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Erik Herron: Ranked choice voting isn't a threat to elections (Opinion)

By Erik Herron
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What is the greatest threat to election integrity in West Virginia and the United States? Judging by West Virginia Secretary of State Mac Warner's



^ V and election changes over time in the U.S.

This method of voting has been used successfully in Australia and Ireland for over a century and was recently adopted by Maine and Alaska. RCV has

strong advocates in the U.S., notably the organization FairVote. Instead of checking a box on ballots to select a single candidate, RCV allows voters to rank the candidates in the order that they prefer.

Imagine how this would work in a West Virginia House of Delegates race where we elect one representative per district. If a voter supports the Republican candidate, they place a “1” next to that candidate on the ballot. If their second choice is the Libertarian candidate, they place “2” next to that candidate, and so on. When votes are tallied, each voter’s first choice is counted and, if a candidate receives a majority, they win. If no candidate gets a majority of first-choice votes, then the poorest performing candidate is eliminated and the second-choice votes are counted. This process repeats until one candidate has majority support.

Warner has argued that “[RCV] often results in candidates who may have majority support losing the election,” but that isn’t true. If a candidate has majority support, they’ll get a majority of first-place votes and win in the first round. He also claimed that “[since] this country was founded,

winners were the candidates who received the most votes.” However, our Electoral College system has produced winners who do not receive the most votes.

He is correct when he states that a candidate could receive more first-place votes than any other candidate and lose the election, however. Imagine an election with three candidates: a Republican, a Libertarian and a Democrat. The Democrat gets 35% of the first-place votes, the Republican and Libertarian get 33% and 32%. Since none of these candidates has a majority, we eliminate the lowest-performing candidate (Libertarian) and look at second-place votes. Libertarian voters are more likely to choose the Republican candidate as their second-place option, meaning that the Republican would probably win in the second round.

But, what does this system do? It takes away the risk of Libertarian voters “throwing away” their vote, and allows voters to select the candidate that they genuinely support. In West Virginia, this would allow voters to cast votes for candidates from the Mountain Party, Libertarian Party or

other smaller political parties without fearing that their vote might help the candidate they like the least to win the race.

While West Virginia might not adopt this system for federal elections, as other states have done, should the Legislature ban it as an alternative?

Warner expressed concern about efforts “to change the American system of voting that has been in place for the last 248 years” But, election processes regularly change in fundamental ways and continue to change in response to the needs of the American people.

What did early American elections look like?

Women and Black Americans could not vote, nor could white men who did not own property.

Elections did not use secret ballots, they used voice votes and party tickets that were susceptible to fraud and intimidation. Partisan activists bribed voters and committed acts of violence to keep opponents away from the polls. Senators were not directly elected by the people, but by state legislatures. Change is not only common in American elections — it is needed.

Although Warner argued “[to] maintain confidence in elections, we should not change the election process in West Virginia,” he knows that fundamental reforms to the way we conduct elections in the state have occurred on his watch. Beginning in 2018, West Virginia allowed overseas voters — particularly those in military service — to vote using a mobile app. In 2022, the state transitioned from using multi-member districts in House of Delegates elections to using only single-member districts. We should not fear change by banning it, but also should carefully evaluate the pros and cons before making major reforms.

In his critique of RCV, Warner correctly notes that the tabulation process can take longer than other methods. He warned that “Voter confidence wanes over time, and conspiracy theories take hold.”

Maintaining voter confidence in elections is critical, but conspiracy theories — like Warner’s own unsubstantiated argument that the CIA stole the 2020 election — take hold only when public officials fail in their responsibilities to argue in good faith about how our elections work.

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