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The ranked-choice difference: What New Yorkers should look for when they vote in this month's primary



By [Jerry H. Goldfeder](#)

Many New York City voters seem perplexed and nervous about ranked-choice voting, which is making its citywide debut in the upcoming mayoral primary. They shouldn't be. It's actually fairly straightforward. They can vote for up to five candidates in each of the five municipal races: mayor, public advocate, controller, borough president and City Council. Once a candidate exceeds 50% of the vote, he or she wins. If no one does, the candidate with the least votes is eliminated and their voters' second-ranked choices get distributed to those candidates. The process continues until someone gets a majority.

What *is* tricky, however, is that there are two ballots — one for those city offices, and a separate ballot, depending upon where in the city the voter lives, for district attorney, Civil Court judge, and political party positions. On this ballot, the voter can choose only one candidate (unless there are multiple positions to be filled), the way New Yorkers are used to voting. So people need to pay attention to the instructions on each ballot.

Just to be sure, though, here are a few do's and don'ts.

Let's say a voter likes several candidates for mayor. You need to make sure to fill in the oval in Column "1" to the right of the list of candidates indicating your first choice. Your second pick should be under Column 2, and so on. You shouldn't vote for two candidates as your first choice. That's an "overvote," and won't count. And you shouldn't vote for your preferred candidate more than once as your first and second choice — this is also wrong.

One other point: You shouldn't forget to turn over your ranked-choice ballot — citywide candidates are on one side, and borough president and Council candidates are on the other.

You might wonder why you cannot rank five candidates for district attorney. After all, it seems like just another local position. But in fact, it's a state office. Each of New York's 62 counties has a DA, and state law governs — so it's on the "vote for only one" ballot.

The really hard part is how to rank candidates. Given the fact that there are 13 people running for mayor, it's likely no one gets more than 50% on the first round of counting (or probably the second or third round either), and until a candidate passes that threshold, the counting continues. If the polls and endorsements are to be believed, there are only four or five candidates with a shot at victory, with the remaining wannabes coming up short. It appears most voters will rank one from this top tier as their first choice.

Let's assume this is the case — though everyone knows that polls can change and there is sometimes a "come from behind" winner. Voters choosing one of the five can expect these candidates to survive in the counting process, as the lowest vote-getters are eliminated. Ironically, then, those who vote for the candidates who come in at the bottom of the pack will have their second choices count, but those who cast ballots for the top-tier candidates may not have their second choice count until near the end of the process. A system that appears to give greater weight to voters who support losers may seem a bit topsy-turvy, but the growing number of cities that have adopted ranked-choice voting seem to be pretty satisfied with the way it works.

So voters need to perform a careful analysis ("guess" is probably a better word) as to when their first-choice candidate may get eliminated — and decide who they would want, or definitely not want, as their next choice. I should also mention that if a voter's first, second and third choices are eliminated, their fourth choice and maybe fifth will count. Of course, a voter cannot assess the candidates' order of elimination with any certainty in advance, especially if they vote by mail or during early voting, because campaign dynamics can change up to the last minute.

All of this leads to two conclusions: Voters should be careful to vote the correct way on their two ballots, and ranking candidates second through fifth is important — if your first-place candidate is eliminated, your second choice is likely to be counted— assuming, of course, your Number 2 is still in the game. And if your second choice is out, your Number 3 is counted. And so on.

Two examples drive this home. In a special election for mayor in San Francisco in 2018, there were eight candidates, and no one passed 50% until the ninth round of counting. And in a Maine

congressional election that same year, the candidate who was behind on the first round won on the final round. So everyone's ranked-choice votes may make a difference.

No doubt ranked-choice voting requires the voter to think harder about their preferences. The benefit, however, is that New Yorkers will have a greater voice as the field winnows. We shall see how it actually plays out.

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