



Top 4 or 5* Nonpartisan Primary – Ranked Choice Voting Final A Compelling Concept

The Top 4 or 5 Nonpartisan Primary with a Ranked Choice Voting Final Election is an extremely compelling concept that has been eloquently presented by Katherine Gehl, a successful businesswoman, and Professor Michael Porter of Harvard Business School.

In this system:

- Primary elections would be nonpartisan. Any qualified candidate could run.
- The top 4 or 5 vote-getters, regardless of party, would move to the general election.
- The general election would be decided by Ranked Choice Voting (RCV).

This system utilizes the advantages of both Nonpartisan Primaries and Ranked Choice Voting while minimizing their disadvantages.

In their original proposal Gehl & Porter recommended the Top 4 primary followed by RCV voting in the final election. They have now switched to recommending a Top 5 primary, because they believe it creates opportunities for more candidates in the final election, which would lead to more turnout and more opportunities for independents. However, some people are still using the Top 4. For example, Alaska currently has a ballot initiative for a Top 4 primary followed by and RCV voting. For purposes of clarity, we will use the numbers 4 and 5 interchangeably.

Top 5 Nonpartisan Primaries

In the primary,

- Any qualified candidate can run, regardless of party.
- The top 4 or 5 vote-getters will move to the general election.
- These primaries should result in many candidates expressing divergent positions, high turnout, competitive elections, more opportunities for independents and moderates, less negative campaigning, less control by big money donors, and more willingness by the winners to govern in a bipartisan or nonpartisan manner.

- With Nonpartisan primaries, independents and moderates would be encouraged to run, leading to a large number of competitive candidates advocating different positions.
- Turnout should be extremely high because most voters will have at least one candidate whose positions they support.
- With 4 or 5 candidates moving to the general election, the risk of having two candidates from the same party or too many similar candidates splitting the vote is overcome. This has been one of the weaknesses of the Top 2 system.
- Since candidates want to win, this system is likely to lead to less extreme positions, less mudslinging, and more civil campaigns.
 - A candidate that takes extreme positions or engages in negative campaigning may emerge from the primary, but that candidate is unlikely to win the final election.
 - With Ranked Choice Voting, the winning candidates are those who can build coalitions.
- Big money becomes less important. In a jurisdiction controlled by one party, big money only needs to ensure that its candidate in the dominant party primary wins. With 4 or 5 candidates moving the final election, the power of big money is limited.
- Since the winning candidates will be chosen by all the voters, instead of the party bases, they should be more willing to govern in a bipartisan manner. With more bipartisan officials, government should function better and actually serve the interests of the people.

Ranked Choice Voting Final Election

The final election with 4 or 5 candidates will be decided by Ranked Choice Voting (RCV).

- Voters will rank the candidates in order of preference.
- The candidate with the least number of votes will be eliminated after the first round. Voters that gave that candidate a #1 will have their votes transferred to the candidate to whom they gave a #2.
- Tabulations will continue until one candidate has received 50% of the remaining votes. That candidate will be declared the winner.

This system has many advantages. It should lead to high turnout, winners who espouse moderate positions, and less negative campaigning, less influence by big money, and elected officials who are willing to govern in a bipartisan or nonpartisan manner.

- In current primary elections with RCV, many votes are “exhausted” (disqualified because voters do not fill out all of their choices.) With 4 or 5 candidates in the general election, voters are more likely to fill out all of their choices, meaning most votes will count.
- Less educated voters will not be disadvantaged. When there are a large number of candidates in an RCV election, less educated voters are less likely to fill out all their choices. With 4 or 5 candidates in the final, this should not be an issue.
- With 4 or 5 candidates, turnout should be extremely high because voters will have multiple choices.
- With 4 or 5 candidates, elections will be more competitive.
- Winning candidates will likely be those who appeal to the broadest coalition of voters. The key to victory may not be receiving the most #1 votes. Rather it will be getting the #2 or #3 votes from the other candidates who are eliminated.
- Polarizing candidates and candidates staging negative campaigns are likely to lose, because while they may receive many #1 votes, they are less likely to receive many #2 and #3 votes.
- Winning candidates will be less indebted to big money donors or party leaders. As a result, they will be more willing to govern in a bipartisan or nonpartisan manner.

This system will thus lead to more independents and moderates being elected, higher turnout, more cooperation between candidates, and less negative campaigning.

If this system is so good,—why don't all jurisdictions use it?

There are two major reasons why this system has not been implemented:

- It threatens the two major political parties and
- It is complicated.

This system of nonpartisan primaries with the top 4 or 5 advancing to the final elections (settled by RCV) directly threatens the control of the two parties and their bases.

- In nonpartisan primaries, parties lose control over the nomination process. The party's favored candidate does not gain a substantial benefit from the party's nomination or a favored spot on the ballot.
- The presence of independents in the race threatens to undermine the control of the dominant party in the jurisdiction. Voters select the candidates they like, not the ones the party tells them to like.
- A process that supports moderates threatens the bases of each party. Right-wing Republicans and left-wing Democrats can win in traditional party primaries, but will often fail to win in this system. Without control of the process, parties lose their power.
- Big money, the lifeblood of both parties, will give less support to the parties and instead focus on individual candidates.
- Since the officials will be elected by the voters, the two parties will have less power to force these officials to tow the party line.

In California, Democrats, like Nancy Pelosi, and Republicans, like Kevin McCarthy, have railed against Nonpartisan Primaries. If political leaders do not like Nonpartisan Primaries, they will really hate this system.

The question that citizens should ask is: are the two parties really serving the needs of the people? Under these parties, we have a system that is polarized. There are few competitive elections. There is little bipartisanship. Government appears broken. Perhaps the parties should serve the people instead of the other way around.

This system is also complicated.

- Except in a few states, voters have not experienced Nonpartisan Primaries.
- Except in Maine and a few cities, voters have not participated in elections with Ranked Choice Voting.
- Many voters like the security of knowing their party is controlling the election and do not want to take the trouble of learning a new system.

However, we believe this system can be easily explained and that complexities can be overcome with proper education. Once a few municipalities or states begin to utilize this system, others will begin to understand its benefits.

Alaska Ballot Initiative 2020

Alaska could be the first state to attempt to implement this system. There is an initiative on the ballot in 2020 for a Top 4 Nonpartisan Primary followed by Ranked Choice Voting in the final election. If Alaska passes this initiative, other states could follow.

CONCLUSION

We currently have a system of government in which the two parties cater to their bases. There are few competitive elections. Independents and third-party candidates have virtually no chance to be elected. Most elections are dominated by negative campaigning. There are few remaining moderates. Government is polarized. Officials of the two parties will not work together to get things accomplished.

The concept of having open nonpartisan primaries with the Top 4 or 5 candidates moving to a final election that will be decided by Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) solves most of these issues. With this system, we should have more candidates, higher turnout, more moderation in campaigning and governing, less control by big money interests, and representatives who are willing to govern in a bipartisan or nonpartisan manner, so that government stops being paralyzed.

This type of election reform could bring about major positive changes.

Democracy Found

Katherine Gehl has started an organization called Democracy Found (democracyfound.org) to promote the concept of Top 5 Primaries with Ranked Choice Voting Final Elections. If you are interested in learning more about this concept, please go to its website.

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