

The Information Landscape and Voters' Understanding of RCV in Alaska

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Abstract: In 2020, Alaska voters approved a ballot measure that implemented Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) in statewide and state legislative contests, as well as Congressional races. The 2022 election was the first cycle in which voters and election officials experienced voting using RCV rules. This paper examines the information landscape surrounding the RCV elections, including how organizations, candidates, political parties, and election officials communicate with voters in 2022 about the new rules. We use data gathered from tweets and newspaper coverage surrounding the election, as well as through interviews with Alaskan stakeholders. The paper also examines election results of primary and general elections from 2014 through 2022 to examine whether RCV created increased voter confusion. Finally, we note that Alaska provides unique opportunities to analyze RCV understanding among language minority communities (Tagalog, Spanish, and Native Alaskan). Therefore, we will also analyze if voters' understanding of RCV rules varies by language communities, in addition to other demographic factors among voters.

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Introduction

Prior to the implementation of ranked choice voting (RCV) in the 2022 election cycle, Alaska had closed primaries and a traditional plurality voting system where voters cast their ballots for their preferred candidate, and the candidate with the most votes won regardless of whether they earned a majority of the vote share. In November 2020, voters in Alaska approved Ballot Measure 2, which established open, nonpartisan primary elections for state executive and state federal legislative races in which the top four candidates advanced to the general election (Hillman 2022, Ballotpedia n.d.). Following the primary, in the general election voters would use ranked choice voting to rank the top four vote getters and elect candidates. Under this process, “if a candidate receives a majority of first-choice votes (50%+1), they win”; if none of the candidates has a majority of the first-choice votes, “the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and voters that ranked that candidate 1st have their vote counted for their next choice. This process continues until one candidate receives a majority of voters’ choices” (Alaskans for Better Elections 2023).

In addition to the changes to the primary and general election processes, the initiative also included campaign contribution reforms, requiring those who donate or receive a contribution of more than \$2,000 to disclose the contribution within 24 hours, and it requires groups that receive the majority of their funding from outside the state to disclose that information (Alaskans for Better Elections 2023). The measure passed with 50.55% approval, by a slim margin of 3,781 votes, making Alaska the second state after Maine to adopt ranked-choice voting for statewide elections and the first state to adopt a top-four primary election (Hillman 2022).

The initiative to implement RCV in Alaska was led by the coalition-based interest group Alaskans for Better Elections, who gathered the required number of signatures to get the initiative on the 2020 ballot (Alaskans for Better Elections 2023). The ballot language was largely written by Scott Kendall, an Anchorage attorney who formerly served as Chief of Staff to former Governor Bill Walker and as Lisa Murkowski’s attorney in her successful write-in campaign for U.S. Senate in 2010. Kendall drew in large part from language in a bill that was proposed but not passed in the state legislature in 2019 (Brooks 2020, Samuels 2022).

The ballot measure was also supported by several groups that were based outside of Alaska. Supporters of Ballot Measure 2 contributed nearly \$7 million, while opponents raised less than \$1 million (Ballotpedia n.d.). The Action Now Initiative, a Texas-based, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization funded by Arnold Ventures and focused on “maximizing opportunity and minimizing injustice through evidence-based policy reform” (Action Now Initiative 2023) contributed more than \$2.9 million to the RCV campaign (Brooks 2020, Hillman 2022). Another major funder was Unite America, a Colorado-based group that describes itself as “a movement of Democrats, Republicans, and independents working to bridge the growing partisan divide and foster a more representative and functional government”, which contributed over \$3 million (Brooks 2020, Hillman 2022, Unite America 2023). And Unite and Renew (n.d.), which describes itself as “a coalition of Americans from the center-right and center-left, Republicans, Democrats, and Independents” and is funded by California investor Harrison Miller, contributed \$300,000 (Brooks 2020). Opponents of Ballot Measure 2 highlighted the fact that outside groups were influencing the way Alaskan elections would be run in the future.

While local groups may not have been major donors to the campaign efforts in 2020, they did help with voter education and Get-Out-The-Vote initiatives in 2022, ahead of the first

election using RCV. The Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN), the largest statewide organization serving Native Alaskans, supported the ballot measure and actively worked to educate their communities about the new RCV system. The organization saw Ballot Measure 2 as an opportunity to elect more mainstream, middle of the road candidates who would communicate with them as Native Alaskans. AFN helped with communicating to Native communities and worked with Alaskans for Better Elections to help educate voters and conduct mock RCV elections. The group also relied heavily on social media, used public radio, faxed information to be posted at tribal and city offices, posted flyers on community bulletin boards, and focused on making sure people were registered and knew when and where to vote, as well as how to properly use the new ranking system (Shannon Mangnuson and Nicole Borromeo, personal communication, March 29, 2023).

One aspect that made the Alaska 2020 ballot initiative unique is that neither major political party endorsed it in the campaign phase. When ten candidates for state senate were asked in October 2020 if they intended to vote for Ballot Measure 2, only the independent candidates signaled that they would; the Democratic and Republican candidates indicated that they did not plan to vote for this initiative (Brooks 2020). In 2020, for some Democrats in Alaska, the history of ten years ago loomed large. In the 2010 U.S. Senate race, Republican Lisa Murkowski was able to attract Democrats and independent voters to win the election, and Democrats feared that the new system could have the same effect on future races, disadvantaging Democratic candidates (Brooks 2020). The Republican party also had concerns; they donated \$50,000 to the group opposing Ballot Measure 2, and passed a resolution that “unequivocally opposes the passage of the ‘Better Elections’ ballot initiative” (Brooks 2020). Much of the resistance to Ballot Measure 2 on the part of political parties was around the shift to an open

primary system; both major parties were hesitant to give up control over the primary elections process (Personal communication with Scott Kendall 3/2/2023, Mangnuson and Borromeo 3/29/2023).

Opposition to and support for Ballot Measure 2 created interesting bedfellows. The state representatives from the most Democratic districts in Alaska and the Republican governor Mike Dunleavy all said they would vote against the measure. In another unlikely pairing, Republican former Governor Sean Parnell and Democratic former U.S. Senator Mark Begich (2020) penned an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal criticizing Ballot Measure 2 as potentially decreasing voter turnout and disenfranchising those who only choose one candidate instead of ranking all candidates. Meanwhile, Senator Begich's son, Jacob Begich (2020), wrote an op-ed in the Anchorage Daily News supporting Ballot Measure 2, touting that it would potentially increase voter turnout and give independent voters a choice, and accusing both major parties of being afraid of moving control from those in the party establishment to the voters. Trade unions were split on the issue with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers opposing the measure and the AFL-CIO staying out of the issue (Brooks 2020).

Less than a month after it was approved by voters, Ballot Measure 2 was challenged in court by the Alaskan Independence Party (AIP), Robert Bird (Chairman of the AIP), Kenneth Jacobus (attorney), and Scott Kohlhaas (who ran for office as a Libertarian) (Ballotpedia n.d., Bohrer 2021). The group claimed that Ballot Measure 2 violated their rights to free speech, free political association and due process, and cited concerns that minor party candidates could get “lost in the shuffle” in a nonpartisan primary (Ballotpedia n.d., Bohrer 2021); they alleged that ranked choice voting imposes “an unconstitutional burden on the voter’s right to make a

knowledgeable choice” (Bohrer 2021). Both the superior court and the Alaska Supreme Court ruled against the plaintiffs and upheld Ballot Measure 2 as constitutional (Ballotpedia n.d.).

Following the approval of Ballot Measure 2, the Alaska Division of Elections and the state government worked to implement the necessary changes to transition from the previous system to RCV. This involved updating regulations, providing education and training to voters and election officials, and modifying the election infrastructure. Many educational tools were rolled out by the Division of Elections including videos, FAQs, and sample ballots (Alaska Division of Elections n.d.). The nonpartisan primary was first used for a special election in June 2022 to fill a vacancy created by the death of U.S. Representative Don Young. RCV was first used in August 2022 for the subsequent special election which saw Mary Peltola elected to the open seat; notably, Peltola is the first-ever woman elected to the House of Representatives from the state of Alaska. RCV was used again for the November 2022 general election where many of the candidates from the special election faced off again (Alaska Division of Elections n.d., Shivaram 2022).

The fight around RCV in Alaska still carries on, however. In the 2023 legislative session, Republican Representative Sarah Vance sponsored a bill to repeal ranked choice voting in Alaska. While she cited a Dittman Research Poll that found 51% of voters wanted to repeal ranked choice voting, those who spoke at the public hearing overwhelmingly supported RCV and touted the election of moderate candidates Mary Peltola and Lisa Murkowski as evidence of the effectiveness of RCV (Ruskin 2023). Opponents of RCV said voter confusion was a problem, and a group called Alaskans for Honest Elections are focusing their efforts on a ballot initiative to repeal RCV and open primaries (Alaskans for Honest Elections n.d.). Former Governor Sarah Palin was the first to sign the repeal petition, which will need 26,000 signatures to get on the

ballot (Samuels 2022). Founding members of Alaskans for Honest Elections, Art Mathias and Phillip Izon have cited voter confusion and decreased voter turnout as reasons for ending RCV, but they also indicated that their efforts are intended to help conservative Republicans win elections; a number of Republicans who are former officeholders are advising the group, and the Heritage Foundation has pledged its support as well (Samuels 2023). Palin was one of 48 candidates in a special election to replace U.S. Representative Don Young after his death. While Palin garnered the most votes in the 48-way primary she did not receive a majority of the voteshare; in the RCV process of counting ballots she ultimately lost the general election to Democrat Mary Peltola (Samuels 2022). Even if Alaskans for Honest Elections can repeal RCV through a future ballot initiative, Alaska will have at least one more election under the RCV system in 2024 (Samuels 2022).

In this paper, we examine the information landscape around RCV elections in Alaska, including how political parties, candidates, and interest groups messages to voters about the validity and use of the new system. We also measure levels of voter confusion with the new system as measured by the number of residual votes.

RCV Use in the United States

RCV first began to gather momentum in the United States during the Progressive Era at the start of the 20th century. Reformers looking to mitigate corruption in American politics looked to RCV as a way of ensuring that candidates would not win with a simple plurality of votes, as well as the promise it held to stymie the influence of political party machines (Santucci 2021; Terrell et al. 2021). RCV received much support particularly from women's suffrage organizations early on, because they viewed the reform as being helpful to electing more women to political office (Terrell et al. 2021). While RCV did work to increase the number of women—

and other historically underrepresented constituencies—running for and winning political office, these successes were also met with resistance and the response was a series of campaigns to repeal RCV in local jurisdictions (Santucci 2021; Terrell et al. 2021).

As of April 2023, RCV is employed in at least two dozen states in the U.S., including those states where localities have adopted the system, states that use RCV in primary elections only, as well as states and jurisdictions that use RCV in military and overseas voting (FairVote 2023). Maine was the first state to adopt RCV statewide, using this system for the first time in 2018 for Congressional and statewide races. Alaska became only the second state to adopt the reform for all state and federal races (except Presidential races) in 2020; voters first used the system in the 2022 election cycle. New York City is the largest American jurisdiction so far to use RCV, which was adopted in 2020 with a decisive vote share of 74% of voters approving the reform (Simmons et al. 2022). Currently, some 63 jurisdictions in the U.S. use RCV in some form, though the format of these elections varies. For instance, in Alaska voters use a “top-four” open primary system (also adopted through the 2020 ballot measure) that sends the four candidates with the most votes through to the general election.

RCV and Voter Confusion

One critique of RCV systems is that levels of voter confusion can increase compared with traditional plurality-based election rules (Lau and Redlawsk 2006). RCV ballots increase the complexity of voting tasks by asking voters to process information and form preferences around multiple candidates, rather than choosing a single candidate. Some scholars show that RCV rules can increase cognitive challenges for voters in processing the increased amount of information (Lau and Redlawsk 2006). To cast complete ballots in RCV elections, voters must gather more information about candidates; the increased complexity of the voting task and more complicated

information landscape may disproportionately disenfranchise inexperienced or low-resourced voters (McDaniel 2016; Crowder-Meyer et al. 2021).

Some studies show that ballot errors are slightly more common in RCV elections than in elections using single vote rules (Neely and Cook 2008; Neely and McDaniel 2015; Schultz and Rendahl 2010; Maloy 2019, 122-123). Also, voters report that ballot instructions are more complicated in cities that use ranked choice voting (Donovan, Tolbert, and Gracey 2019). In sum, Americans do not like confusing or overly bureaucratic rules (Herd and Moynihan 2019), and opponents of ranked choice voting frequently argue that the rules are too confusing.

Several studies also show, however, that voters largely understand ranked choice voting rules. In places that have adopted RCV rules, a majority of voters typically rank more than one candidate, unless a candidate or party instructs supporters to only rank one candidate (Mauter 2014; Neely and McDaniel 2015; Burnett and Kogan 2015; Alvarez, Hall, and Levin 2018; Gillespie, Levan, and Maisel 2019). Most voters also rank candidates in ways that reflect rational candidate preferences, at least in the presence of clear party cues (Alvarez, Hall, and Levin 2018). The positive reports from voters stand in contrast to those from local election officials, who tend to believe that many voters do not understand RCV rules (Anthony et al. 2020).

There is mixed evidence around whether RCV rules have negative, disproportionate impacts on under-represented constituencies. Some studies have found higher error rates in minority precincts in San Francisco RCV elections (Neely and Blash 2008; Neely and McDaniel 2015). Another study of Minneapolis RCV elections, however, found no racial or income disparities in overvotes after the adoption of RCV voting rules (Montjoy et al. 2017). Coll (2021) finds no significant racial differences in abilities to rank candidates, while Maloy and Ward (2021) find that Asian and Black voters are more likely to make ballot mistakes on ranked ballots

than white voters. Studies of voter understanding of RCV rules tend to find minimal differences across racial groups (Donovan, Tolbert, and Gracey 2019).

This study contributes more to understanding how the information context of an RCV election impacts levels of voter confusion. Experimental evidence shows that simply providing information about candidates encourages voters to rank all the candidates that they are able to rank (Boudreau, Colner, and MacKenzie, 2020). One study assessing how voters used a system of “cumulative voting” in a local election in Port Chester, New York in 2010 shows that voters largely understood the system and cast their ballots correctly—even strategically—because there was a concerted effort on the part of election officials and organizations to educate the public about the new system in advance (Kimball and Kropf 2016). More studies since then have confirmed that voter confusion also diminishes—and support for RCV also increases—when voters receive voting guides, sample ballots, and overall become more familiar with this system (Neely et al. 2005; Shineman 2016; Blais et al. 2021; Crowder-Meyer et al. 2021).

Herein, we use Alaska's first use of the RCV system as a case study to survey the information landscape provided in a new RCV election. In order to understand the information landscape, we have conducted several intensive interviews with Alaska election professionals in order to understand how stakeholders are using information. Second, we examine newspaper articles all over the state and Tweets from the Division of Elections, the parties, the candidates, and a wide selection of interest groups active in Alaska to answer the question of what sort of information is available to prospective voters about RCV. Finally, we examine election results to see whether voters used RCV to the fullest extent by ranking all the candidates they were able.

Partisanship and RCV Support

Some research shows that the institution of an RCV election can be a highly partisan affair. Some existing studies find stronger support for RCV among Democrats than Republicans (McCarthy and Santucci 2021; Anthony and Kimball 2021), while Blais and colleagues (2021) finds little to no relationship between party affiliation and preferences for ranked choice voting. The adoption of RCV in Maine has been highly partisan, with Democrats largely supporting the reform and Republicans strongly opposed (Santucci 2018; Gillespie, Levan and Maisel 2019; Anthony et al. 2020).

The adoption of RCV in Alaska provides a more complicated case of partisan support for the new rules (e.g., Herz 2020 on Alaska). In the early stages of the Ballot Measure 2 in Alaska, both political parties were opposed to the reform, because the ballot measure also required an open primary system; neither political party was in favor of this change. However, in August of 2022, when RCV was used for the first time, the political parties in Alaska appear to have accepted the reform and were actively part of a much larger organizational landscape informing voters about how to use the new system.

The complicated relationship of party to RCV attitudes suggests a more nuanced analysis of the information landscape—how is information provided to voters? That is, do various stakeholders simply seek to educate voters on how to use it? Do they suggest a strategy for using RCV to enhance the possibility of a particular outcome? Importantly, how are candidates communicating information? We code the newspaper articles and tweets for themes related to RCV. We hypothesize that the types of information provided will vary by the communicator's partisanship.

Data & Methods

In 2022 when RCV was used for the first time, the political parties in Alaska were part of a much larger organizational landscape informing voters about how to use the new system. In order to evaluate the information landscape, we analyzed two distinct types of media information: 1.) newspaper coverage from all over the state; 2.) Tweets from candidates, the two main political parties, various interest groups, and the Alaska Division of Elections.

Newspaper coverage of RCV

To find articles about RCV, we utilized the Newsbank database in order to search all available Alaska newspapers for the dates May 16-November 30, 2022. We chose those dates to locate information three months before the primary and special general election. We also searched approximately three weeks after the election (through November 30). Table 1 provides the search terms we used to locate newspaper articles.

Table 1: The Search Terms Used to Locate RCV Articles

Top-4, Top 4, Top Four (any of those and “primary”); RCV, Ranked choice voting, Final four, Ballot, “Don’t rank your ballot”, “Rank your choices”

Table 2 provides a list of the newspapers we searched for and the number of articles we located. We supplemented the newspaper search with articles collected by Unite America and from Fairvote.org's media monitoring created by staffer Will Mantell. We checked all the searches for duplicate articles, as might especially happen when newspapers used wire services for newspaper articles.

Table 2: Newspapers Searched and Number of Articles Located

Newspaper	Number of Articles
Anchorage Daily News	166
Anchorage Press	27
Arctic Sounder	17
Associated Press State Wire: Alaska	21
Bristol Bay Times & Dutch Harbor Fisherman	30
Daily Sitka Sentinel	31
Delta Discovery	12
Edge, The: University of Alaska-Anchorage	1
Fairbanks Daily News-Miner	96
Homer News	20
Juneau Empire	83
Kodiak Daily Mirror	20
Mat-Su Valley Frontiersman	48
Nome Nugget	13
Northern Light, The University of Alaska	1
The Peninsula Clarion	68
Articles not on NewsBank (supplemented with Fairvote.org articles)	82

From those searches, we acquired and are coding a total of 736 newspaper articles, including news articles, editorials, and letters to the editor.

Twitter/Tweets from Candidates, the Division of Elections, and Interest Groups

Using the same time period for Twitter searches as the newspaper searches, we downloaded Tweets broadcast by candidates (see Tables 3-5), the parties, and interest groups

(see Table 6). We also downloaded Tweets broadcast by the Alaska Division of Elections, as prior research indicates that election officials are a key source of nonpartisan election information (see for example, Merivaki and Suttman-Lea, 2023).

Table 3: Senate Candidate Tweets (only including those who made it beyond the primary)

Candidate	Party	Number of Tweets
Patricia R. Chesbro	Democrat	402
Buzz A. Kelley	Republican	3
Lisa Murkowski	Republican	633
Kelly C. Tshibaka	Republican	967

Table 4: House Candidate Tweets (only those who made it beyond the primary)

Candidate	Party	Number of Tweets
Nick Begich	Republican	57
Chris Bye	Libertarian	271
Sarah Palin	Republican	198
Mary S. Peltola	Democrat	1,042

Table 5: Gubernatorial Candidate Tweets (only those who made it beyond the primary)

Candidate	Party	Number of Tweets
Mike Dunleavy (Nancy Dahlstrom)	Republican	MD=112 ND=0
Les Gara (Jessica Cook)	Democratic	LG=676 JC=339
Bill Walker (Heidi Drygas)	Independent	BW=417 HD=554
Charlie Pierce (Edie Grunwald)	Republican	CD=no apparent account EG=17

Table 6: Election Division, Party Organizations and Interest Groups Tweeting During the RCV Campaign

Group	Leans	Number of Tweets
<i>Election Division</i>		
Alaska Division of Elections	nonpartisan	468
<i>Political Parties</i>		
Alaska Capital City Republican Women	Republicans	0
Alaska Republicans	Republican (Official)	188
The Alaskan Democratic Party	Democratic (Official)	667
Alaska Young Democrats	Democratic	135
<i>Interest Groups</i>		
ACLU of Alaska	Left	104
AFL-CIO of Alaska ¹	Left	243
Alaska Center	Left	424
Alaska Policy Forum	Right	72
Alaskan Federation of Natives	nonpartisan/left	53
Alaska Firefighters	Left (?)	24
Alaska Public Interest Research Group (PIRG)	Left	158
Alaska Americans for Prosperity	Right	47
Alaska Chamber of Commerce	Right	19
Alaska Miners	Left	96

¹ https://www.bls.gov/regions/west/news-release/unionmembership_alaska.htm.

Alaskans for Better Elections	nonpartisan	354
Alaska Right to Life	Right	0
ANCSA Regional Corporation ²	Endorsed Murkowski and Petola	93
Alaska Oil and Gas Association (AOGA)	Right	163 (but only one appears to be about voting and it's on Election Day)
Alaska Planned Parenthood Advocates	Left	0
RurAL Cap	Left	128
AARP Alaska	Nonpartisan (left leaning)	94
@AK_BlackCaucus	Left	4
Tlingit & Haida	Tribal Government	351

Results

While as of this writing the newspaper article coding is not complete, in Table 7, we provide the coding of the newspaper that is complete from *The Anchorage Daily News*. Several different themes have emerged from the articles, including encouragement for people to vote,

² The ANCSA organization is a group of regional organizations designed to organize land ownership in the wake of the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971. Their webpage indicates that the corporation "added an additional layer of land ownership across Alaska. Additionally, in 1998 the federal government officially recognized over 200 Indian tribes in Alaska (entirely separate entities from Alaska Native corporations), which opened the doors for a government-to-government relationships between those tribes and the federal government. ANCSA divided the state into twelve regions defined by the common heritage and shared interests of the indigenous peoples within each geographic area. The regional boundaries do not represent land owned by the Alaska Native regional corporations; instead, they established which of the twelve Alaska Native regional corporations would serve the people, villages, and communities within that area. Within each region of Alaska there is a complex landscape of governance, land ownership, roles, and relationships. While there is overlap in who the organizations represent, each entity plays a distinct role. Individuals and businesses alike experience the intricate network of Alaska Native regional corporations, Alaska Native village corporations, federally recognized tribes, city and borough governments, and Alaska Native regional non-profit organizations." (see <https://ancsaregional.com/the-twelve-regions/>).

education on ranking processes, various types of strategy suggestions, and reporting on the difficulties that people had voting both in general and with RCV.

Table 7: Information Themes Found in *Anchorage Daily News*

Coding Categories	Number of Appearances	Example
General get out the vote	14	About Mary Petola as first Native Alaskan in Congress: "Some leaders hope that will translate to greater turnout among rural voters, who face challenges such as slow mail delivery and a high ballot rejection rate." (10-23-22)
Education	57	"One side of the ballot is all ranked-choice questions. On the other side are yes-no questions, including a once-in-a-decade question on whether to hold a constitutional convention and judicial retention questions for 29 state judges." (11-8-2022)
Strategy: hidden	15	From Central State Committee: "The committee is made up of 80-odd members, and is comprised of Republican District chairs and other party officials. It threw its unanimous support behind Dunleavy in January and narrowly approved endorsing Pierce in April as part of a ranked-choice voting strategy." (10-25-22)

Strategy: ranking order	24	"Alaska's Republican U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski says she plans on ranking Democratic U.S. Rep. Mary Peltola first in the U.S. House race on the November ballot, where Murkowski's own name will also appear as she runs for a fourth term." (10-22-22)
Strategy: don't rank	10	"...Alaska campaigns and political parties have each been broadcasting their own messages about how voters should use the ranking system: Republicans, for example, told conservatives to "rank the red" in the U.S. House race and leave Peltola off their ballots entirely." (8-18-2022)
Pro RCV	43	"In an interview Tuesday, Murkowski said the election reform would "allow voters to feel hopefully more engaged in their process and those who are running for election hopefully more inclusive in their outreach to all Alaskans when they are asking for their vote." (8-11-2022)
Anti RCV	35	"Palin on Monday again railed against Alaska's new ranked choice voting system, calling it "weird," "whack" and "cockamamie." She said that it had "disenfranchised" Alaska voters by sending

		Peltola to Congress to fill the remainder of Young's term, effectively empowering President Joe Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to lock up Alaska's resources." (9-5-2022)
Legal	6	"The lower court ruling, from Anchorage Superior Court Judge Una Gandhir, came Friday after hearing arguments in a lawsuit filed earlier this week by the Alaska State Commission for Human Rights against the Alaska Division of Elections and Lt. Gov. Keven Meyer, who oversees the division. The commission asserted that the primary, which is the state's first all-mail election, does not provide visually impaired voters in the state adequate voting access." (6-10-2022)
Vote by mail/online	5	"For voters that haven't cast their ballot yet, several options are available. Mail-in ballots must be postmarked by June 11. Voters intending to mail their ballots are encouraged to check with their individual post office to find out the cut-off deadline depending on the local hours of operation." (6-6-2022)
Difficulty voting	4	"Ballots from six rural Alaska villages were not fully counted in Alaska's November elections, the Division of

		Elections said Friday. A division official said the U.S. Postal Service failed to deliver them to the state election headquarters before the election was certified on Nov. 30." (12-7-2022)
Candidate information	29	"Independent progressive candidate Santa Claus has run an event-free campaign from the beginning. Vowing not to accept campaign contributions, he said he has no plans for in-person events in the final week of the shortened campaign season brought on by Young's unexpected death in March." (6-6-2022)
Confusion about RCV	14	"Trying to make sense of the race was a "nightmare," said a 32-year-old Anchorage man who voted Saturday in Anchorage and would only give his first name, Brian. 'I'm looking at everybody on there, I'm trying to remember who I'm hearing and what I'm hearing about them, looking into some of the people I'm hearing about more,' he said after voting for Begich. 'Looking at 48 names is insane.' (6-12-2022)
Confusion about voting in general	9	Editorial: "It's not yet clear why an unprecedented number of primary ballots have been rejected; the Division of

		<p>Elections has supplied numbers of rejected ballots — 6,205 as of Wednesday evening — but not reasons for their rejection. One potential culprit is witness signatures — the language relating to witness requirements accompanying Alaskans’ ballots was needlessly complicated — but we won’t know for sure until after the election is certified. (6-17-2022)</p>
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*More than one code may appear in each article.

Also as of this writing, Tweet coding is also not complete, but we have identified some themes in the messaging based upon initial analyses of the data. The first theme in the messaging was actually built around “Trying to Avoid Confusion” in the June 2022 primary election to replace Don Young, because this election did *not* use RCV. One example of such a message came from **Alaskans for Better Elections** who reminded voters that the June 1 primary was only the first step in the special election for the open seat in Congress—they called it "The Pick One Primary."

@tmqdev @AlaskaMunicipal All you need to know is also available in this 30 second spot! But please let us know if you have other questions. <https://t.co/T49SJm3t36>

There were also several “Strategy” messages delivered by candidates via Tweet. For instance, on the day of the regular primary election (August 16), Lisa Murkowski tweeted:

*In today’s Primary Election, #PickOne, #PickLisa! 🇺🇸
Alaska—I’d be honored to earn your vote.
#GoVote! <https://t.co/t8oxXB5zqk>*

Murkowski's messaging was met with some backlash; one response to her Tweet was that Murkowski secretly supported RCV and she was a cheater, with the following picture.



Other candidate strategies encouraged voters to rank their ballots but to still do so along partisan lines. One example comes from October 25, when Democratic candidate for Senate Patricia Chesbro tweeted:

Happening now. While you watch Kelly Tshibaka, remember that you can block her and still vote your conscience, thanks to 1st & 2nd choice votes. We have 2 candidates who would lead Alaska's economy into a rust belt. The choice is clear: #ChooseChesbro #1 <https://t.co/Bc58bsMZcQ> <https://t.co/ALs6yOwaQ2>

The eventual winner Mary Peltola tweeted little else but issues and campaign visits, but did retweet the news that Murkowski planned on ranking Peltola first (October 22, 2022):

RT @LACaldwellDC: NEWS: @lisamurkowski says she is going to pick @MaryPeltola as her first choice on her ballot.

The Republican Party and candidates in Alaska encouraged their voters to “rank the red” via messaging and by using the hashtag #rankthered. For example, in this Tweet, Sarah Palin amplified a letter to the editor in the Anchorage Daily News written by the statewide chair of the Republican Party:

#RankRepublican #RanktheRed #SarahforAlaska [and included a picture quoting the editorial.] (Tweeted: October 27, 2022).

The Democratic Party had at least one tweet that demonstrated a more one-dimensional perspective of RCV. The Alaska Democratic Party tweeted on October 18:

Folks, this is not a drill. By ranking the Gara-Cook ticket first on your ballot, you're sending a clear message that you reject Republican extremism! Let's get it done! #AKDems

However, the ADP tweeted this on October 31: *Mike Dunleavy has been a disaster for Alaska. We encourage you to rank Gara-Cook #1 and Walker-Drygas #2! #AKDems <https://t.co/AtT26Vu341>*³

Interest groups and the Alaska Division of Elections did work to provide “educational “information about RCV via Twitter. The ANCSA Regional Corporation tweeted on August 9, 2022:

Wondering how to fill out your ballot on August 16? Ballots will have 2 sides: one with the primary election races, one with the ranked choice general election race. Thanks to Get Out the Native Vote for the ballot graphics! Keep up with their work: <https://t.co/krVny9Wvr3> <https://t.co/BLaDvtjWlc>

Ultimately, most newspaper and Twitter messaging analyzed thus far appears to fall along the lines of 1)reducing voter confusion, 2)candidate/party strategies for ranking, and 3)educating voters about the new system. We observe little to no messaging so far that encourages voters to

³ The t.co file is a small flyer telling voters who the Alaska Democratic Party endorsed and how to rank the candidates.

not rank their ballots; this is a different outcome than what was observed in Maine when voters used RCV for the first time in 2018.

Alaska Residual Vote Results, 2014-2022

To better analyze the effectiveness of the above-mentioned messaging campaigns in reducing voter confusion, we examine data from official election results in each Alaska house district to compare residual votes in the ranked choice voting election of 2022 to previous elections. Alaska has 40 state house districts, which is the unit of analysis for this comparison. We include two previous midterms (2014 and 2018) and two prior presidential elections (2016 and 2020) in the analyses below. The dependent variable is the residual vote rate, a common measure of voter confusion. The residual vote rate is the percentage of ballots cast that lack a valid vote for a particular contest. We focus on races for U.S. House, state house, and state senate, which feature contests in every year. Alaska has 20 state senate districts, and each senate district encompasses exactly two state house districts. We measure the residual vote rate for each race in each house district during the primary and general elections from 2014 through 2022.

In Table 8, we report mean residual vote rates for legislative contests in Alaska from 2014 to 2022. We exclude contests where only one candidate ran for the office. Contrary to our hypothesis, we tend to see *lower* average residual vote rates in 2022 than in prior Alaska elections, with an especially large decline in primary elections in 2022. Primary elections typically feature much higher residual vote rates than general elections. Furthermore, there is significant ballot drop-off in the state legislative races, but these rates are also lower in the Top Four elections of 2022.

Table 8. Mean Residual Vote Rates in Alaska House Districts, 2014-2022

Years	U.S. House		State House		State Senate	
	Primary	General	Primary	General	Primary	General
2022 (Top 4)	0.8%	1.3%	12.3%	7.8%	12.7%	7.9%
2014-2020	7.0%	2.4%	16.7%	7.8%	18.7%	7.2%

Uncontested races are not included. Data are weighted by the number of ballots cast in each district.

Source: Alaska Division of Elections

For a more rigorous comparison, we examine residual vote rates in regression analyses that control for some other factors. The main independent variable of interest is a binary variable denoting the top-four elections of 2022. We include three control variables. One is a binary variable for districts covered by the language requirements of section 203 of the Voting Rights Act. We also control for presidential election years, since having the presidential contest at the top of the ticket tends to produce a different pattern of residual votes than in midterm years. Finally, we include a control for the number of candidates on the ballot, since residual votes are more frequent when voters have fewer choices. This is an important control, since the number of competitive legislative races in Alaska increased, and the number of uncontested races decreased in 2022 (Williamson 2023). We use OLS regression to model the residual vote rate in each district, and we weight the data by the number of ballots cast in each district.

Table 9. Predictors of Residual Vote Rates in Alaska House Districts, 2014-2022

Independent Variable	U.S. House		State House		State Senate	
	Primary	General	Primary	General	Primary	General
Top Four (2022)	-8.9* (0.6)	-0.2 (0.2)	-7.0* (1.2)	0.9 (0.7)	-6.1* (2.0)	1.7* (0.8)
Covered VRA section 203	0.5 (0.6)	0.3 (0.2)	0.9 (1.4)	-1.0 (0.7)	3.5 (2.3)	0.4 (0.8)
Presidential year	6.6* (0.5)	-1.6* (0.2)	7.4* (1.3)	-1.8* (0.6)	-0.9 (2.5)	-1.8* (0.7)
Number of candidates	----	----	-4.5* (0.7)	-0.2 (0.5)	-4.3* (1.0)	-0.7 (0.7)
Constant	3.0* (0.4)	3.0* (0.1)	24.0* (2.1)	9.1* (1.2)	30.2* (3.7)	9.6* (1.8)
N	200	200	154	159	100	100
R ²	.60	.37	.39	.07	.28	.07

Cell entries OLS coefficients. Dependent variable measures the percent of ballots without a valid vote for the office at the top of the column. Uncontested races are not included. Data are weighted by the number of ballots cast in each district.

*p < .05 (two-tailed)

Source: Alaska Division of Elections

As the results in Table 9 show, when controlling for other factors we still observe a sharp decline in residual votes (between 6 and 9 percentage points lower) in all types of legislative contests during the top-four primary elections of 2022. Once we control for other factors, however, we find no statistically significant changes in residual votes in general elections in 2022, except for a higher residual vote rate in state senate races in 2022. As expected, we find substantially higher residual vote rates in primary elections when fewer candidates appear on the ballot. This accounts for part of the change in 2022, since the share of uncontested state house elections declined from 25% in pre-top four period to 15% in 2022. Similarly, uncontested state senate races dropped from 16% in the pre-top four era to 5% in 2022. We also find that residual

vote rates tend to increase in primary elections but drop in general elections during presidential years.

Finally, we do not observe significantly different residual vote rates in the covered jurisdictions. The bottom-line result is that we do not see higher residual vote rates in the top four elections of 2022, with the exception of state senate races. In fact, we find substantially lower residual vote rates in the 2022 primary elections. Further analyses of these data will include controls for partisanship of House districts in Alaska, as well as an analysis of residual ballot rates in districts with higher numbers of constituents whose first language is not English and have higher proportions of Native Alaskan communities represented.

In a survey following the August and November 2022 elections, the McKinley research group found that voters largely reported that they understood the new RCV system (McKinley 2022). Additionally, most voters reported receiving educational information ahead of these elections that helped to inform them about how to use the new system. As the McKinley group reports:

The surveys indicate ranked-choice voting (RCV) education reached 95% and 93% of voters in August and November, respectively; and most voters (85% in August and 79% in November) said it was simple or somewhat simple to vote their RCV ballot.

Discussion and Implications

Ranked Choice Voting is progressing as of this writing much as it did when it first began—it is controversial and some groups and candidates are still fighting its implementation or are at least still figuring out what the winning strategies will be under the new system. Not everyone was happy about the 2020 ballot measure in Alaska that ushered in RCV, though initial evidence indicates that much of the resistance was focused on the shift to an open primary

system, not necessarily around RCV itself. Regardless of the resistance observed in the 2020 campaign phase around Ballot Measure 2, interest groups and most candidates seem to have resolved themselves to accepting the new system and have shifted efforts to more strategic and educational messaging about how voters can use the new system ahead of the 2022 election cycle where RCV was first utilized. These educational efforts appear to have been effective in reducing voter confusion, at least in an analysis of residual votes in 2022 compared with previous election cycles.

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