

Ranked Choice Ballots for Military and Overseas Voters: Presidential Nomination Contests

2014 POLICY GUIDE



State Policy

August 2014

Ranked choice absentee ballots uphold voting rights for military and overseas voters when presidential candidates withdraw after their ballots were cast.

The Problem: Presidential primaries unfold quickly after initial contests in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Nevada. These early contests always lead to the withdrawal of several major candidates, yet the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act of 1986 (UOCAVA) and the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act of 2009 (MOVE) protect the voting rights of U.S. citizens residing abroad by mandating that states mail absentee ballots to overseas voters at least 45 days before federal elections. As a result, dozens of states will mail overseas voters ballots for presidential primaries that will include candidates who will withdraw before the primary. Overseas voters may receive, complete and return those ballots before they know which candidates have dropped out.

Solution: Ranked choice absentee ballots provide a legal and practical solution to the

disenfranchisement of overseas voters in presidential primaries. These voters will send back a primary ballot where they can rank candidates in order of choice. Rather than have an absentee ballot count for a candidate who has formally withdrawn, it instead would count for the highest-ranked candidate on the ballot who is seeking the nomination.

Parties also should provide ranked choice ballots to overseas voters for caucuses where in-person voters can shift to a second choice.

Success Story: Though not yet extended to presidential primaries, in 2014, five states are using ranked ballots in congressional runoffs that could go to a runoff election. South Carolina has done so since 2006; election officials report near perfect use of the ranked choice ballot and high rates of overseas voters having their ballots count in runoffs.

Where RCV Ballots for Military Voters Are Used in Runoff Elections

- Arkansas (federal, state and local primary and general elections with runoffs)
- Louisiana (federal and state elections with runoffs)
- South Carolina (federal and state primary elections)
- 2014 only] Congressional and Senate primaries in Alabama and Mississippi
- Springfield, Illinois (municipal elections)

Fiscal Impact

Little to none. States have developed good ballot designs, voter education, and ballot-handling materials. Ballots can be efficiently tallied by hand.

Related Reforms

- Ranked Choice Ballots for Military and Overseas Voters
- Ranked Choice Voting
- Civic Education
- Democracy Index

Part Two Resources

- Model statute