Ranked Choice and STAR Voting:
What Are They and Can They Narrow the Partisan Divide?

It feels as though the American democracy is almost irretrievably broken with the partisan divide between the two parties preventing action by Congress, creating an environment in which the two sides don't accept the same facts, and developing a climate in which it seems that there are two Americas. Not all of the consequences of the partisan divide can be laid at the feet of elected officials, but is it possible that the method of electing our leaders has contributed to the divide in a meaningful way; could changing that method begin to narrow the divide?

Political scientist Lee Drutman of New America, formerly the New America Foundation, argues in his new book, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: the Case for Multiparty Democracy*, that the two party structure enhances partisanship particularly when the parties are defined as ideologically coherent entities which have no overlap. Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) encourages participation beyond the two major parties. Ranked choice voting is also seen as "encouraging candidates to try to broaden their appeal and achieve consensus."

What is the position of the League on voting methods?
We should begin this discussion of RCV by stating the position of the League of Women Voters of Oregon (LWVOR), revised in 2017.
The LWVOR recognizes that election methods affect how voters participate in our democracy, who can run for office, and who can get elected. Therefore, the League supports election methods that:
- Encourage voter participation and voter engagement.
- Encourage participation of those with minority opinions to participate.
- Are easy to use.
- Are verifiable and auditable.
- Promote access to voting.
- Promote competitive elections.
- Promote sincere voting over strategic voting.
- Discourage negative campaigning.
- Prevent political manipulation (e.g. Gerrymandering).
- Are compatible with vote-by-mail elections.

The LWVOR does not support that the current plurality voting system of elections is the best method for promoting democratic choice in all circumstances. For single-winner systems, the League supports ranked-choice voting; we do not support range or approval voting. The LWVOR supports an election system that elects policy-making bodies---legislatures, councils, commissions, and boards---that proportionally reflect the people they represent. We support systems that promote stable government, but we do not support systems that protect the two-party system. The LWVOR supports enabling legislation to allow local jurisdictions to explore alternative election methods. If an alternative election method is adopted, then funding for startup and voter education should be available. The League does not support nonpartisan elections for state legislators.

What is Ranked Choice Voting?
The LWVOR studied a variety of election methods, developed a position in 2009, and provided an update in 2016. This description of ranked choice comes from that study. A ranked choice ballot lists all candidates and asks the voter to assign an order to each. Ballots are tabulated first by counting the first place vote on each ballot. If a candidate receives a majority of the first place votes, that candidate is declared the winner. If no candidate has a majority, the candidate with the fewest number of first place votes is eliminated, and the votes

from those ballots are redistributed to their second place choice. If any candidate has a majority after this process, the candidate wins; if not, the process of eliminating the candidate with the fewest number of first place votes and redistributing the votes on those ballots to the second place choice continues until a candidate has a majority (50% +1) of the votes. As the League document states "The system can be imagined as a simulated series of runoff elections where voters cannot change their preferences between rounds. See a short video of this process here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Z2fRPRkWvY

The League document also includes this sample ballot:

Mark only one candidate per column. Vote only once for any candidate.				
1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	
●	○	○	○	Michelle Obama
○	○	○	●	Lady Bird Johnson
○	○	●	○	Hillary Clinton
○	●	○	○	Eleanor Roosevelt

Ranked choice ballots are more nuanced than ballots in which only one choice is permitted. They allow voters to express a wider range of options, including no opinion. Voters can express relative feelings for any or all candidates. RCV decreases the likelihood of a spoiler effect in which, for example, votes for one of two candidates with similar positions can split the vote, throwing the election to a candidate with dissimilar positions. Note: in many discussions of election methods, RCV is also known as instant runoff voting or IRV.

Let's compare RCV with our current system in which the winner has the most votes, a plurality rather than a majority. In RCV the winner on the final ballot has a majority of the votes while in a plurality system, the winner may not be the choice of the majority of voters. In a crowded field only a small fraction of the voters might support the winner. As the League document states, "In fact, the winner in a plurality contest may be a candidate the majority of voters would have least wanted. Earning broad support across the majority of voters is a worthy goal. RCV rewards candidates who do so. In contrast, plurality encourages candidates to pursue the largest minority (AKA: the plurality).

RCV encourages candidates to seek second place support as well as first place. This strategy discourages overly negative campaigning because candidates risk alienating potential supporters and encouraging them to give them last place votes. In a plurality system, however, mudslinging frequently works because a voter's decision not to vote for an opponent is effectively a vote for the candidate.

One concern with voting methods involves "strategic" voting in which voters try to game the system. This can be seen in a primary election where a voter chooses a candidate who is not her first choice who seems to have a better chance against the opponent of the other party in a general election. Simulations of voting outcomes show that RCV is much more resistant to strategic voting, and is much more likely to deliver a candidate who is the favorite of the majority of voters.

There are criticisms of RCV. One involves monotonicity, which says that, all other things being equal, if you increase your desired candidate's ranking then it must never hurt their overall election result. Because RCV is very sensitive to the order in which candidates are eliminated, there are situations where it is possible for your favorite candidate to lose when ranked higher on many ballots. One way to determine whether an election is "accurate" when it contains more than two candidates is to evaluate which candidate would win the election when their vote total is compared with that of each other candidate. Consider a case where candidate A is declared the winner through RCV. If candidate A gets more votes than B but fewer votes than C, the election

feels inaccurate. This is an example of a lack of monotonicity. Understandably this can cause distrust of the voting process, which may explain why some cities have returned to plurality voting (Pierce County, WA in 2009; Ann Arbor, MI in 1976; Burlington, VT in 2010, Aspen, CO in 2010). There are estimates that this might happen as much as 15% of the time in RCV. Monotonicity is preserved in "normal" plurality voting because the vote you cast is not changed by a subsequent tabulation.

It is also important to note that the winner has the majority of votes cast on the last ballot. If, for example, 100 ballots are cast but 8 people vote only for two candidates and those two are eliminated in the first two rounds, then there will only be 92 ballots remaining in the group cast, with the winner needing 46+1 votes to have a majority.

There are also some administrative difficulties including the increased time to calculate a winner, and the need for a central elections administration office to determine which candidate(s) to eliminate each round. Recount procedures are also more complicated and would require additional administrative procedures for Oregon election officials as well as new vote tallying systems since optical readers would be needed. These effects may also have contributed to the return to plurality voting in the areas mentioned above. It should be noted that as of June of this year, 22 jurisdictions in the US (state, county, and city) used RCV and 53 jurisdictions are projected to use RCV in either their next election or the one following. That represents two states, one county, 26 cities outside of Utah and 23 Utah cities. Ranked voting is also used in national or state elections in Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Malta, Slovenia and Nauru. Australia has been using RCV since 1918 and Ireland since 1912.

How Does Score Then Automatic Runoff (STAR) voting differ from RCV?
STAR can be thought of as a second cousin to RCV in terms of allowing voters to express their preferences. It attempts to keep the strengths of RCV (evaluating the candidate with the most support and doing so in an efficient manner) while avoiding the problems with non-monotonicity. Political scientists have been evaluating the accuracy of multicandidate elections by running computer simulations, They found that range voting, in which candidates are similar to that used to rank restaurants on Yelp, for example, and the results summed, followed by a general election for the top two winners gave the best results (greatest "accuracy") when evaluated by two statistical methods (Condorcet winner criterion and Baysean regret). STAR voting takes this approach of using range voting to determine not only preference for a candidate but strength of the preference (Is the candidate a 5 or a 7?) but then uses that strength of support in an automatic runoff, thus avoiding a second election. It also avoids the delay in announcing the results of elections that may occur with multiple rounds of RCV.

How does STAR work?
You rank the candidates from 0-5, as shown below on the sample ballot. Note that you don't need to rank all candidates if you don't know anything about them and you can give two candidates the same ranking. All of the votes are totaled and the top two vote getters for all of the ballots are selected. A second tabulation of the top two vote getters is then done on all ballots. In this second tabulation these two vote getters are considered as though they were two candidates in an election, totaling the number of higher votes (higher preference) for each candidate. Suppose when all of the votes are tallied, the top two vote getters were Abby, 650,000 points and Carmen 450,000 points. Your ballot would be rescanned and one vote would be given to Carmen because you had ranked her higher. The candidate with the highest total for this scan, the candidate who was ranked higher of the two finalists, is the winner. The first step in the tabulation is the identification of the two candidates with the greatest overall support; the second is a run-off between those two candidates.

Score Candidates:	**0**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Abby	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	●	(5)
Ben	●	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Carmen	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	●
DeAndre	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	●	(5)
Eric	(0)	●	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

Comparison of Ranked Choice and STAR Voting

- Ranked choice voting asks you to give a first choice, second choice, third choice and so on. This allows a voter to show relative preference but not the extent of that preference. STAR voting allows you to indicate the depth of your preference: If you really like one candidate, you might give them a 5 and everyone else much lower scores. In addition, ranked choice voting doesn't allow you to give two candidates equal scores; you must decide between them or give no score. STAR voting is a variation of range voting in which, rather than sticking to only one score of 5, you can give several candidates 5s. The concern here is like the concerns about grade inflation; if you are an easy grader, does that skew the results in an election? Studies show that in an election of a reasonable size, these differences don't affect the outcome, that is, candidates preferred most by the most voters win the elections.
- A second concern with the ranking of candidates in RCV is that if the field of candidates is large, you will need a ranking scale that is as large as the number of candidates so that each gets a unique ranking. While slates of candidates larger than 5 are not common, this is a challenge for ranked choice voting. There were 13 candidates on the ballot in the New York City mayoral primary in June 2021. The "workaround" for this concern is to limit the voter to 5 votes spread among the 13 candidates.
- In RCV there can be many rounds of tabulation to get to a candidate who has the majority of votes cast. In STAR there is only one runoff. The process of re-tabulation in ranked choice voting is more complex, requiring more complex code, and the ballots must be physically or digitally in the same place. It also takes more time, which increases concern about election safety and fraud.
- Both ranked choice and STAR need to narrow the field to the top two candidates to have one winner with greater than 50% of the vote. In STAR, the top two candidates are the ones preferred by the majority of the voters. In the second step, all ballots are counted again, taking into account the preference of each voter for the two candidates with the greatest support by the voters. The only time a ballot isn't counted is if the voter gave the same ranking to the top two candidates. In RCV a winner is the candidate preferred on a majority of the remaining ballots in the final round of tabulation. Some ballots may not be counted in the final round if the remaining candidates were not among the votes on that ballot.

How does the League of Women Voters of Lane County (LWVLC) assess STAR voting in terms of the criteria for election methods listed near the beginning of this document?
Action committee members of LWVLC examined STAR voting, Ballot Measure 20-290, prior to the November 2018 election. The ballot measure failed to pass, with 47.6% of the voters supporting it. There was an attempt to put STAR voting on the May 2020 ballot for the Eugene local election. The verification process questioned 23 signers' signatures. The STAR campaign provided affidavits for those signatures and also identified 30 signers whose signatures were rejected for a variety of reasons. Based on this evidence, an appeal was filed with the Lane County Circuit court which ruled the appeal moot, because the election date had passed. The case continues based on the argument that the decision was incorrect, because local elections are not subject to the state requirements that an initiative must aim for a specific ballot. A court date is coming up soon.
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In general, STAR voting meets many of LWVOR's criteria for election methods from the 2016 Election Methods Consensus.
- It encourages "sincere" rather than "strategic" voting in which voters dishonestly represent their preferences to improve their chances of a desirable outcome or decrease the chance of a less desirable outcome.
- Because there are no wasted votes, votes that are not counted for an inaccuracy, like voting twice, effective votes are maximized. That is, even if their favorite(s) aren't in the top two, their scores for those top two (if not equal) can influence the final outcome.
- It encourages competitive elections and doesn't advantage incumbents or party control. The scoring approach ideally rewards voters by enabling them to elect a candidate better reflecting the support of a majority of those casting ballots. This, in turn, should invite participation by more candidates and candidates who otherwise might not have run for office. All of these results should lead to more competitive elections.
- It should encourage issue-oriented campaigns because candidate must compete for every vote to earn reasonable scores, which should encourage issues-oriented debate and communication about policy positions.
- It should discourage extremism because candidates able to appeal to a broader range of voters will be able to earn scores that could propel them forward.

In the analysis of the STAR voting, there were a number of criteria that were probably met by STAR voting but because the method was relatively untested at that time, the ability of STAR voting to meet the criteria couldn't be assessed.

STAR voting has been used in a number of small elections, most recently by the Deschutes Democrats for the local Special District election endorsements in March 2021, by the Democratic Party of Oregon for presidential delegate elections in June, 2020, by the Independent Party of Oregon for a presidential preference poll in June, 2020 and also for their primary in May 2020.

Can changing from plurality voting to methods like ranked choice or STAR affect the partisan divide?

New York City. The New York City mayoral election is the largest US election that has used RCV. The major concern about that election occurred because the Board of Elections of NYC failed to remove some test ballots from the software used to tabulate the votes, which altered the initially reported results. This error was fairly rapidly identified and the test ballots removed, but the error caused consternation and a lack of trust by some voters. It appears that the problem was a failure to get upgraded software installed early enough. There was also concern that the process confused the voters, but 95% of 1662 voters surveyed who had voted either early or day of election voting found the ballot "simple to complete." Concerns were also expressed about the timeliness of obtaining the results, but other cities that used this method felt that the amount of time

necessary to get the results was not out of line. This timeliness is of concern because delay in determining results undermines voter confidence and can lead elected officials to promote conspiracy theories and lies about the outcome of elections.

RCV also changed the way that campaigns were run. During the last few days, the campaigns of Andrew Yang and former sanitation commissioner Kathryn Garcia formed an alliance in which voters of Yang who almost certainly wouldn't win ranked Garcia second. The alliance was seen to diminish incivility in campaigning. Ranked choice was also used in the City Council Democratic primary and resulted in a more diverse slate of candidates for the general election. In the current city council, 14 of the 51 councilors are women; after the Democratic primary, 29 women are standing for election to the heavily Democratic city council. And of those women, 26 are women of color, with nearly three quarters women under 40. This means that the City Council could have a council that skews younger and more diverse than in previous years.

A close analysis of all of the races in New York City showed that in only 3 out of 63 did the ultimate winner of the contest not receive more first place votes, although they may not have received a majority on the first round. In one borough, Shekar Krishnan won the Democratic nomination although rival Yi Chen had the most first place votes with a difference of 29 votes. However since neither had a majority of votes, 7 rounds of counting were needed to get to a majority for Krishnan. He said that ranked choice was a key part of his campaign strategy, through the creation of a broad coalition that was multicultural, multi-lingual, and multi-generational. In a second race, challenger Kristen Jorden defeated incumbent Bill Perkins by 114 votes after 13 rounds of counting (and a hand-recount since the margin was so small). Analysis of the race suggested that Perkins, a vulnerable incumbent who only jumped into the race late and faced concerns about his health and cognitive ability, would have won the race in a plurality election because the vote against him would have been split among the 12 other candidates.

One argument for RCV is the removal of the spoiler. *The Washington Post* has done a nice analysis of this effect in the New York City elections. When we think of spoiled elections, we remember when Bush got 48.5% of the votes, Gore got 48.4%, and Nader got 1.64% of the votes, many of which might have gone to Gore. But the spoiler effect can be considered in terms of spoiling the system. This can be considered as one described above. But it could also be considered as a spoiled election in which a third party candidate considering running might be dissuaded from entering because he knows he can't win. This is often hard to evaluate because it is speculative. How can you decide the effect of something that didn't happen? Advocates of ranked choice say that the method encourages more candidates to enter because they won't be acting as spoilers. The Post writers looked at the 46 Democratic primary candidates for city council. In 2017, the average number of primary candidates was three; in 2021 it was 6, which could be considered as a victory for ranked choice voting.

While there appears to be a general consensus that RCV worked in New York City, there are additional concerns to be noted. A substantive concern is that RCV was used in the Democratic primary for mayor. Because NYC is a majority Democratic city, the nominee in the Democratic primary is almost assured the election. A better process would be to hold a nonpartisan election, including Republicans in addition to Democrats, as is done in San Francisco and Minneapolis. A second concern is the exhausted ballot. An exhausted or inactive ballot is one that doesn't rank one of the two candidates left after all the elimination rounds. This could mean the voter selected five other candidates or ranked fewer than five. An analysis of the mayoral primary results by Citizens Union showed that just under 15% of the voters had inactive ballots in the final tabulation. Some observers attributed this to lack of understanding the process, although, as noted earlier, a survey of voters indicated substantial understanding.

San Francisco. Prior to 2002, San Francisco used a two-round runoff system for elections, which usually meant a second round in December to get a majority winner. This was expensive and caused voter fatigue. The adoption of RCV in 2002 saved money, but it also improved the climate of elections. As was true in San Francisco as well as other cities with ranked-choice voting, candidates spent less time attacking each other, as compared to similar cities that didn't adopt ranked-choice voting. Voters in these cities reported being more satisfied with local campaigns as a result. RCV has also increased the number of minority candidates. Scholars have concluded that more minority candidates ran because, under ranked choice, such candidates could reach out to other communities where they might not be the natural first choice and ask for second-choice votes. Women who would have been deterred by negative campaigning were more willing to run under RCV. Similar results were observed in other cities such as Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Australia. A comparison with RCV in Australia is illustrative because Australians have been doing this for over a hundred years and Australia is another continental-sized federal two-party democracy. As it was designing its democracy, it borrowed heavily from the US form of government: the idea of sharing sovereignty between the national and state governments, a bicameral legislature, including a senate to represent the interests of the states, and a written constitution. Its electoral process has some notable modifications. Voting is compulsory, they have created independent electoral management bodies, which has created a widespread view of elections as a kind of rule based game refereed by an independent umpire, and by the use of preferential choice voting. These adaptations have resulted in high levels of electoral participation, aggregative national parties combined with minor party representation, and a utilitarian preference for government to play the role of both rule maker and arbiter. One of the striking effects of preferential voting is the way the system has operated to steer the political system away from extremes and toward the political center on most political issues. "It has provided the electorate with the means to punish perceived extremism of any ideology, providing strong incentive for the major parties to keep their focus on the middle ground at all times." It has also encouraged a lot of cross-party deals between major and minor parties.

A summary from an article that outlined the experience of Australian voters for Maine citizens listed the following advantages:
- Voters like the system because they can choose a smaller party and still then give a second vote for one of the big parties, without worrying that their vote is going to be "wasted."
- Politicians appreciate being able to claim a majority mandate, particularly when in or aspiring to be in government. In some cases, this enables them to win office even in situations where they may be a compromise choice between two more polarizing opponents.
- In Australia, about one in every 11 districts is won by a candidate who gains fewer first-choice votes than their opponent, but as a compromise or "least unpopular" choice picks up sufficient preference votes so as to come through the field during the count from second (or very rarely third) place and wins the seat. But this is the exception, not the norm. In two-third of all districts, the counting of secondary votes results in the first-count leader winning, while in the remainder, the winner gains a clear majority on the first count and wins his/her seats without a second preference ever being counted.
- The system has helped maintain social harmony by delivering centrist politics. There is a focus on the middle ground in elections, and a similar convergence on many big-ticket policy issues such as health, education and defense are supported by the two main parties.

The use of RCV in federal elections in Australia and in city elections in the US has demonstrated that there are viable alternatives to plurality voting which may offer opportunities to reshape the political climate as well as to provide better representation to its citizens.

Discussion Questions

1.   STAR voting was on the ballot in 2018, but failed to gain a majority. What was the opposition to it?
2.   What would be necessary to adopt RCV or STAR voting in Oregon?
3.   Which method is better?
4.   Which, if either, could narrow the partisan divide?

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(Material prepared by Nancy Mills)