



Bipartisan Policy Center

Beyond the First Choice: Improving Alaska's Election Reporting Process

Invited testimony on HB225 before the House State Affairs Committee of the Alaska State Legislature

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Good evening Chairman Shaw, Vice Chairman Wright, and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify about transparency in elections. I commend the committee for taking the opportunity to analyze how Alaska can make elections more efficient and accessible for its voters.

My name is William Adler and I am the Associate Director of the Elections Project at the Bipartisan Policy Center, a non-profit organization that combines the best ideas from both parties to promote health, security, and opportunity for all Americans. Founded in 2007 by former Senate majority leaders Howard Baker, Tom Daschle, Bob Dole, and George Mitchell, BPC promotes evidence-based and politically viable policy solutions through rigorous analysis, painstaking negotiation, and advocacy.

BPC's Elections Project researches and advocates for pragmatic solutions to improve the transparency, accountability, and accessibility of American elections. Many of our policy recommendations are unanimously endorsed by our [Task Force on Elections](#), a bipartisan group of state and local election administrators from across the country whose knowledge and on-the-ground experience inform practical and effective policies for election reform.

We do not take a formal position on ranked choice voting or any other voting method; however, as with any voting method, there are best practices that states and jurisdictions should follow. We hope to provide insight as to which policies can best serve Alaskan voters without creating confusion or posing an undue burden to election officials. Thus, we applaud this bill's goal to ensure that voters know who is leading in a ranked choice election as unofficial results are reported. This is a manageable task for Alaska's election workers and observers and would provide a meaningful boost in public transparency of ranked choice elections.

Under current [regulations](#) implemented in the 2022 Alaska elections, first-preference votes are tallied and reported on Election Day and updated intermittently until the 15th day after the election, the deadline for receipt of absentee ballots; at this point, the Elections Division releases the tabulated ranked choice results. Under this model, it can take more than two weeks for Alaskan voters to get a clear picture of which candidate is leading across races. In a ranked choice election, first-preference vote tallies alone are suggestive of who is leading the race but do not paint the full picture. Expediting these results aligns with the best practice of getting the public meaningful information quickly.

From our understanding, policymakers and administrators adopted this process with the reasonable aim of avoiding confusion about final results. It is true that if ranked ballots are retabulated as they come in, the apparent winners may shift; however, this is true for *all* unofficial results, even in jurisdictions that don't use ranked choice voting. The potential for changes in the leading candidate is no reason to withhold from the public more comprehensive data on the unofficial election result.



After several close elections in 2022, voters and observers were left guessing how the eventual ranked choice tabulation would play out in federal races. But it doesn't have to be this way. FairVote and the Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center—two of the leading organizations analyzing ranked choice voting—consider it best practice to release preliminary round-by-round tallies on election night, updating the results as more votes are counted.

This bill requires the Division of Elections, when they update unofficial results, to make public the data necessary for anyone to tabulate the ranked choice results. This would allow observers and trusted third parties—many of whom we already depend on to call races after election day—to report and analyze electoral standings beyond just the first-preference votes. It may still take time for elections to be called by the media, since the bill doesn't address ballot deadlines and some ballots still need to travel long distances to be counted. Still, under these revisions, voters will get an earlier, more meaningful picture of election results.

This bill also mitigates some logistical and administrative concerns associated with delayed unofficial ranked choice tabulations. Alaska has a history of competitive elections, including three close statewide races in 2022. Delayed tabulation of unofficial results could hamper elected officials' ability to adequately prepare for transitions. If one of Alaska's federal representatives faces multiple competitive challengers who split the vote, for instance, they may appear to have a substantial lead over their opponents in first-preference votes, even if they ultimately lose once tabulation is complete. Without unofficial ranked choice tabulations, candidates may not have a clear sense of the direction of the race, potentially delaying the often-complex process of transitioning in or out of Congress. This concern is heightened for the governorship as the Governor of Alaska's term begins just four weeks after the general election. If first-preference votes do not provide clarity on the outcome of the governor's race, delayed tabulation can potentially cut the gubernatorial transition period *in half*. This bill would mitigate that concern.

All election processes should be clear, accountable, and approachable for voters, regardless of your stance on ranked choice voting as an electoral system. We encourage legislators and election officials to continuously examine how ranked choice elections can be better administered and reported. For instance, minor revisions could be made to this bill to eliminate ambiguities and ensure that the data released by the Division is usable by the public without proprietary software.

In addition to releasing the data necessary for observers to conduct the ranked choice tabulation, the Division of Elections could themselves conduct the tabulation and release it as part of the unofficial results. Although they have previously released round-by-round results only *after* the absentee ballot deadline, best practice would be to release them earlier to allow Alaskans to better understand how winning coalitions come to be formed. The Division can also make the ranking procedure more transparent and understandable by including visual aids indicating how ballots are reallocated, as do other jurisdictions.

Voters need transparency, candidates need time to transition into office, and election administrators need clear guidelines from the Legislature. Discussing these issues here in the Legislature is an important step toward building a stronger electoral process in Alaska that the public can trust and more easily understand. Thank you again for inviting me to speak on this issue, and I would be pleased to take any questions Committee members may have.