

Conducting a Statewide Hand-Recount with Ranked Choice Voting

Recounts are rare; but when they are needed, they are critical to ensuring that the election process is fair and seen as fair. Recounts are a failsafe to confirm the candidate with the most eligible votes wins. Under ranked choice voting, the need for recounts will still be rare, and they can be administered in a way that will remain fair to all parties and comparable in time to recounts today.

Critically, each ballot will only require a single review in determining for whom it should count in all but the most unusual circumstances. Although an initial ranked choice voting count is conducted through multiple rounds of counting, the recount will not need multiple rounds. That's because the order in which lower-performing candidates are eliminated doesn't change the outcome for a close second-place finisher. In an RCV recount, the rankings for candidates placing below the candidate requesting the recount can be ignored, and each ballot should take a single review to determine for whom it should count. The top candidates are the only ones with a chance to win, so rankings for all other candidates are simply ignored as if those candidates have already been defeated. Ballots can be sorted based only on which of those top candidates, if any, the ballot supports, and this process will generally conclude the recount.

When requested by the second-place finisher

When a final tabulation results in a close election between a candidate who finishes second and a candidate who finishes first, the recount is simple. Ballots are recounted and divided into three groups and tallied:

- Leading candidate: ballots that rank the leading candidate ahead of the trailing candidate (or which rank the leading candidate and not the trailing candidate) are put into the leading candidate's group;
- Trailing candidate: ballots that rank the trailing candidate ahead of the leading candidate (or which rank the trailing candidate and not the leading candidate) are put into the trailing candidate's group;
- All other ballots, including those that do not rank either of the two finalists and all other "exhausted ballots," are set aside.

After sorting the ballots, whichever of the two candidates has more ballots in their tally is the winner. The process is completely analogous to a recount in a vote-for-one system, the chances of it occurring are the same as we have today, and length of time for this recount should be comparable.

When requested by the third-place finisher

Under RCV, there is a small chance that a third-place candidate may request a recount on the grounds that he or she would have won if they had not been eliminated. If a candidate who

placed third requests a recount challenging her elimination in the penultimate round (for example a near-tie between the candidates for second), the recount process is very similar to the one above. Instead of three groups of ballots, however, there are four groups; and these groups are tallied:

- Leading candidate: ballots that rank the leading candidate ahead of the two trailing candidates (or which rank the leading candidate and not the trailing candidates);
- Second-place candidate: ballots that rank the second-place candidate ahead of the leading candidate and the third-place candidate (or which rank the second-place candidate and not the other two);
- Third-place candidate: ballots that rank the third-place candidate ahead of the leading candidate and the second-place candidate (or which rank the third-place candidate and not the other two);
- All other ballots, including those that do not rank either of the three finalists and all other “exhausted ballots,” are set aside.

Additionally, to ensure that each ballot need only be examined once, the ballots counting for the second-place candidate are further divided into sub-groups depending on which of the other two candidates are ranked higher. Only the second-place candidate’s group needs this extra tally to indicate how those ballots should be counted in the event that the second-place candidate is eliminated. That way, in the rare case that the order of elimination changes, the elimination of the second-place candidate can be done without any need to re-examine the ballots. So ballots for the second-place candidate are further divided and tallied based on:

- Those that rank the leading candidate above the third-place candidate
- Those that rank the third-place candidate above the leading candidate
- Those that ranked neither

If, after tallying and tabulating the ballots, the third-place candidate who requested the recount still has the fewest votes, then the recount ends because that candidate is eliminated, and the rest of the tally is unaffected.

In the event that the order of elimination is reversed between the second-place candidate and the third-place candidate, with the second-place candidate now eliminated, the sub-group tallies are used to allocate that candidate’s ballots to the first place candidate, the requesting candidate, and the exhausted ballot tally. This will produce a winner without needing to re-examine the ballots.

When requested by a later finisher

The process would be much more complex if the candidate in fourth-place requests a recount. Such a request would be vanishingly rare. FairVote has been unable to identify any ranked choice voting election for public office ever conducted in which the candidate placing fourth or later in first-choices won the election. For that reason, we recommend that candidates placing fourth or later not be eligible to request a recount.

General points

Be sure when conducting a ranked choice voting recount to follow the rules for exhausted ballots. For example, a ballot that ranks the leading candidate above the trailing candidate should not be added to the leading candidate's group if it has an overvote at a higher ranking.

Also, the recount can be conducted in stages as ballots are centralized. For example, a recount that is not complete may terminate early at the requesting candidate's request if the ballots are increasing the margin of victory of the leading candidate rather than reducing it as they are counted.