



**Healthy States  
National Task Force**  
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

Civic Health Subcommittee

State Leader Policy Brief

# Increasing Public Trust in Government



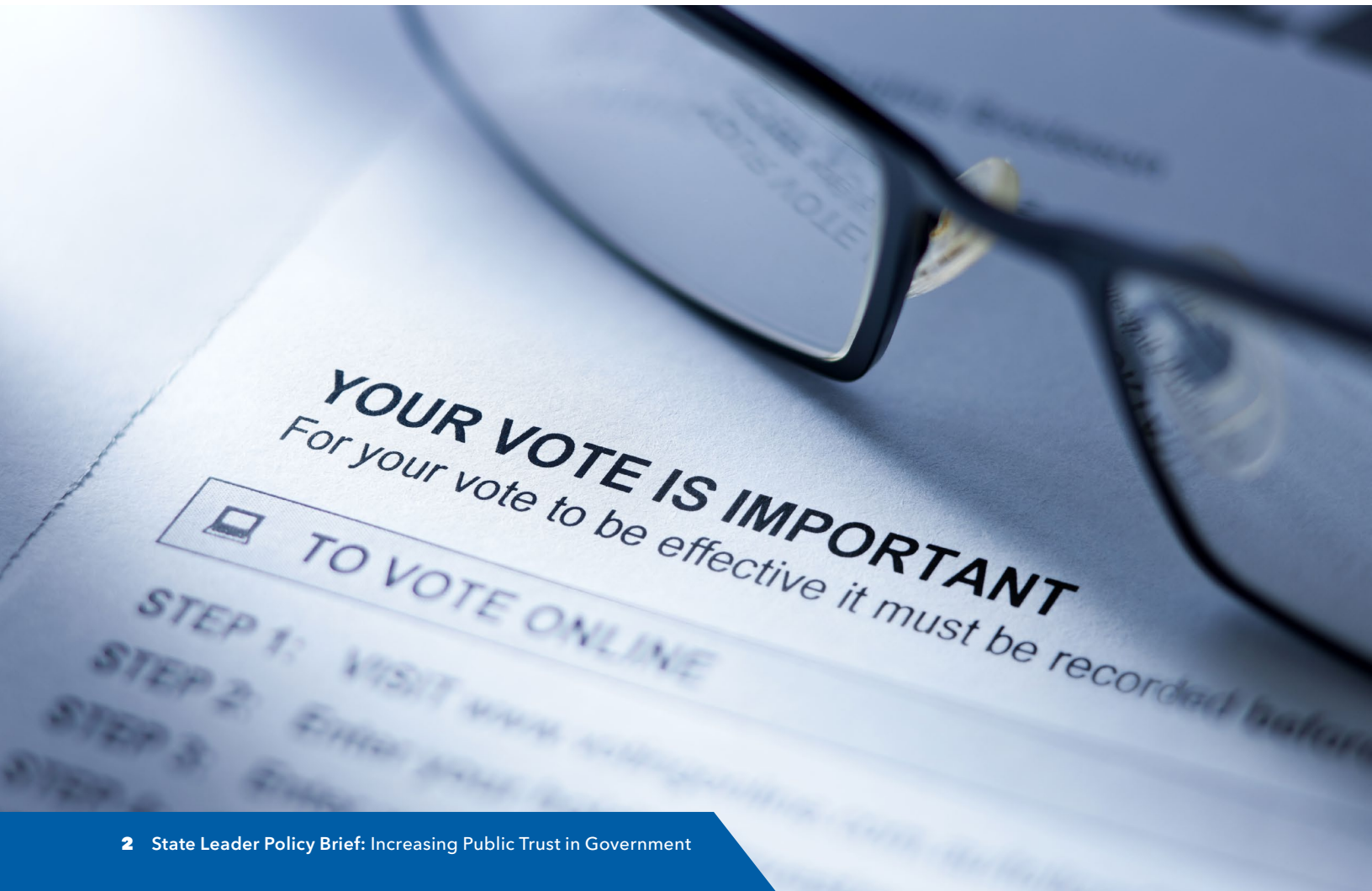
## About This Brief

The Council of State Governments (CSG) Healthy States National Task Force State Leader Policy Briefs are informational resources for state leaders to improve understanding of policy issues and empower policy conversations. Included in each brief are introductions to the policy problem, a survey of state policy options and analysis and

recommendations for state leaders. The policy options presented in this guide are not endorsement of a particular policy by CSG or members of the Healthy States National Task Force, but rather are intended to assist state leaders in their assessment within their specific state contexts.

Debates over topics including the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 elections, increasing polarization, economic uncertainty and other similar issues have only exacerbated the tension between the public and public institutions, something that has been a subject of concern for years.

As of May 2021, only 24% of people polled by [Pew Research](#) said that they can trust the government in Washington, D.C., to do what is right “always” or “most of the time.”<sup>1</sup> When Pew first asked this question in 1958, the number of Americans who felt that they could trust their government to do what was right always or most of the time was nearly 77%.<sup>2</sup> And according to one [study](#) looking at public trust in public institutions, the demographic group falling mostly in the “Low Trust” category includes people who are “young, isolated, and economically and socially vulnerable.” The study’s authors state that this “Low Trust” group includes 20% of America that has little to no faith in most public institutions.<sup>3</sup>





# The Need for Renewed Public Investment in Voting and Civics

As states reopen, schools fill with in-person instruction, and workplaces settle into a hybrid world, state policy-makers must continue to wrestle with the worsening civic health among U.S. residents for which there is no easy cure. This state leader policy brief looks closely at how voting reform might restore trust and the feeling of agency among Americans, and it will outline a wider menu of policy options that a special commission on democratic citizenship believes could elevate civic trust for years to come.

## State Options for Increasing Trust in Public Institutions | Voting

The COVID-19 pandemic served as both a laboratory for voting reform and a breaking point in the public's trust in the nation's current voting systems. With the risk of COVID-19 exposure particularly high for state poll workers, a result of the group skewing older in age, and with many voters of all ages wanting safer ways to cast a ballot, we saw Democrat and Republican policymakers work together to administer elections in 2020 unlike any most states had ever seen. At the same time, an unprecedented number of Americans believed a conspiracy theory that the 2020 presidential election was "stolen," and as a result, trust in voting systems at all levels of government reached a new low.

In order to correct these negative trends in voter confidence, a policy response is needed. Voting is a central tenant to the U.S.'s most novel contribution to the modern world: the peaceful transition of power. To keep that peace and ensure representative government survives the test of time in this country, policymakers will need to employ new tactics to inspire trust in state voting systems and make every citizen's vote a meaningful reflection of their political priorities.





## State Policy Options

This brief will focus on three types of voting systems:

1. Jungle primaries
2. Single-winner ranked-choice voting
3. Proportional ranked choice voting

Currently, the majority of state and municipalities utilize a plurality-vote “winner-take-all” model of voting. In this model, a candidate only needs a plurality of votes to win, creating a system where it is possible that a candidate who is disliked by the majority of voters can win an election by receiving a few votes more than anyone else running. Benefits of this voting model include:

- Reinforces a two-party system
- Produces stable majorities in legislatures
- Disempowers more extremists’ parties

However, this model also comes with great costs, including:

- Forces competing ideological factions into one of two parties that struggle to represent voter preferences
- Encourages gerrymandering
- Discourages voter turnout
- Creates a high number of “wasted votes” per election
- Denies representation to third parties
- Suppresses representation of historically excluded groups like racial minorities and women.<sup>4</sup>

The following are voting alternatives to the standard winner-take-all system, designed to increase voter confidence and the significance of each individual ballot:

## Jungle Primary (Two-Round Runoffs and Louisiana's Majority-Vote System)

Two-round runoff elections are similar to the standard plurality-vote system in that it is a winner-take-all model. In this model though, a candidate must ultimately gain the majority (50% of votes + 1 additional vote) to win the race. The process includes two rounds of voting taking place on two separate days. All candidates are listed on the first ballot and voters choose one of them. If no candidate receives 50% + 1, the field is cut down to the top two candidates and another round of voting is needed on a separate day.

An example of a two-round runoff model can be found in Georgia. In Georgia, statewide office holders (state legislature, governor, U.S. Representatives, etc.) are elected by majority vote in single-winner districts. If a candidate in a primary, general, or special election fails to reach 50% + 1 vote, then the top two vote getters go on to a runoff election, usually held nine weeks after the first election.<sup>5</sup>

The Jungle Primary typically refers to [Louisiana's majority-vote system](#),<sup>6</sup> which follows the same formula above with slight differences. In Louisiana's system, all candidates regardless of party are placed in the first (primary) round of voting. If it is an election where only one person can win, a candidate could reach the majority threshold, 50% of votes + 1, in that first round and win the election. Like in any other two-round runoff, if no one gets to the majority vote threshold, then the two highest vote earners move on to a second round (general).

If a Louisiana election is being run with multiple winners (for example, a municipal council), then a majority-vote system is still used. Thresholds are established for the number of votes that a candidate must get to have a "majority" and thus win the seat. These thresholds are calculated by:

1. Dividing the total votes cast for all of the candidates by the number of offices to be filled.
2. Dividing that number by two, then adding one.

### Example for a multiple-winner race in Louisiana

If an election race is "Elect Three" and there were 1,040 total votes cast, the total votes are divided by three for the offices to be filled, which is 346.6. The resulting 346.6 is then divided by two to give the minimum threshold needed to win with a majority vote, which is 173.3 rounded up to 174, plus one, which is 175. A candidate needs at least 175 votes to win one of the three offices to be filled. If there are more than three candidates that meet the 175 majority-vote threshold, then the three candidates with the most votes will be elected.

If there are remaining offices to be filled due to a lack of a majority in the primary election, the number of candidates who qualify for the general election [*second day of voting*] is twice the number of offices remaining to be filled.

Example quoted directly from the Secretary of State website, <https://www.sos.la.gov/Election-AndVoting/GetElectionInformation/HowAreCandidatesElected/Pages/default.aspx>



## Single-winner Ranked Choice Voting (RCV)

Single-winner Ranked Choice Voting is an “instant runoff” voting model that requires a candidate to get a majority (over 50%) of votes before they can be declared the winner. The primary difference between a RCV model and the other majority-vote models mentioned above, is that there is no second day of voting. The runoff is instant. Voters rank their preference from first to last. After the votes are counted, if one candidate received over 50% of the vote, that candidate wins. If, however, no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote, then the candidate with the least number of “first” votes is eliminated and the people who voted for that candidate have their votes *shifted* over to their second choice. If still no candidate has a majority, then the process repeats itself and the next eliminated candidate will see their voters’ votes shifted to their third choice. This continues to happen until one candidate breaks 50% of the vote share.

Benefits of this system include:

1. Candidates have to speak to a broader group of voters, meaning they have to lean away from the extremes
2. It gives more opportunity to third-party candidates and increases representation for minority groups

It inspires confidence among voters that their votes were not wasted<sup>7</sup>

## Proportional Ranked Choice Voting

Used for electing a legislative body in a way that “promotes majority rule and fair representation for all voters,”<sup>8</sup> more than one candidate wins in this system. Voters rank their favorite candidates, as many or as few as they would like, in order of their preference. To win, a candidate must meet a certain threshold, similar to what takes place in Louisiana’s system for multi-winner elections. The threshold is always the smallest number of votes that guarantees that the candidate will be one of the winners because no other candidate could get more votes than them. For three candidates, the threshold would be 25% of the votes + 1 because there would not be enough total votes left over for three other winners to earn more votes and take the three available seats.

Election Thresholds	
Percent for One Seat	Seats to Elect
50% + 1	1 Seat
33.3% + 1	2 Seats
25% + 1	3 Seats
20% + 1	4 Seats
16.7% + 1	5 Seats

Table retrieved from: FairVote. (n.d.). *Proportional Ranked Choice Voting*. Retrieved from FairVote.org: [https://www.fairvote.org/prcv#what\\_is\\_prcv](https://www.fairvote.org/prcv#what_is_prcv)

When a candidate wins, reaching the winning vote threshold, votes in excess of what the candidate needed to win can be shifted to each excess voter's second choice so that no part of their vote is wasted, just as in Single-winner Ranked Choice Voting. [FairVote](#), an organization that advances voting reforms that make democracy more functional and representative, recommends making a fraction of that vote available to the voter's next choice when their first choice has already won. An example of how this process plays out can be found [here](#).<sup>9</sup>

**At present, no statewide races are utilizing Proportional Ranked Choice Voting. However, a few U.S. municipalities use this system including:**

**Arden, Delaware:** Used to elect at-large members to the Board of Assessors.<sup>10</sup>

**Cambridge, Massachusetts:** Used to elect at-large members to the city council and school committee (school board).<sup>11</sup>

**Minneapolis, Minnesota:** Used for at-large seats to two municipal boards (council and other offices are elected in single-winner RCV elections).<sup>12</sup>

## Additional Considerations for State Leaders

Two-round runoffs, because they are still winner-take-all systems, share some of the same disadvantages as the most popular plurality system of voting. They are also more expensive as they carry the possibility of a runoff election on a separate day. Louisiana's Jungle Primary also carries the negatives of most winner-take-all voting systems in that it creates a high number of "wasted votes" per election, weakens representation of third parties and suppresses representation of historically excluded groups like racial minorities and women.

State policymakers may consider what voting models achieve the goal of strengthening the public's trust in public institutions by making individual votes meaningful, government representative of different ideologies and people, and decreases the number of voters who feel their vote has been wasted.





Ranked Choice Voting (instant runoff) models like those mentioned before for single-winner and Proportional RCV systems might be the best avenue for accomplishing that goal. However, these models face two competing theories over turnout:

1. RCV will increase voter turnout because it gives voters more power over the outcome and reduces the number of wasted votes.
2. RCV will actually depress voter turnout because it's more of a burden on voters to have to rank and prioritize a number of candidates instead of casting a ballot for just one.

One [study](#) found that a short explanation of how RCV uses vote transfer to limit wasted votes did not increase public support of this model.<sup>13</sup> In this study younger voters, Democrats, respondents with higher levels of formal education, and third-party supporters tended to evaluate RCV more positively than older voters, Republicans, respondents with lower levels of formal education, and major party supporters. The study's authors concluded that state policymakers considering RCV should also consider a sustained educational campaign to overcome initial public resistance.<sup>14</sup> Another [study](#) found that people who have had prior experiences with RCV have more positive feelings towards this model, further suggesting that education and time is needed to decrease what is known as "status quo bias" among the public.<sup>15</sup>

Exit surveys conducted after RCV contests indicate that the model is mostly favorable in practice:

- After Maine's first election with RCV in 2018, more than 3 in 5 voters (60.9%) favored either expanding RCV for other elections in the state or keeping the current level of usage. A majority (53.4%) favored expansion, while only 39.1% supported stopping use of RCV.<sup>16</sup>
- After the 2018 RCV mayoral and council elections in Santa Fe, New Mexico, more than 55% of respondents said they liked using the ranked choice voting ballot and more than 67% of respondents said the ballot was "not at all confusing."<sup>17</sup>
- When New York City used RCV in 2021, 95% of voters found their ballot simple to complete and 77% of New Yorkers want RCV in future local elections.<sup>18</sup>



## Endnotes

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- <sup>6</sup> Louisiana Department of State. (2021). How are Statewide and Local Candidates Elected? Retrieved from Louisiana Secretary of State - Elections and Voting: <https://www.sos.la.gov/ElectionsAndVoting/GetElectionInformation/HowAreCandidatesElected/Pages/default.aspx>
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