.gov/~2018/bills/static/HB0035.html>

<sup>7</sup> Municipal Alternate Voting Methods Pilot Project, Utah Code 20A-4-6, <https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title20A/Chapter4/20A-4-P6.html>

<sup>8</sup> Deb Otis, “Utah 2021 Report,” FairVote, May 24, 2022, <https://fairvote.app.box.com/s/s5tx6125zxtzynj4omi8szrl6bd8yy0k>

<sup>9</sup> Leia Larson “Ranked-choice voting expands in Utah this year. See if your city is doing it.” The Salt Lake Tribune, July 8, 2021, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2021/07/08/ranked-choice-voting/>

<sup>10</sup> H.B. 127, 64th Legislature, 2021 Gen. Sess. (Utah. 2021). <https://le.utah.gov/~2021/bills/static/HB0127.html/>; H.B. 178, 65th Legislature, 2022 Gen. Sess. (Utah. 2022). <https://le.utah.gov/~2022/bills/static/HB0178.html>

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