



**RANKED CHOICE VOTING
IN NEW YORK CITY:
AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS**

About the Authors

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About FairVote

FairVote is a nonpartisan organization seeking better elections for all. We research and advance voting reforms that make democracy more functional and representative for every voter.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the first citywide ranked choice voting (RCV) elections in New York City, conducted in June 2021. FairVote analyzed campaign activity, voter turnout, demographic trends, and cast vote records and found that:

- **Ranked choice voting helped to elect the most diverse New York City government ever.**
Eric Adams won the Democratic mayoral primary and went on to become the city’s second Black mayor. Candidates of color won more than two-thirds of city council seats after winning RCV primaries, a sharp increase from 2017 and 2013. For the first time in history, New York City will have a majority woman city council with women filling 31 of the 51 seats, up from the 14 seats held by women prior to the November general election. Historically large and diverse candidate pools are occurring nationwide, and ranked choice voting helps to propel more of these candidates to victory.
- **Voter turnout was the highest in 30 years.**
More than 940,000 voters participated in the 2021 primaries, the highest number since 1989. That high turnout occurred both at the top of the ballot and in down-ballot races; 93% of city council races had higher turnout than in 2017.
- **Voters in all demographic groups used ranking at high rates.**
In the mayoral race, 87% of New York voters ranked multiple candidates, and a median of 66% used multiple rankings in other contests. Ranking usage depends on the context of each contest and not on voter demographics. Voters of all racial and ethnic groups, ages, incomes, and education levels made full use of the ranked ballot.
- **Winners earned broad consensus support.**
Every nominee was the “Condorcet winner,” or the candidate who defeats all others when matched head to head. In the 41 contests requiring multiple rounds of counting, winners were ranked by 64% of voters on average. In the mayoral primary race, Eric Adams was ranked by 57% of voters.
- **Democrats and Republicans both nominated candidates using RCV.**
Forty-one contests used RCV tallies to determine the winner, including 39 Democratic primaries and two Republican primaries. Because RCV is not used in general elections in New York City, unaffiliated and third party voters only experienced RCV this year in the four districts that held special elections to fill city council vacancies.
- **Improvements can lead to even more success in future RCV elections.**
We recommend continued voter education efforts, safeguards against election results reporting errors, earlier release of preliminary RCV results, and expansion of RCV to general elections.

● INTRODUCTION: BRINGING RCV TO NYC

The 2021 New York City primary elections represent the largest use to date of ranked choice voting (RCV) in a citywide election in the United States. In 2019, a charter commission voted nearly unanimously to place a charter amendment on that year's ballot that would establish RCV for all primary and special elections.¹ The amendment won handily, with 73% of New York City voters in favor.

Due to term limits, a large majority of seats for citywide offices, borough president, and city council were open. Many city groups sought to identify and train candidates, such as 21 for 21, which focused on boosting women's representation.

In the first citywide use of RCV on June 22, 2021, 352 candidates competed in 52 RCV elections with three or more candidates, including primaries for Democratic and Republican nominations. Of those, 41 elections used multiple rounds of RCV to select a winner, with three contests resulting in a "come from behind winner", or a winner who would not have won a plurality election.

It is difficult to assess the success of a reform during its implementation. Throughout the process leading up to and following the 2021 New York City primary, some speculated about potential ranked choice voting failures. A handful of candidates campaigned against ranked choice voting. The Board of Elections suffered delayed election results and erroneously released test ballots as finalized data; while both problems were unrelated to ranked choice voting, they almost certainly influenced initial public opinion about the implementation of RCV.

A retrospective analysis of the election, however, indicates success across all metrics. Ranked choice voting was broadly popular with and understood by the voting public, thanks to voter education efforts led by Rank the Vote NYC, Common Cause NY, and the city government among many others. (See appendix A for a full list of organizations engaged in voter education.) Among voters surveyed by Rank the Vote NYC, 95% found the ballot "simple to complete," and 78% said they understood ranked choice voting well. These results were consistent across racial and ethnic groups. Similarly, 77% of those surveyed supported using RCV for future local elections.² Although human error led to a mistake in initial results reported by the New York City Board of Elections, which briefly dominated the news cycle, the reaction to RCV's use in the primary was positive and the result was a diverse slate of candidates with broad support advancing to the general election.

¹ New York City Charter Revision Commission. (2019). [Final Report of the 2019 New York City Charter Revision Commission](#).

² Rank the Vote NYC. (2021, June 28). [Rank The Vote NYC Releases Edison Research Exit Poll on the Election](#). [Press release].

● CONDUCTING ROBUST VOTER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES' MOST POPULOUS CITY

The events of 2021 made it a challenging year to roll out a new voting method. Election changes stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as spurious attacks on the 2020 election's legitimacy nationwide, left voters on guard against changes to voting rules. What's more, COVID-19 created sudden and dramatic uncertainty around city finances, leaving fewer resources for voter education than policymakers had hoped. In response to those concerns, the City Council enacted legislation in February 2021 to set standards for the city's public awareness campaign for RCV.

The New York City Campaign Finance Board (CFB), which runs NYC Votes, the city's nonpartisan voter engagement initiative, was designated as the lead agency for RCV education. Its outreach campaign included direct-to-voter outreach through webinar presentations, text messages, a broad-based media campaign, a citywide postcard mailing, extensive promotion on social media, an explainer video in multiple languages, and a printed voter guide mailed to every eligible registered voter. The CFB's materials were informed by usability and messaging research performed by the Center for Civic Design, consisting of a series of focus groups with New York City voters with a specific focus on voters from Black and Hispanic or Latino communities.

The new voter information website, voting.nyc, included the online voter guide and interactive tools to enable voters to practice ranking and learn how RCV works. The website rollout was supported by a \$1.1 million media/advertising campaign directing voters to the website. More than 525,000 voters visited the voting.nyc website in the weeks leading up to the June primary, surpassing expectations and outperforming site traffic in previous elections.

The NYC Votes campaign was just one of many voter education efforts. The New York City Board of Elections conducted its own awareness campaign which aligned its messaging with the CFB's efforts. The mayor's office, through its DemocracyNYC initiative, poured \$15 million into a public relations campaign and created resources in 15 languages. As the election drew near, CFB/NYC Votes and Democracy NYC joined forces to send 3 million text messages to potential New York City voters.

Rank the Vote NYC, the grassroots coalition that supported the RCV referendum in 2019, also contributed to voter education. Rank the Vote NYC created a coalition of more than 750 organizations that focused on engaging hard-to-reach populations, including older voters, new voters, and low-turnout communities. The coalition hosted more than 600 online and in-person trainings, talked to 55,000 low propensity voters at their homes, and distributed nearly 1.5 million copies of RCV explainer materials in 13 languages and in large print.

After the election, New Yorkers reported high levels of satisfaction with ranked choice voting. In exit polling conducted by Rank the Vote, 95% of voters reported that they found their ballot simple to complete, 78% said they understood ranked choice voting extremely or very well, and 77% said they want ranked choice voting in future elections. Importantly, these observations held true across ethnic and demographic groups.

● ELECTORAL DIVERSITY

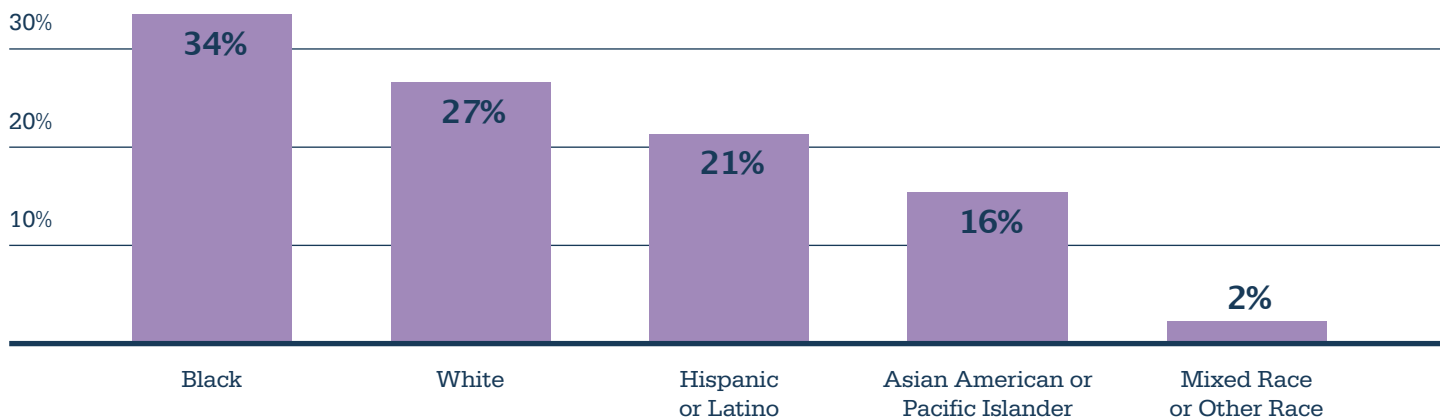
In elections with ranked choice voting, larger and more diverse candidate fields lead to a more diverse set of winners, which translates to greater diversity of representation in government. The 2021 NYC primary results bear this out.

Eric Adams won 51% of the final-round vote in the mayoral primary and went on to win the mayoral seat in the November general election, making him the city’s second Black mayor. In city council primaries, candidates of color won 35 Democratic contests, up from 26 in the previous cycle. Women went on to win 31 out of 51 seats in the general election, the largest number of women elected to the council in its history. Additionally, LGBTQ+ candidates won a record six seats after winning RCV primaries and Black and Hispanic or Latino candidates went on to win six out of eight city or borough-wide races.

The candidate fields in RCV primaries were also historically large and diverse as candidates from a wide variety of backgrounds were empowered to run for office. In RCV-eligible contests (those with three or more candidates), 73% of all candidates were people of color and 43% were women or gender non-binary. The average number of candidates per contest was 6.5 candidates, more than double the 2017 average of 2.6 candidates.

The introduction of RCV coincided with an expansion of public financing in New York City which matched contributions up to \$250 at a rate of eight to one, another factor that may have contributed to the large number of candidates running for office.

FIGURE 1
NYC RCV Candidates by Race or Ethnicity



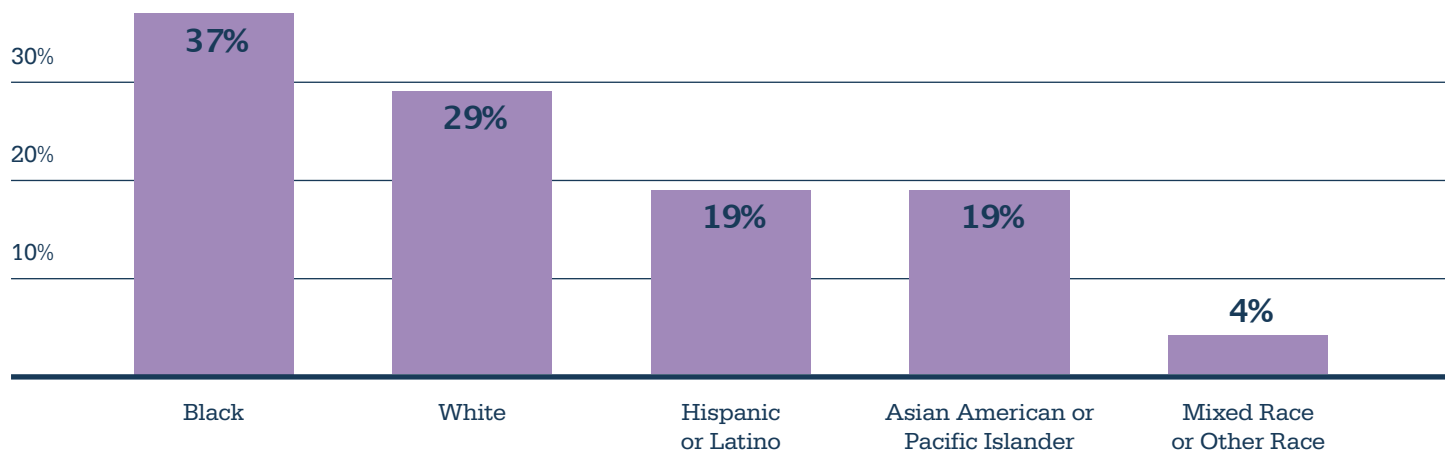
Previous research has found that ranked choice voting leads to an increased chance of victory for women³ and candidates of color.⁴ Research also shows that RCV mitigates the “spoiler effect”, or the tendency for the vote to be split among multiple candidates from similar backgrounds running in the same contest, which harms the chances that one of them will win.⁵ The chart below shows the diversity of winners in New York’s RCV elections.

³ Represent Women (2020, July). *In Ranked Choice Elections, Women WIN. RCV In the United States: A Decade in Review.*

⁴ John, S., Smith, H., & Zack, E. (2018). *The alternative vote: Do changes in single-member voting systems affect descriptive representation of women and minorities?* *Electoral Studies*, 54.

⁵ Otis, D. & Dell, N. (2021). *Ranked Choice Voting Elections Benefit Candidates and Voters of Color.* FairVote.

FIGURE 2
RCV Primary Election Winner by Race or Ethnicity



Several races resulted in trailblazing outcomes that were upheld in the November general election. Crystal Hudson and Kristin Richardson Jordan are the first queer-identifying Black women elected to the city council, and at 23, Chi Osse is one of the youngest. Shahana Hanif is the first Muslim woman and among the first South Asian Americans elected to city council. Jennifer Gutiérrez is the first Colombian American council member, and Shekar Krishnan, the first Indian American.⁶

● RCV MITIGATES VOTE SPLITTING

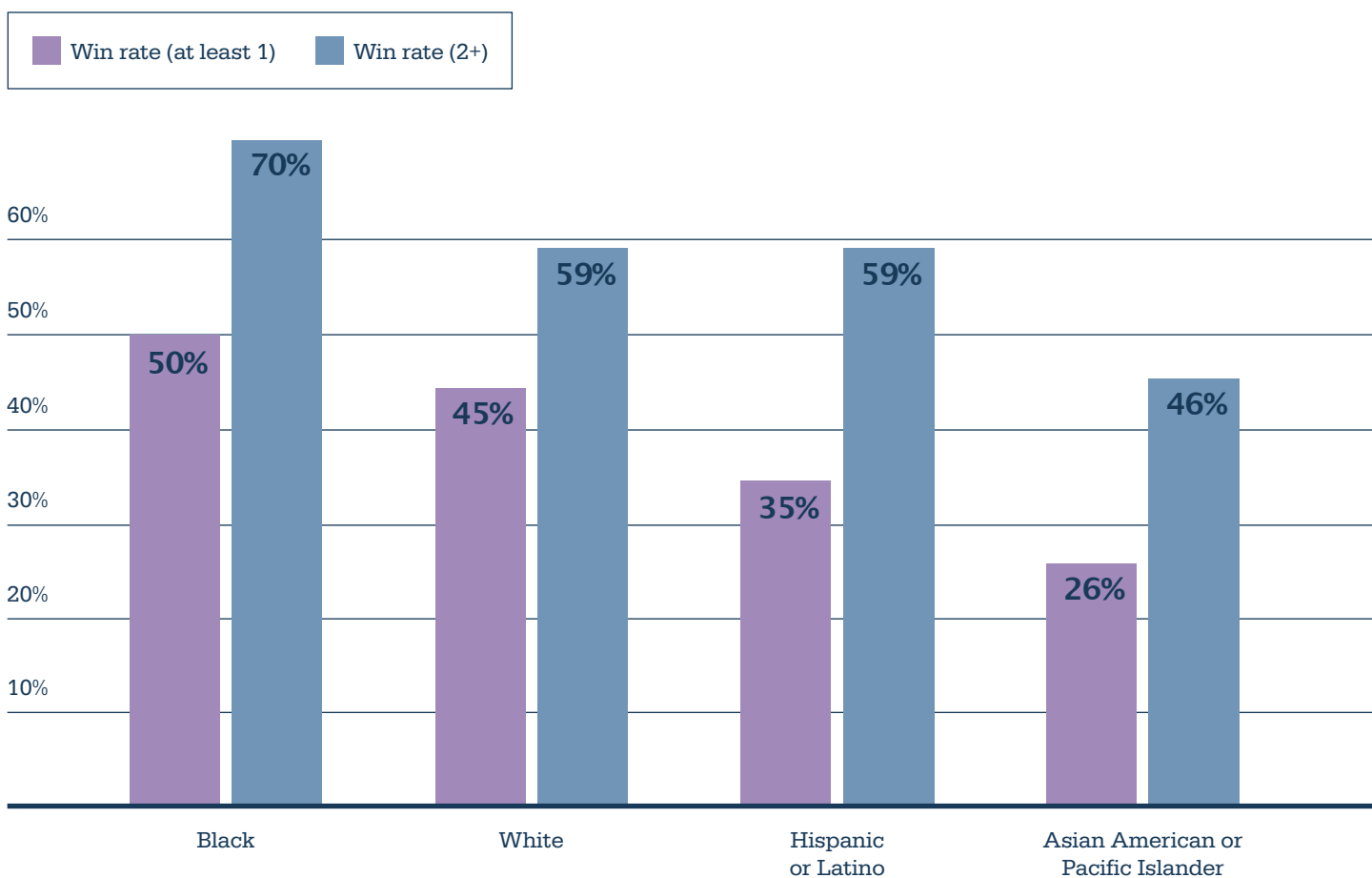
One of this election’s biggest successes is its historically diverse candidate field, a sign that more people are empowered to run for office. Similarly, one of RCV’s most important features is its ability to overcome some of the historical barriers to entry in politics and welcome a large and representative set of candidates into the political arena. New York’s former voting method for primaries, single-choice plurality, generated concerns that similar candidates might split the support of their voters. RCV mitigates this issue by allowing communities to consolidate support behind candidates with broad appeal, rather than divide. Voters can rank multiple, similar candidates on their ballots, knowing that their vote will still count even if their first choice does not win.

While it is hard to separate the effects of RCV from the impact of expanded public financing, it is clear that RCV – at minimum – complements public financing by reducing vote-splitting. In the NYC primaries, RCV was key to accommodating more candidates, which in turn led to historically diverse election results.

The NYC primary results indicate that in a ranked choice contest, candidates from every racial and ethnic group studied are more likely to win when competing against other members of the same racial or ethnic group, instead of facing a penalty for doing so. Additionally, voters across all racial and ethnic groups studied effectively used multiple rankings on their ballots, as discussed more fully in the case study on ballot use later in this report.

⁶ Common Cause NY (2021, July 14). [Major Takeaways from New York City’s First Ranked Choice Election](#). [Press release].

FIGURE 3
Win Rate for Racial / Ethnic Groups Based on Number of Candidates



As measured by race and ethnicity, Black candidates demonstrated the highest win rates, winning 50% of all races with at least one Black candidate and 70% of races that included two or more Black candidates. Hispanic or Latino candidates saw the biggest increase in win rates from a baseline of 35% for races with at least one Hispanic candidate to 59% for races with two or more Hispanic candidates.

This demonstrates that ranked choice voting contributes to descriptive representation for communities of color, especially in diverse districts with large candidate fields, such as in New York City. Candidates of color are more likely to run in districts where the majority are voters of color; just under 70% of New York City Council districts have such majorities. Candidates of color, particularly Black candidates, succeeded in these districts under ranked choice voting, demonstrating an ability to build diverse coalitions. By incentivizing candidates to reach out to more voters and by increasing the likelihood that those elected to office reflect the diversity of their communities, ranked choice voting contributes to a fairer and more representative democracy.

● ERIC ADAMS'S PATH TO VICTORY

RCV worked as intended in the mayoral election; Eric Adams, the Brooklyn borough president, built on a strong first-round lead to win the mayoral nomination in the eighth round of counting.

FIGURE 4
Round-by-Round Results, NYC Democratic Mayoral Primary

Candidate	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5	Round 6	Round 7	Round 8
Eric Adams	30.7%	30.8%	30.8%	31.2%	31.7%	34.6%	40.5%	50.4%
Maya Wiley	21.4%	21.4%	21.4%	22.0%	22.4%	26.1%	29.1%	
Kathryn Garcia	19.6%	19.6%	19.6%	19.9%	20.5%	24.4%	30.5%	49.6%
Andrew Yang	12.2%	12.2%	12.3%	12.6%	13.0%	14.8%		
Scott Stringer	5.5%	5.5%	5.5%	5.7%	6.1%			
Dianne Morales	2.8%	2.8%	2.8%	3.2%	3.3%			
Raymond McGuire	2.7%	2.7%	2.7%	2.8%	3.0%			
Shaun Donovan	2.5%	2.5%	2.5%	2.6%				
Aaron Foldenauer	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%					
Art Chang	0.7%	0.8%	0.8%					
Paperboy Love Prince	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%					
Joycelyn Taylor	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%					
Isaac Wright	0.2%	0.2%						
Write-ins	0.2%							

Despite Adams’s strong first-choice support, he fell short of a majority of first choices. As a result, the race continued to an instant runoff in which the field was reduced to two candidates over multiple rounds of counting. As trailing candidates were eliminated from the contest, Adams, Wiley, and Garcia gained the most votes from supporters of eliminated candidates. By the sixth round, Garcia overtook Wiley for the second-place position after earning almost 45% of active transfer votes from Andrew Yang supporters. A large majority of Wiley’s transfer ballots went to Garcia in the final round, but not enough to overcome Adams’s strong lead.

Adams went on to win the November general election, becoming New York City’s second Black mayor.

● COALITION-BUILDING ON DISPLAY IN MAYORAL & COUNCIL CONTESTS

The mayoral election and several city council contests were notable for candidates’ use of coalition-building RCV campaign strategies. In ranked choice voting, candidates compete to be voters’ second and third choice as well as their first. This means that cross-endorsements, in which candidates endorse specific competitors for voters’ second- and third-choice rankings, can help candidates build coalitions that expand their outreach beyond their traditional base and improve their chances of winning. Even though the data show that voters make up their own minds about how to use their rankings, candidates are wise to compete for every other candidate’s “back-up” votes. Andrew Yang’s endorsement of Kathryn Garcia as a second choice in the mayoral contest demonstrated the potential impact of this strategy.

The Yang and Garcia coalition strategy came late in the election, after the start of early voting, but likely helped Garcia to earn a place in the final round, where she finished within one point of Eric Adams. An examination of how ballots were transferred when Yang was eliminated in the sixth round illustrates the power of the coalition strategy.

FIGURE 5

Ballots Transferred to Finalist Candidates Upon Andrew Yang’s Elimination
(Excluding Inactive Ballots)

	Ballot Transfer in Actual Election (After Garcia–Yang Joint Campaigning)	Ballot Transfer in Pre–Election Polling (Before Garcia–Yang Joint Campaigning)
Transferred to Adams	39%	47%
Transferred to Garcia	45%	34%
Transferred to Wiley	16%	18%

Garcia and Yang made their first joint campaign appearance on June 19. A comparison of their polling averages prior to June 19⁷ ⁸ with the election results from June 22 shows that Garcia increased her standing with Yang voters by nearly eleven percentage points. Adams and Wiley, however, each received fewer votes from Yang supporters than polls predicted.

While Garcia ultimately did not win, she and Yang demonstrated how cooperation, coalition, and asking for voters’ second and third choice support can affect an election’s outcome. Garcia’s effort to be inclusive may also have contributed to her even higher share of support among voters who favored Maya Wiley.

Candidates in other New York City races also campaigned together or cross-endorsed each other, with mixed results. Several candidates in the Democratic primary for Staten Island borough president informally worked together, with candidate Cesar Vargas explaining, “I think ranked-choice voting has made [the campaign] more collegial.... I can see my competitor not just as a candidate to compete against me, but also as someone who can also support me by working with his community because I can do the same for him, because at the end of the day he or she can be part of my voters’ options.”⁹

Sandra Nurse in council district 37 collaborated with other candidates on training events and literature distribution and went on to win the nomination.

Candidates who campaigned together or cross-endorsed but were unsuccessful in their races include Rebecca Lamorte and Billy Freeland in district 5, Sara Lind and Jeffrey Omura in district 6, five candidates in district 7 who used the Twitter hashtag “#RankUs1Thru5,” Nabaraj KC and Austin Shafran in district 19, seven candidates in district 20 who united in an unsuccessful attempt to oust an establishment-backed candidate, Debra Markell and Harpreet Toor in district 23, and Scott Murphy and Andy Marte in district 34.

⁷ Emerson Poll. (2021, June 15-16). [NYC Mayor 2021](#). Emerson College Polling.
⁸ FairVote and Citizen Data Poll. (2021, June 14-17). [New York Ranked Choice Voting Poll](#). FairVote and Citizen Data.
⁹ Kashiwagi, Sydney. (2021, May 5). [Rage Against the Queens Machine](#). City & State New York.

● HIGH TURNOUT CITYWIDE

The 2021 primary elections saw the highest turnout of eligible voters in a New York City primary in more than 30 years; more than 940,000 voters cast ballots.¹⁰ Additionally, a higher share of voters who participated in the mayoral election at the top of the ballot also participated in down-ballot races for comptroller and public advocate compared to the last open-seat citywide primaries in 2013. Turnout increased in 93% of city council districts that held competitive primaries, and Democratic turnout in the mayor’s race increased 36% among eligible voters over 2013, the last open-seat Democratic mayoral primary.

Highly competitive races drive voter turnout. (Other factors, possibly including an increase in voting by mail, also contribute.) The chart below shows that primary contests with more candidates tended to have higher voter turnout, indicating that more competitive races increase voter interest and participation. Additionally, a larger field of candidates in an election increases voter outreach and, consequently, voters’ awareness of the contest. By mitigating the “spoiler effect” in races with many candidates, ranked choice voting encourages more competitive races and thus contributes to higher voter turnout and engagement.

FIGURE 6
Voter Turnout vs. Number of Candidates



¹⁰ While the number of registered voters in New York City has risen sharply over recent decades, the population eligible to vote in primaries has been relatively constant, which is why this study focuses on the relative number of primary voters.

● MORE NEW YORKERS' PREFERENCES REPRESENTED IN ELECTION OUTCOMES

Using RCV in the 2021 primary dramatically increased the number of voters whose preferences were accounted for in the mayoral race.

In the last NYC open-seat mayoral election in 2013, only 68% of voters voted for one of the two front-runners in the Democratic primary. The winner received 40.8% of the vote, narrowly avoiding the runoff that would have been triggered if no candidate exceeded 40%. The 32% of voters who did not vote for a front-runner had no mechanism for expressing a preference between the finalists, and candidates had little incentive to reach out to voters outside their expected base of support.

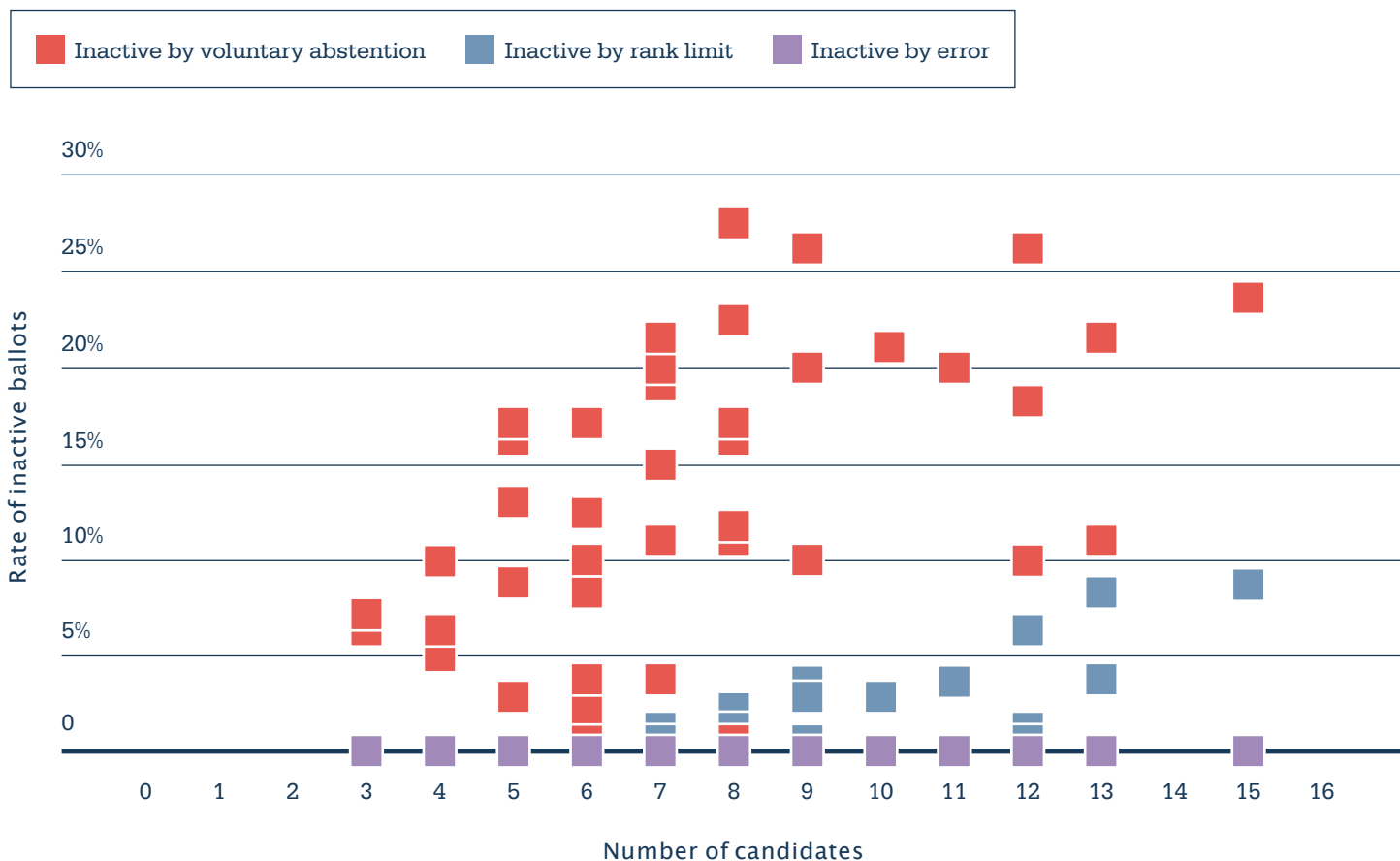
By contrast, 85% of voters in the 2021 mayoral primary expressed their preference between the two finalists by ranking Adams or Garcia or both. Ballots that validly ranked at least one candidate but did not count in the final round are known as “inactive ballots” or “exhausted ballots.” Of the 15% of ballots that became inactive, three-quarters were due to “voluntary abstention,” meaning the voter did not use all five ranks on their ballot and chose not to rank either finalist. These voters exercised their right to abstain from ranking candidates they do not support. This number matched expectations: in a poll of voters who abstained from ranking in NYC special elections, 77% reported choosing to abstain because they had only one preferred candidate.¹¹ One-quarter of the voters whose ballots became inactive used all five rankings on their ballot but did not include either Adams or Garcia in their rankings. Less than one percent of inactive ballots became inactive due to a ballot error.

To put this in perspective, the 15% of voters who did not express a preference between the finalists represent a 50% reduction in non-participation rates from 2013, giving Adams a stronger electoral mandate.

In general, the percentage of inactive ballots is most strongly correlated with the number of candidates on that ballot.

¹¹ Common Cause NY & Rank the Vote NYC. (2021, April 16). [Common Cause/NY + Rank the Vote Release Exit Poll on Ranked Choice Voting in Bronx, Queens Special Elections](#). [Press release].

FIGURE 7
Inactive Ballots by Cause



For example, the average inactive ballot rate in U.S. elections prior to 2021 is about 9.8%. For contests with seven or more candidates, the rate is nearly 18%. Therefore, the NYC mayoral primary, with a 15% rate of inactive ballots, is on par with or slightly below historical averages for highly competitive elections with crowded fields.

NOMINEES WITH BROAD SUPPORT

A key feature of RCV is its ability to advance candidates supported by the broadest group of voters. FairVote measured this in three ways.

First, each contest was evaluated on whether it included a candidate who would win a hypothetical two-person contest against every other candidate in that race. Such a candidate is known as a “Condorcet winner.” Cast vote records provided by the New York City Board of Elections were used to determine which candidate would win each hypothetical head-to-head matchup based on which candidate was ranked higher by the most voters. In the New York City primaries, every ranked choice winner was also the Condorcet winner, indicating that RCV effectively advanced strong nominees from these party primaries.

Second, we analyzed “come-from-behind” wins, or cases in which a candidate won the election after trailing in the first round. There were three come-from-behind winners in New York City (Figure 8), all of whom trailed by less than three percentage points in the first round.

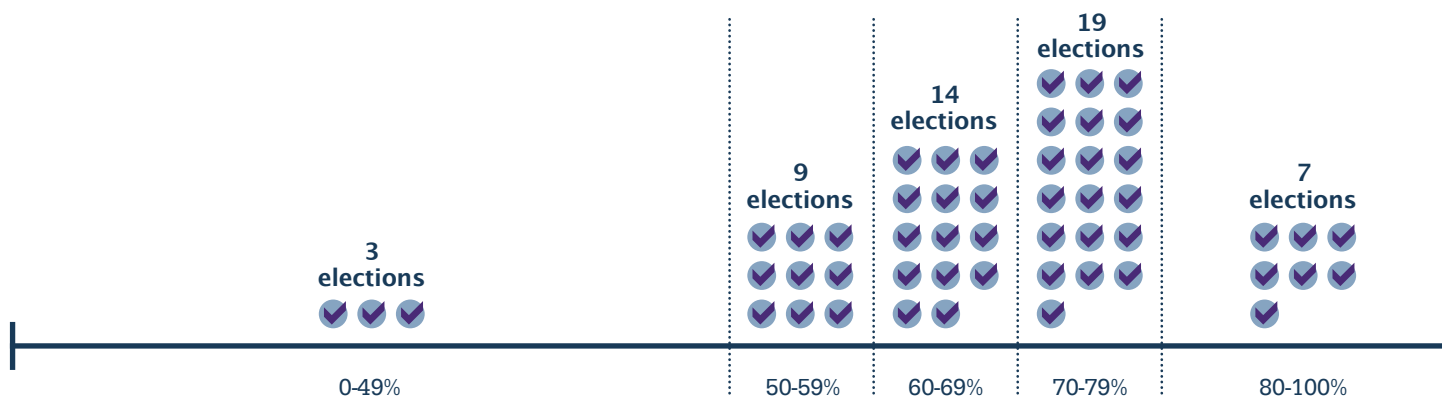
FIGURE 8
Come-From-Behind Wins in New York

Contest	Candidate	First Round	Final Round
Democratic Primary for City Council D25	Shekar Krishnan	26.3%	53.4%
	Yi Andy Chen	26.9%	46.6%
	Carolyn Tran	15.5%	-
Democratic Primary for City Council D9	Kristin Richardson Jordan	19.0%	50.3%
	Bill Perkins	21.1%	49.7%
	Athena Moore	10.9%	-
Democratic Primary for City Council D50	David Carr	31.4%	50.3%
	Marko Kepi	33.6%	49.7%
	Samuel Pirozzolo	22.9%	-

In each case, the winning candidate demonstrated an ability to earn the support of voters with other first-choice preferences. These candidates built a coalition of first-choice and lower-preference supporters in order to amass broad support. Each of these come-from-behind winners was also a Condorcet winner, meaning they would win in a head-to-head contest against any other candidate in the race, including the candidate who earned the most first-choice rankings.

Third, we measured how many voters ranked the winner anywhere on their ballot, regardless of whether the voter’s ballot ended up counting for that winner. A voter who ranks a candidate anywhere on the ballot is expressing some level of support for that candidate, which can be used as a measure of consensus. Of the 52 winners in contests with three or more candidates, 49 were ranked by at least half of voters. Half of the winners were ranked by 70% of voters or more.

FIGURE 9
Portion of Voters Ranking the Winner in Each Election
(With Three or More Candidates)



● RCV ELIMINATED RUNOFF ELECTIONS

Ranked choice voting also eliminated a series of costly run-off races. In 2013, the city spent roughly \$13 million to hold a runoff for public advocate, an office with a total budget of \$2.3 million at the time.¹² Turnout declined by more than 60% between that runoff and the general election, meaning a smaller and less representative group of voters participated in the most decisive round of the election.

Under New York City’s old rules, candidates for mayor or other citywide offices were required to enter a top-two runoff election if no candidate earned more than 40% of the vote. This means that the Democratic mayoral primary would have advanced to a runoff between Eric Adams and Maya Wiley, the two candidates with the most first-choice support.

By combining two elections into one, the city saved millions and voters were not asked to return to the polls to vote a second time.

An additional 28 races did not see any candidate cross the 40% threshold in the first round. By tabulating across multiple rounds, the ranked choice voting process helped candidates build broad electoral mandates in their communities which advanced candidates with strong support to the general election.

CASE STUDY: TWO RCV RECOUNTS UPHOLD INITIAL RESULTS

The NYC Board of Elections conducted hand recounts in city council districts 9 and 15 because the initial margin of victory was less than 0.5%, the margin within which a recount is mandated by law.

Prior to these recounts, there had been three RCV recounts in the U.S. since 2004: a 2010 North Carolina State Appeals Court election which confirmed the initial result, a 2018 Maine congressional race, and a 2017 Minneapolis city council race in which the recounts were not completed because the petitioners withdrew their requests after early results failed to show a significant change.

Both New York City recounts upheld the initial result.

In the ninth district, Kristin Richardson Jordan prevailed over incumbent Bill Perkins by a margin of 114 votes in the final round. The initial tally showed Jordan leading by 104 votes, and the recount widened her margin of victory to 114 votes. The Board of Elections did not announce when the recount officially began, but according to news reports, the recount took 16 days, ending on August 7.¹³

¹² Taylor, Kate. (2013, September 29). [High-Cost Runoff for Public Advocate’s Post Prompts Calls for Reform](#). *The New York Times*.

¹³ Cruz, David. (2021, August 7). [Unofficial Manual Recount Tally Shows Democratic Socialist Beating Incumbent For Harlem Council Seat](#). *Gothamist*.

The Republican primary for district 50 was even closer, with David Carr ahead by just 42 votes in the initial tally. The hand recount confirmed Carr’s win and expanded his lead to 44 votes. The recount took eight days, concluding on July 30.¹⁴ Notably, this contest also represented a come-from-behind win for Carr, as his opponent led in first choices.

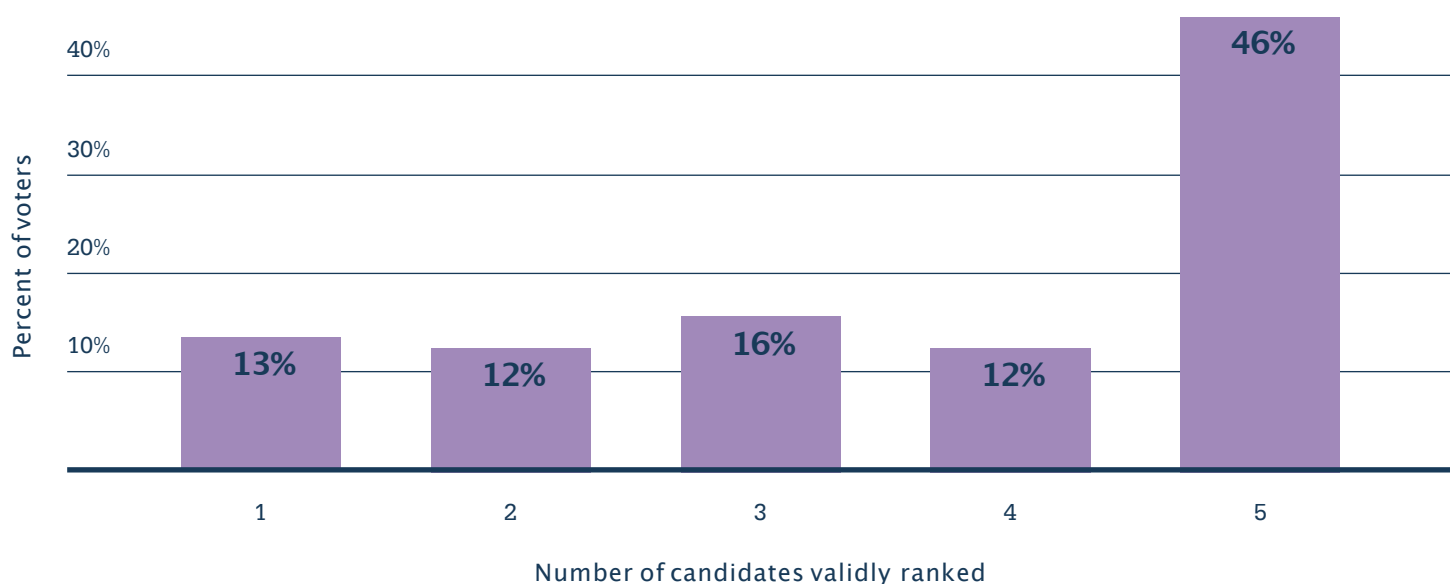
FairVote’s research on election recounts in statewide elections shows that recounts rarely change outcomes, with a typical margin shift of 0.04% for elections with fewer than one million ballots cast, where margin shift is measured as the difference in the margin between the top two candidates divided by total votes cast. The margin shifts in the two New York City races, 0.06% and 0.03%, matched expectations set by recounts in non-RCV elections.

Recounts can be time-consuming regardless of the voting method, but these ranked choice voting recounts do not appear to have been more burdensome than previous recounts in New York City. The 2021 recounts took 16 days and 8 days respectively, a shorter recount period than in 2013, when a recount for district 36 took 17 days.¹⁵

CASE STUDY: WHICH VOTERS USED THE MOST RANKINGS?

Overall, 87% of New York voters ranked multiple candidates in the mayoral primary race and a median of 66% of voters used multiple rankings in other NYC races. The rate of ranking usage, however, varied across different elections and conditions.

FIGURE 10
Number of Rankings Used in Mayor’s Race



¹⁴ Sommerfeldt, Chris. (2021, July 30). [David Carr to be certified as winner of chaotic GOP City Council race on Staten Island – but pro-Trump challenger cries fraud.](#) New York Daily News.

¹⁵ New York City Campaign Finance Board. (2013). [2013 Post-Election Report.](#)

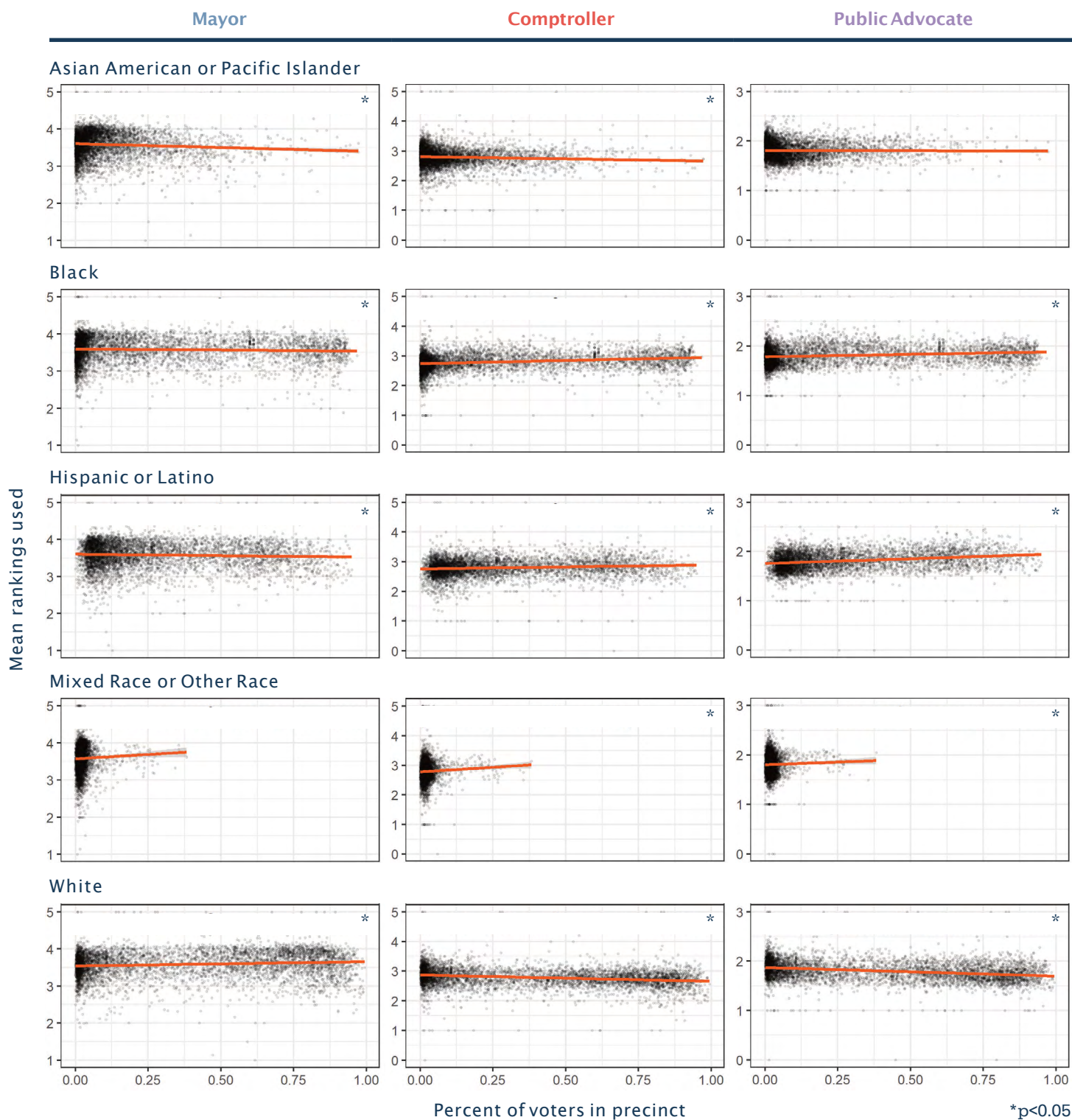
This study used a variety of statistical analysis techniques to examine how ranking usage varied by voter demographic. Findings indicate that ranking usage is much more dependent on the context of the election than on voter demographics. FairVote's analysis shows that voters of all racial and ethnic groups, ages, incomes, and education levels use the ranked ballot to rank their candidate preferences. Results from three statistical methods support these findings.

The first method, a linear regression, examined the relationship between the racial and ethnic makeup of a voting precinct and the mean (average) number of rankings used on ballots in that precinct. This technique is common in work on voting rights issues.

Each point on the graphs below represents one precinct. Each precinct's position on the x-axis represents the portion of voters of a given race or ethnicity in the precinct, and its position on the y-axis represents the average number of rankings used on ballots in that precinct. The linear regression is shown by the orange lines. Positive relationships, shown as upward-sloping lines, indicate that when a racial group makes up a larger share of a precinct's population, ballots from that precinct use more rankings. In other words, an upward-sloping line represents a racial or ethnic group that likely used more rankings on their ballots.

We see surprisingly divergent behavior in the three citywide RCV elections, as shown below.

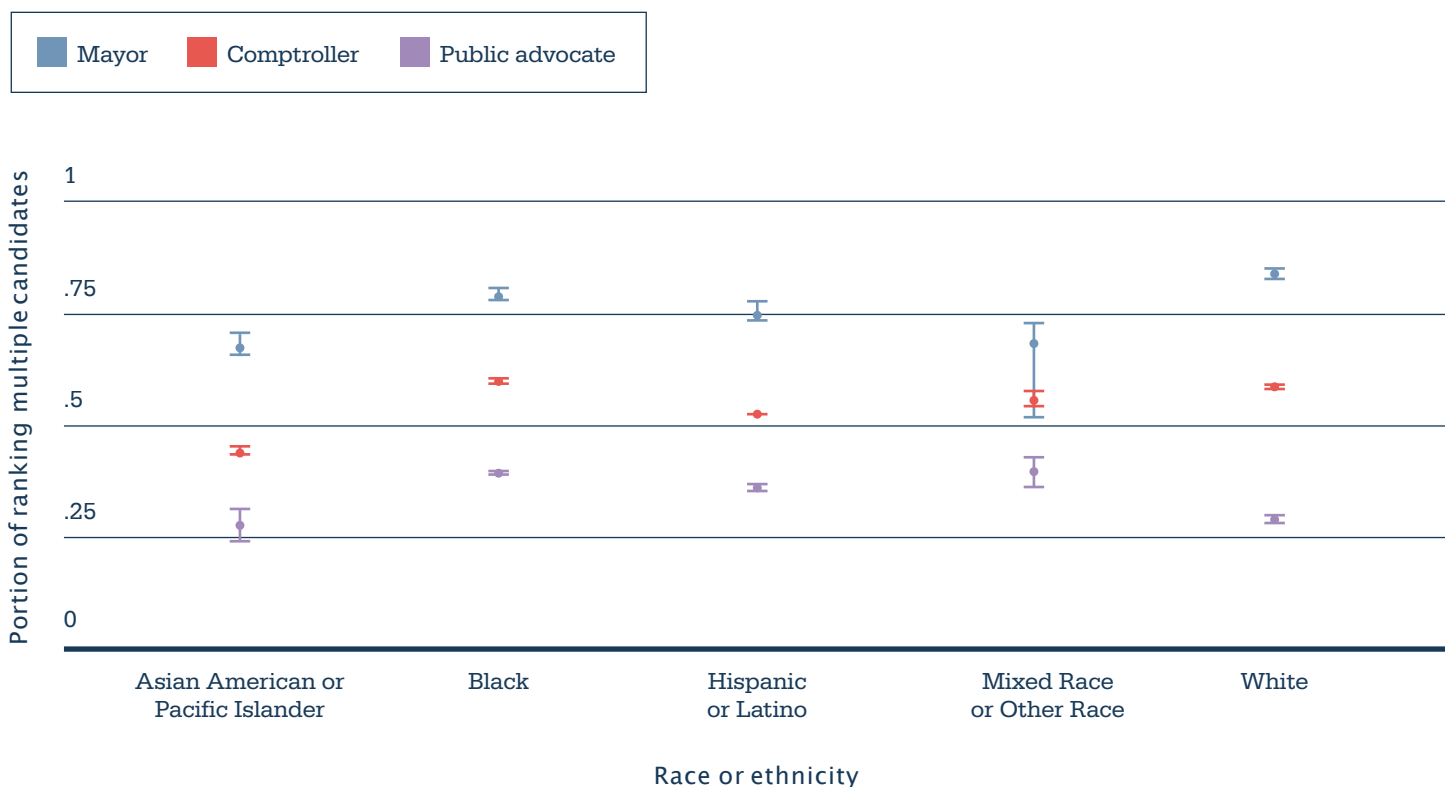
FIGURE 11
Linear Regression, Ranking Behavior and Voter Race and Ethnicity



*p<0.05

The second method, ecological inference, is a statistical technique often used in voting rights work to determine whether voters from different racial or ethnic backgrounds engage in different voting behavior. Ecological inference analysis attempts to extrapolate individual behavior from aggregate data, and so it complements the linear regression analysis above. This method identifies the estimated portion of voters of each racial or ethnic group who ranked multiple candidates on their ballots.

FIGURE 12
Ecological Inference Estimates, Ranking Behavior and Voter Race and Ethnicity



Both the regression and ecological inference show that voter behavior varied among these different citywide elections. In the mayoral election, voters in heavily White precincts tended to rank more candidates on their ballots, but the opposite pattern occurs in the elections for comptroller and public advocate, the only other citywide RCV elections. In these two races, precincts with large Black, Hispanic or Latino, or mixed race populations showed the most strongly positive relationships to a high usage of ranking on ballots. According to the ecological inference analysis, Black voters have either the highest or second-highest use of multiple rankings in all three citywide contests.

Given these divergent results, we conclude that ranking behavior is more dependent on the candidates and their campaigns rather than on a voter’s race or ethnicity. For example, previous FairVote work found that candidates who are perceived as front-runners and candidates who engage in anti-RCV rhetoric are likely to attract more “bullet votes,” or votes that select only that candidate and rank no others.¹⁶ Eric Adams fit both of those criteria in the mayoral election.

Pre-election polling showed Adams with a roughly 10-point lead, and he made public statements expressing skepticism about RCV. Unsurprisingly, voters who ranked Eric Adams as their first choice had the lowest average ranking rate among voters for the top five candidates.

FIGURE 13
Average Ranking Usage in Mayoral Election

Candidate	Eric Adams	Kathryn Garcia	Maya Wiley	Andrew Yang	Scott Stringer
Average Ranks from First-Choice Voters	3.4	4.0	4.0	3.4	3.7

Given Adams’s strong support among Black voters in the mayoral race, the low ranking usage for Adams in particular may have contributed to the lower-than-average ranking usage for Black voters overall in that race, even though Black voters demonstrated the opposite ranking behavior in the comptroller’s election.

A similar analysis of the six borough president elections also shows high ranking usage across all racial and ethnic groups.¹⁷

The last method, a multiple regression model, analyzed variables besides a voter’s race or ethnicity. This method differed from the others in two key ways. First, it considered demographics by state assembly district rather than by voting precinct, a less granular analysis chosen because of the greater availability of data at the assembly district level. Second, it measured the portion of voters who ranked multiple candidates as the dependent variable, rather than measuring average rankings used. This made for a cleaner comparison across elections of different sizes. Once again, ranking usage was highly context-dependent; several groups had statistically significant relationships with ranking usage in some elections but not others.

¹⁶ Otis, D. & Zawora, C. (2021). [Rate of “Bullet Voting” Depends on Candidate Strength, Party Cues, and Other Factors](#). FairVote.

¹⁷ FairVote. (August 2021). [RCV in New York City](#).

FIGURE 14
Coefficient-Level Estimates for Multiple-Ranking Model

Predictors	Estimates		
	Mayor	Comptroller	Public Advocate
Intercept	0.78*** (0.63 – 0.93)	0.43*** (0.32 – 0.54)	0.24*** (0.14 – 0.34)
Education	0.41*** (0.23 – 0.59)	0.24*** (0.11 – 0.37)	-0.02 (-0.14 – 0.10)
Income	0.03 (-0.13 – 0.18)	0.05 (-0.07 – 0.16)	0.06 (-0.04 – 0.16)
Age	-0.71** (-1.25 – -0.18)	-0.02 (-0.42 – 0.37)	0.13 (-0.22 – 0.49)
Hispanic	-0.05 (-0.19 – 0.09)	0.06 (-0.04 – 0.16)	0.15** (0.06 – 0.25)
Black	0.03 (-0.08 – 0.15)	0.15** (0.06 – 0.24)	0.19*** (0.11 – 0.27)
Asian American or Pacific Islander	-0.28** (-0.44 – -0.11)	-0.14* (-0.27 – -0.02)	-0.03 (-0.14 – 0.08)
Mixed Race or Other Race	-0.69 (-1.80 – 0.42)	-0.17 (-0.98 – 0.64)	-0.14 (-0.88 – 0.59)
Observations	69	69	69
R ² /R ² adjusted	0.636/0.595	0.555/0.503	0.527/0.473

*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

In Figure 14, Education is measured as the percent of the population over age 25 with a bachelor’s degree or higher, Income is the scaled median household income, Age is the percentage of the population over age 65, and the remaining categories are the percentage population of each racial or ethnic group in each precinct.

More highly educated precincts appear to have returned more multiple-ranking ballots for mayor and comptroller (as indicated by positive estimates and stars for statistical significance), but this is not the case in the public advocate race. Precincts with more older voters used ranking less in the mayoral election, but not in the other two citywide races. Black voters used ranking more in the comptroller and public advocate elections, but not the mayoral. Overall, no group’s ranking trends were consistent across all three citywide elections.

We conclude that no single demographic group is less likely to engage with the ranked ballot. Voters of all races, ages, incomes, and education levels appear to understand the ranked choice voting ballot and use the opportunity to rank candidates.

CASE STUDY: REPUBLICAN VOTERS RANK CANDIDATES IN STATEN ISLAND

While most competitive elections this cycle occurred on the Democratic ballot, two Republican primaries drew enough candidates to use RCV, with both winners favored in the November general elections. One notable example is the Staten Island borough president's race, where four candidates competed in a close race. Former U.S. Representative Vito Fossella and City Council minority leader Steven Matteo were separated by less than four points in first-choice rankings, with other candidates earning 16% of first-choice preferences.

FIGURE 15

Round-by-Round Totals in Republican Primary for Staten Island Borough President

Candidate	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
Vito Fossella	43.7%	44.0%	51.2%
Steven Matteo	40.1%	40.5%	48.8%
Leticia Remauro	12.6%	12.7%	
Jhong Kim	2.8%	2.8%	
Write-ins	0.8%		

Two-thirds of voters for the trailing candidates expressed a preference between Fossella and Matteo, exercising their right to choose between the finalists. Fossella ultimately prevailed, although his lead narrowed because voters for Leticia Remauro preferred Matteo over Fossella by roughly 20 percentage points. Considering the second choices of voters whose top candidates were not finalists is a crucial component of promoting majority winners and electing candidates with broad support.

In a FairVote/Citizen Data poll of Republican voters in this borough, 70% of respondents reported they found ranking candidates to be easy, and most ranked multiple choices.

● RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RCV ELECTIONS

While the election results led to broadly supported nominees, representative outcomes, and voter engagement with the ranked ballot, this implementation of RCV was not without challenges. Delays and reporting errors fed a lack of confidence in the results, areas in which improvements can be made before the next election cycle.

As New York City adapts to the ranked choice voting system, circumstances particular to New York City may cause multiple election cycles to pass before the process is fully integrated and RCV preliminary results or a cast vote record are available on election night. FairVote hopes to see that change realized in the near future, following the example of other RCV cities like San Francisco.

In order to build on the positive effects of ranked choice voting seen in the NYC 2021 primaries, FairVote recommends:

A continued focus on voter education with dedicated funds and increased emphasis on reaching all communities. While no substantive disparities in the use of rankings were found in this election, voter education will continue to be important to ensure that all voters are empowered to cast a meaningful ballot.

The extension of RCV to general elections to allow more voters to participate and to ensure representative general election outcomes. Only Democrats and Republicans used RCV in 2021 because party primaries are open only to voters registered with that party. As such, unaffiliated and minor party voters did not have the opportunity to rank candidates in this election cycle.

CONCLUSION

New York City's 2021 primary election results demonstrate that ranked choice voting is well suited to large candidate fields, letting voters more fully express their preferences and advancing candidates with broad bases of support. Ranked choice campaigning rewards positive coalition-building, which expands and diversifies the city's political ecosystem and candidate pipelines. Candidates are more likely to leave ranked choice elections with a host of new allies instead of negative feelings over "splitting the vote." Particularly when those large candidate fields are diverse, this feature of ranked choice voting helps to retain diverse political talent.

New York's use of RCV was the largest demonstration of the system in the United States to date, involving more than one million voters. It was not without complications, however, especially relating to reporting errors and delayed results from the Board of Elections. In some cases, these complications led to negative media coverage that blamed RCV for administrative problems. Still, numerous other examples of successful RCV administration in the United States point to the feasibility of releasing timely and accurate RCV results through a transparent and trusted process. Now that the dust has settled from this election, it is clear that RCV led to outcomes that are good for voters, candidates, and governance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Sean Dugar, Eric Friedman, Sarah Goff, Alexis Grenell, Chris Hughes, Kevin Kosar, Jack Nagel, and Allie Swatek for their valuable input and feedback on this report.

APPENDIX A: VOTER EDUCATION

DemocracyNYC
 New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs
 New York City Civic Engagement Commission
 Young Men's Initiative
 New York City Department of Education
 New York City Campaign Finance Board/NYC Votes
 New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities
 Asian American Legal Defense & Education Fund (AALDEF)
 Alliance of Families for Justice
 American Council of the Blind
 Brennan Center
 Bronx Independent Living Services
 Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled
 Brooklyn Voters Alliance
 Campaign Finance Board/NYC Votes
 Center for Independence of the Disabled
 Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College
 Chinese American Planning Council
 Citizens Union
 Civic Engagement Commission
 Common Cause/NY
 Disability Rights NY
 Dominicanos USA
 Downstate NY ADAPT
 The Dream Unfinished
 Fortune Society
 Generation Citizen
 Harlem Independent Living Center
 Hispanic Federation
 Latino Justice
 League of Women Voters
 Markers for Democracy
 Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs
 Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities
 MinKwon
 NALEO
 New York Civil Liberties Union
 New York Immigration Coalition
 Office of the NYC Public Advocate
 Rank the Vote NYC
 Reinvent Albany
 Smart Elections
 Soft Power Vote
 United Neighborhood Houses
 Who's on the Ballot
 Vote Early NY



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