

# Thanks to ranked-choice voting, expect a spike in spoiled ballots

By *Liam Sigaud* on May 17, 2018

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Advocates of ranked-choice voting (RCV) commonly claim that their preferred method of deciding elections boosts civic engagement, channels the true will of the people and strengthens our democracy.

But for all the empty rhetoric, RCV may actually have significant voter-suppression effects. A study from Stanford University found that voter turnout in mayoral elections *declined* relative to plurality elections after RCV was implemented, though the result was not statistically significant.

Even more concerning, a great deal of evidence suggests that the number of spoiled ballots in RCV elections is substantial.

During municipal RCV elections in Minneapolis, MN, in 2009, “10.5 percent of the votes cast...were spoiled ballots or contained voter errors. And a higher incidence of spoiled ballots and voter error occurred in low-income, high-minority population areas, not affluent, predominantly white voting precincts.”

For comparison, generally about 1 percent of votes cast in plurality elections are invalid. In Minneapolis’ RCV elections in 2013, the [trend held](#) — researchers observed a higher rate of spoiled ballots in low-income wards than in more affluent ones.

In 2004, a similar percentage (9.7 percent) of ballots were [invalidated](#) in San Francisco’s municipal RCV elections. When political scientists at UC Berkeley reviewed the election

results, they detected a higher rate of spoiled ballots in districts with more racial minorities, senior citizens, immigrants, and low-income residents.

After Aspen, CO, adopted RCV for its mayoral election in 2009, the City Clerk revealed that there had been 168 spoiled ballots; two is typical.

Similar examples abound. Seemingly every jurisdiction in the United States that has adopted RCV has seen huge spikes in spoiled ballots, particularly in disadvantaged areas. A rough estimate, based on data from Minneapolis and San Francisco, is that nearly 6,500 Mainers may have their ballots invalidated in next month's election.

Why? The obvious answer is that filling out an RCV ballot can seem more like solving a brain teaser than participating in an election. Despite the efforts of the Secretary of State's office to educate the public, RCV remains a mysterious and confusing process for many Maine voters. No wonder it takes 19 pages to describe how it all works.

The voter-suppression caused by RCV is particularly ironic in light of the fact that many RCV advocates vilify supporters of voter ID requirements for allegedly trying to disenfranchise minority voters.

We should all want fair elections with broad participation. The best place to start to achieve that objective is to end RCV before it does too much damage to our state.

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