NAME

Nathan Lockwood V3 (FINAL).mp3

DATE

March 17, 2022

DURATION

44m 14s

4 SPEAKERS

Mila Atmos
Nathan Lockwood
Jocelyn Benson
The Democracy Group

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Mila Atmos
Thanks to Native for supporting Future Hindsight. Native makes safe, simple, effective products that people use every day with trusted ingredients and trusted performance. Get 20% off your first purchase by visiting nativedeo.com/hopeful or using promo code "hopeful" at checkout. Thanks also to Shopify. Shopify is a platform designed for anyone to sell anywhere, giving entrepreneurs like myself the resources once reserved for big business. For a free 14-day trial and full access to Shopify's entire suite of features, go to shopify.com/hopeful.

[00:00:44] Mila Atmos
Welcome to Future Hindsight, a podcast that takes big ideas about civic life and democracy and turns them into action items for you and me. I'm Mila Atmos. Last week in our interview with Art Chang about the inside view of running as a political outsider in the New York City mayoral race, we touched on the issue of ranked choice voting, or RCV, and I admitted that I was a little bit confused by it. So I thought I wanted to find out more. And while it doesn't sound like the most exciting thing, it seems that ranked choice voting could be one of the most revolutionary democracy reforms we have available to us. That sounds more interesting, right? So I'm joined today by someone who is genuinely very excited about RCV and an unapologetic evangelist for ranked choice. Nathan Lockwood is Executive Director of Rank The Vote, an organization with a vision that the national adoption of ranked choice voting could create a political and social culture, with elections based on a competition of the best ideas, rather than scorched earth politics, and a government that is truly accountable to we, the people. Nathan, thank you for joining us.

[00:02:07] Nathan Lockwood
Thanks so much for having me today, Mila.

[00:02:09] Mila Atmos
So as I said, I admitted how I was a little bit confused about how ranked choice voting actually works. Help me clear it up here. Let's start with the super basics, some Voter Education 101. What is the status quo for most voters and then what is ranked choice voting and how does it upset the status quo?

[00:02:33] Nathan Lockwood
You know, the way we've been voting our whole lives, you typically go into the voting booth. There is two or more candidates running. You pick one of the candidates, whether there's one running or 10 running, and you've voted. That's how we vote right now. And we count those votes and whoever has more votes than anyone else will win that election. They will win that election, whether they have 70% of the vote or whether they have 15% as long as they have more votes than anyone else that's running in that election. This method works pretty well when there's only two people running. You're guaranteed to get a winner with a majority, although it's kind of an unfortunate lack of choice when there's only two people running. You start to run into problems, though, as soon as you start to add just that next person, you can have what's called the spoiler problem where the person who is the frontrunner, who's most similar to the person who joins gets kind of unfairly penalized by having another candidate appealing to their base of supporters. The most famous election like this would have been the 2000 presidential election, with George W. Bush and Al Gore, and with strong Green Party candidate, Ralph Nader, competing as well. Everyone remembers who was alive then and voting then. From day one, the Democrats were very unhappy about Nader's decision to run. They said, "listen, this is going to be a close race and you are going to mess it up for all the people who care about the things you care about. You have no chance of winning and you're going to take votes away from Al Gore." And people were so concerned about this election that they- if you were sitting at the lunch table talking about it with your friends and you were a Democratic voter, you might be like, "don't even think about voting for Ralph Nader."

[00:04:21] Nathan Lockwood
Or if your friend was thinking of voting for Ralph Nader, you really tried to talk them out of it, sort of scold them out of it because people were that scared it would affect the outcome. Unfortunately, they were right to be concerned. The outcome came down to the contest in Florida, where George W. Bush wins by just over 500 votes. Meanwhile, Ralph Nader gets about 100,000 votes and exit polling shows that had he not run, about half of the voters would have voted for Gore, about a quarter for Bush, about a quarter wouldn't have voted, meaning instead of losing by 500 votes, Gore would have won, likely in the neighborhood of 15- to 20,000 vote margin and a majority, as opposed to George W. Bush, who won with less than majority support. Our current election system, we just talked about a case where the Democrat was penalized. It's an equal opportunity punisher. Interestingly, just eight years earlier, George W. Bush's father, H.W. Bush, was competing in an election against a historically strong, independent candidacy of Ross Perot. And if you talk to George H.W. Bush's campaign, they feel strongly that they were unfairly penalized by his participation, as, you know, kind of pro-business conservatives. They felt that Ross Perot, who got nearly 20 percent of the vote, took way more votes away from Bush than from Clinton, who went on to win that election with just 43% of the popular vote.

[00:05:43] Mila Atmos
Actually, I almost forgot. I think when we talk about the Bush and Gore election, we don't talk about the fact that Ralph Nader ran anymore. We just talk about the counting of the ballots in Florida and the unfairness and the lawsuit and the Supreme Court, but actually at that time, I remember people were incredibly angry about Nader basically spoiling the race. So how does ranked choice voting address this problem?

[00:06:11] Nathan Lockwood
Ranked choice voting addresses this problem extremely effectively, and it's just one simple change to the way we vote. Basically, instead of going into the voting booth and picking a single candidate, voters like us are allowed to rank the candidates in the order that we like them. So we can say "this one's my favorite, my first choice. But if they don't have the support to win, count my ballot towards my second choice" and it allows you to always vote for your favorite candidate without wasting your vote. Because we're not just getting one piece of information from voters, we're getting a much more complete picture of how they feel about the candidates, we're able to know who the majority prefers in an election. So back to our Al Gore/George Bush/Ralph Nader example. A Nader voter could vote for Nader as their first choice, and Gore as their second choice. The way these votes are counted is very similar to the way we treat runoff elections, except it's an instant runoff. We've collected all the information we need about voters' preferences from that one ranked ballot, and you can very quickly tabulate in the first round.

[00:07:16] Nathan Lockwood
You just look at the first-choice votes. If someone has a majority election over, we have a winner. If no one has a majority, we go to a runoff round where first we eliminate the candidate with the least support. But then we look at the ballots of the voter who supported that candidate with their first choice. And we say, Well, your candidate's been eliminated, but you didn't waste your vote. We're going to count it towards your next choice. And we sort of have an instant runoff election with the remaining candidates. And we repeat that process until one of the candidates demonstrates majority support and you have a winner. It's a very efficient way of determining who the majority supports, and it allows voters to vote for their favorite candidates without being worried about wasting the vote. Many Nader voters probably voted for Gore because they saw that train wreck coming, and they didn't want to be responsible for electing a candidate furthest from their views. And so it's a very elegant way of solving that spoiler problem.

[00:08:11] Mila Atmos
So was that really the first time in the U.S. that people were like, "we need ranked choice voting"?

[00:08:17] Nathan Lockwood
It's an interesting question. So a really short history of ranked choice voting in the United States. The concept of ranked choice voting was invented in England in the 19th century, so in the 1800s. And it actually came to be used during the progressive era in the U.S., in major cities, and it was used as a much more fair way to vote, including New York, by the way. It was used intentionally to dilute the control of the political bosses and the party machines, the stranglehold they had over city politics. It was rolled back quite a bit during the McCarthy era and the fear-based political culture at that time. And it began to reemerge shortly after the 2000 election. Advocates had started working again in the early 90s and began to put the first enactments back on the U.S. map in the early 2000s, starting in the Bay Area.

[00:09:17] Mila Atmos
Oh. Interesting. You know, I thought ranked choice voting was new and unfamiliar to most Americans, but you're telling me basically it has a pretty long history. So how common is this method of voting now?

[00:09:30] Nathan Lockwood

Well, it's grown a lot. It has been pretty unfamiliar to most Americans for advocates like myself and organizations like Ranked the Vote or Fair Vote or Unite America or Represent US. You know, our first goal is to educate people about ranked choice voting because it turns out that you're talking about changing a voting system and voting is the bedrock of our democracy. So people understandably apply a very strong conservative evaluation to any proposed change to the election system. We don't want to disenfranchise or harm our democracy. It turns out that once people learn about ranked choice voting, that's probably the best indicator of support. People who know what it is and are familiar are most likely to support it. Those who are unfamiliar with it are at least likely to embrace it. In 2005, when San Francisco began using ranked choice voting, at that time, the only city remaining using ranked choice voting in the U.S. was Cambridge, Massachusetts, and had a very long and very successful usage of it. Since San Francisco adopted now it went up to about 15 cities, around 2016. And today that's ballooned to over 50 municipalities that have enacted ranked choice voting. This past November, a record number of municipalities use ranked choice voting. I think the number was in the 30s, and now there's even two states that are using it statewide for almost all state and federal elections. Maine, which adopted ranked choice voting by ballot referendum in November 2016, has used it now for two cycles for state and federal elections, including U.S. Senate races, including U.S. House races, and including, in a historic first in 2020, Maine used ranked choice voting to determine their state's delegates for the presidential election. And also in 2020, by a ballot measure, Alaska adopted it. There was a lot of excitement about that and the positive changes that'll bring to politics in Alaska. So we have pretty widespread usage in the U.S. now. Two whole states, 50 municipalities. There's likely going to be additional ballot referenda in November 2022, where voters will have the opportunity to adopt ranked choice voting, possibly in Nevada, Missouri, and possibly another state or two. So it's a reform that's growing very rapidly.

[00:11:53] Mila Atmos

Wow. Impressive. So as you are going around the country and doing this work, what are the most common misconceptions you come across when you talk to people about RCV?

[00:12:06] Nathan Lockwood

I think the biggest concern is that it's going to be too difficult for voters to vote in or use. That's pretty quickly dispelled just when you show someone what a ranked choice voting ballot looks like and walk them through how you fill it out. Because the reality is from the time we're like two, we're already ranking things whether it's ice cream or candy or you know what car we want to buy or you name it. There's strong data and evidence which shows that all kinds of voters of all different, you know, backgrounds and life experiences are very successful with ranked choice voting where it's been adopted and are very satisfied with it.

[00:12:48] Mila Atmos

We're going to take a brief break from our conversation with Nathan Lockwood to hear from our sponsors. When we come back, did ranked choice voting cause confusion and delays in New York City's mayoral election?

[00:13:04] Mila Atmos

Oh, that sound makes me smile. It's the sound of another sale on Shopify, the all-in-one commerce platform to start, run, and grow your business. Supercharge your knowledge, your sales, and your success. For a free 14-day trial, go to shopify.com/hopeful, all lowercase. I love how Shopify makes it easy for anyone to successfully run your own business. Every 28 seconds, a small business owner makes their first sale on Shopify. It powers millions of entrepreneurs from first sale to full scale. Get started by building and customizing your online store with no coding or design experience. Access powerful tools to help you find customers, drive sales, and manage your day-to-day. More than a store, Shopify grows with you. Gain knowledge and confidence with resources to help you succeed. Plus, with 24/7 support, you're never alone. This is possibility powered by Shopify. Go to shopify.com/hopeful, all lower case, for a free 14-day trial and get full access to Shopify's entire suite of features. Start selling on Shopify today. Go to shopify.com/hopeful right now.

[00:14:24] Mila Atmos

Thanks also to Native deodorant. Native makes safe, simple, effective products that people use every day with trusted ingredients and trusted performance. With the products you use every day, shouldn't you be able to understand the ingredients list? Native has fewer simpler ingredients, so you know everything that it's made of. It's also safe and effective. The deodorant has 24 hour odor protection, naturally derived ingredients, and a smooth residue free application. Native deodorant is made with ingredients you've heard of, like coconut oil and shea butter and baking soda. The coconut and vanilla scented aluminum-free deodorant has been a customer favorite for years. Other scents include lavender and rose, cucumber and mint, or even unscented. And, recently Native partnered with Baked by Melissa with a collection of scents inspired by Baked by Melissa's delicious cupcake creations. From Tie Dye Vanilla Cupcake, Mint Cookie Cupcake, Fresh Peach Cupcake, to Ginger Lemonade Cupcake, they can make your day a little sweeter. I love knowing exactly what's in my deodorant, and I love how good it smells. Smell and feel fresh all day long with Native. Get 20% off your first order by going to nativedeo.com/hopeful or use code "hopeful" at checkout. That's 20% off your first order at nativedeo.com/hopeful or with promo code "hopeful" at checkout. Let's return to our conversation with Nathan Lockwood of Rank the Vote.

[00:15:59] Mila Atmos

I don't want to just focus on New York, but this is, of course, my first experience, my only experience with ranked choice voting. I felt like we talked a lot about how to vote this last time as opposed to who to vote for. It was really hard to unpack everything that was going on, given that it was also an election in the middle of a pandemic, right? So that people were doing a new thing, ranked choice voting, also doing something unusual, voting in a pandemic. And it affected so much about going into the ballot booth. In terms of the New York election, what was your takeaway from that election? Because there was a lot of coverage.

[00:16:39] Nathan Lockwood
Yeah, so there was a lot of coverage. As an advocate, I was most interested to see the fundamentals and what the voters experienced and how they evaluated their use of the system. So in that sense, the exit polling was extremely encouraging, that 95% found it easy to fill out their ballot. And I think a lot of very successful voter education went into that. 77% wanting to use it again is an incredibly powerful metric. I think by all accounts, the mayoral election itself was very competitive and I think satisfying in terms of people feeling like the right person won, but also feeling like there was a conversation where New Yorkers got a chance to learn about how they were feeling about the direction of their city based on the election. So that seemed positive. In the City Council races, it seems that it was part of a mix of reforms that was quite transformative. The New York City City Council, for example, used to have 27% of the representatives were women. In a single election with ranked choice voting, that number went to 61% of council members being women. That was due to a number of factors, including strong civic organizations, help supporting women running for office, a favorable campaign finance mechanism in New York City, term limits introduced a think back in 2012, which resulted in more open seats that people could compete for. And then ranked choice voting is credited by a lot of the civic organizations that were working to support women candidates is really helping them in their mission by helping ensure that you didn't have to worry about multiple women candidates competing at once and splitting the vote, they could really focus on the fundamentals, focus on helping people prepare to be effective candidates, and then not have to worry about hurting each other by running at the same time.

[00:18:37] Mila Atmos
I was under the impression that basically because of ranked choice voting, it made it more possible to have multiple candidates. But then it was really overwhelming to understand who's running on what and what for and who should I really vote for? Because there were so many candidates in the mayoral election. So does ranked choice voting encourage this kind of a huge field? And is that a disadvantage?

[00:18:57] Nathan Lockwood
There's different ways you can implement ranked choice voting. I mean, there's some basic principles to how ranked choice ballot works and how those votes are counted, but you can structure elections in different ways. In New York City, there were a couple goals when the charter committee proposed ranked choice voting and voters adopted it by 74%. One thing they were trying to do was save the high cost of runoff elections and also address problems with voter turnout in runoff elections, where you often get many voters not showing up for either the preliminary or the runoff. And so the choice was made to sort of consolidate the preliminary and the runoff into a single election. I think as voters get used to the system and they start to understand, you know, not just how to fill out their ballot, but feel comfortable with the fact that you know you don't have to rank everybody. If you really just like one, you just pick one. If you got a few that you prefer over the others, rank three or four. New York City voters are allowed to rank up to five, so you rank as many as you're interested in. And the good thing is, your vote's going to count much more than it would have if you were only allowed to pick one. And in fact, even the voters who pick one kind of benefit from other voters ranking their choices, if you think back to there are Florida and Ralph Nader, Al Gore, George Bush example. I've talked to some voters who are like, "you know, I don't need this. I always vote for the party candidate and I don't even think about it. I just go tick the lever." I'm like, "well, you know, you benefit from ranked choice voting, too, because when you want to go vote for your Al Gore and that Ralph Nader person is running, it's good for you that you're kind of fellow Democrats in this case who are really tempted and attracted to vote for a candidate with new ideas are able to rank your candidate second so they don't derail your chance of winning."

[00:20:50] Mila Atmos
Well, I like that you talked about the fact that we don't have to do a runoff because for sure, I think anywhere a primary election is very sparsely attended, let's say. You know, like, I think here in New York, it was only like 21% turnout in the primary and then to have them come out again for a runoff. In terms of ranked choice, I think a lot of people came away with the impression that ranked choice has something to do with the mistakes in the early result tabulation. But was that actually the case? Like, what is what actually happened?

[00:21:21] Nathan Lockwood
Yeah. So I mean, there was a very glaring error by the Board of Elections when they were doing the preliminary count where they used the wrong data set. So, you know, the Board of Elections reputation in New York is not great to begin with. It's an appointed body with a history of nepotism, and they didn't do themselves a lot of favors in terms of preparing for this election and what it would take to count it. The bigger problem really was the delays, and the delays were, I think, much more a function of absentee ballots in the age of COVID, where we had, you know, record amounts of mail-in voting for the municipal election and the existing New York state rules were not really geared towards a timely result in that scenario. Rules in place such that you could not count absentee ballots until a week after the election ended. The good news is from this experience, New York state actually very quickly passed legislation to update the rules for counting absentee ballots. But at the end of the day, ranked choice voting allowed for the elimination of the runoff election, which would have had to happen. So even with all the delays there were, there was still a savings of about $15 million and at minimum, a few weeks because New Yorkers would have had to come out again for another runoff. And remember, this is a runoff in the Democratic primary, so the voters would have ended up voting quite a few times in this election.

[00:22:43] Mila Atmos
Yeah, right, and plus in New York, it's a closed primary, so you're leaning on a specific subset of the population to come out again to vote. You mentioned this earlier that there are more women who were elected to the City Council. So aside from women, what other kind of candidates benefit from ranked choice?

[00:23:04] Nathan Lockwood
When we talk about ranked choice voting, one of the general effects that you would expect to see because it's not a plurality system like our current system where voters get one pick only, they can't fully express themselves, and winners can win with far less than a majority. With ranked choice, it is much better surfacing the wishes of the majority and not having them confounded by the spoiler problem or vote splitting between candidates. That seems to bear out in the U.S. experience, and how it manifests itself is greater success for women candidates and also candidates of color and that affect appears to follow a trend in terms of district demographics, which sort of supports, again the underlying principles of ranked choice voting, of surfacing majority sentiment in terms of who the winner is. So that effect will be of a different magnitude depending on the composition of the district. In jurisdictions that have adopted ranked choice voting, an increase in candidates of color running and being successfully elected and also women getting elected. So it's been very positive in terms of reflective representation.

[00:24:12] Mila Atmos
Actually, I think one of the great side effects here is that basically people are paying attention to election reform and therefore, you know, doing things like updating laws about how to count absentee ballots and things like that. So that's, I think in general really encouraging that people are paying attention at all to begin with and then to implement other kinds of reforms. So what motivated you to get involved with this campaign?

[00:24:36] Nathan Lockwood
Yeah. Well, I got involved in early 2017 and prior to that, I was politically active kind of in college and for a few years after. And my wife and I met and had some had children, and I was pretty busy for almost a couple of decades. Coming out of that, I was looking to get active and try to do something good again, and I was really concerned about Congress and our government. It seems like they have a lot of trouble getting things done, solving problems, working together to figure out ways to agree on things and solve problems. And that was deeply troubling for me. I was exploring ways that people are talking about fixing that, and there was one organization that's now called Unite America that at the time they had a strategy they were proposing of electing more centrist candidates in order to sort of be a bridge between the Republicans and the Democrats, and provide a bloc that could help form a majority with either group to get them talking to each other again. They were talking about running independent candidates or supporting more moderate Democrats or Republicans, and I wouldn't necessarily call myself a centrist, but I found the idea of getting people with different perspectives to work together to accomplish important things to be appealing. It became apparent pretty quickly some of the challenges that approach might have just in terms of the spoiler problem and whatnot.

[00:25:54] Nathan Lockwood
And so I was excited to start hearing about ranked choice voting after Maine passed it. There was a group of like five people in Massachusetts, five advocates, and they were pretty much the only people thinking about ranked choice voting in Massachusetts at the time. But they said this is our chance. Maine just showed that any state that wants to can pass ranked choice voting, or at least if they have the ballot measure and we have one in Massachusetts. They said, "let's start organizing people to grow support and see if we can build the momentum to do a ballot measure here or, you know, pass it through the Legislature." So I heard about the work they were doing in the spring of 2017 and became a volunteer leader. It was all volunteer-led at the time. We grew from those five advocates to about 7,000 volunteers over two to three years, and we grew from their small list of 200 supporters to over 50,000 supporters. So that was what enabled us to grow the financial support to launch the ballot measure. We went from a situation where none of Massachusetts congressional representatives endorsed ranked choice voting to a situation where six out of nine, or seven out of ten, if you count Joe Kennedy, you know who went to run for Senate, endorsed the ballot measure. A bunch of our former governors, Deval Patrick and William Weld, former chairs of the state GOP, Jennifer Nassour, Former Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey, both Senators Warren and Markey endorsed. So we went from an issue that no one was thinking about or talking about to something where most of our federal representatives endorsed overwhelmingly. Just this past December, the House of Representatives passed a bill that included funding for states and municipalities that want to adopt ranked choice voting. It was like $40 or $50 million of funding, and that was kind of a milestone in terms of the significance of Congress passing legislation for ranked choice voting. It hasn't passed the Senate yet, but that's how I got involved, and that's kind of what we're working on now at Rank the Vote. We kind of took that model in Massachusetts about organizing education and support for ranked choice voting and shared it with activists in other states. So now we work with a network of 28 state groups that are volunteer led. They're just kind of doing grassroots organizing, meeting people, doing live outreach, and getting them educated and excited about ranked choice voting.

[00:28:23] Mila Atmos
That's so exciting, I mean, I didn't know that you went from five passionate volunteers to build this huge, you know, grassroots effort. Congratulations. What's impressive about that is that people really are powerful if they want to organize and get this kind of stuff done. I have a question about the bill that is before the Senate. If they pass it, what does that mean for us?

[00:28:46] Nathan Lockwood
Well, you know, the bill is what we would categorize as enabling legislation. You know, so ranked choice voting is is easy for voters. It's a better system. But like any change, it does require effort from our election administrators. For example, in some cases, it requires upgrading election equipment. Most of the modern equipment supports ranked choice voting, and it's good to upgrade anyways for security reasons. But if you want to do it at a specific time to accommodate ranked choice voting, you might be having to pay some money. There's also voter education costs. New York did a great job. They spent about $15 million on voter education for the first usage there. So about as much as they save by not having the runoff, they won't have to spend that every cycle as voters get more used to it. Having this legislation makes it easier for municipalities and states that are excited about the benefits to justify the cost of, you know, taking the plunge and the cost isn't exorbitant. But you know, when you've got tight budgets, every little bit helps. Another type of enabling legislation, we sometimes call it a local option bill that some states have passed, which basically just makes it easier for municipalities to choose to update the way they vote to use ranked choice voting. The state that uses ranked choice voting the most right now other than Maine and Alaska, the ease at statewide is Utah.

[00:30:06] Nathan Lockwood
Three years ago, there were no cities in Utah using ranked choice voting. There was a bipartisan passage and the overwhelmingly Republican legislature of Utah signed by the governor of a local option bill that would allow, make it easy for cities in Utah to try it. In the first go around, two cities tried it, it turned out it was hard for them to get their clerks to support it. They amended the bill to ensure that cities that wanted to try it could get support from their election administrators. And now almost half the cities using ranked choice voting in the U.S. are in Utah, there's 23 cities. In November, 40% of Utah voted in a municipal election using ranked choice voting. And the municipal enactments are great because they give people a familiarity in somewhat slightly lower stakes contests. You know, so they can adopt ranked choice voting, get to understand how it works, see how easy it is, how beneficial the results are and then when you have a campaign in that state to broaden the usage for their state legislature or for Congress, there will be discussion about what the impact will be, but concern over feasibility or how hard it's going to be is kind of off the table because people already know it's a piece of cake.

[00:31:20] Mila Atmos
So is Utah your like poster child for ranked choice voting at its best? Or do you have another example that you love to talk about?

[00:31:28] Nathan Lockwood
I don't know. Many folks, including myself, really admire the system of ranked choice voting that has been in Cambridge, Massachusetts for about 80 years because it's an incredible model about how we can strengthen democracy. In Cambridge, it works like what we discussed, except they count the votes in a slightly different manner, which results in something that people call proportional representation. I guess the easiest way I could explain the benefit, in winner-take-all districts, you're going to have some people who get the representative they want and you're going to get maybe half or more folks that don't get a representative that they want. Their candidate lost. In Cambridge, 77% of voters see their first choice elected to represent them. 91% see their first or second choice and 95% see their first, second, or third choice. It's a totally different paradigm. A real problem with our single-member winner-take-all districts is a representation of minority groups. I live in Massachusetts, so let me just kind of mess with all our heads here when we're talking about minority groups. In Massachusetts, let's talk about Republicans. They're probably about 35% of the population, and politically, they're somewhat of an oppressed minority because their percent of the population is about even across all the districts.

[00:32:54] Nathan Lockwood
So they have zero congressional representatives in Massachusetts, despite being about 35% of the population. So if you thought that there was some fairness of proportionality, you would expect them to have, you know, roughly three of the nine congressional representatives, right? But because they're losing in every district, they have zero. And Cambridge's system fixes that because instead of a single-member district with like a roughly 50% threshold to win, they have a larger district where let's say five people are running and you need roughly 17% to win. So what it means is if you're a minority, whether it's a racial or ethnic minority or political minority, a certain point of view, whatever your interest group is, if you constitute, you know, 17% to 20%, you're very likely to be able to elect a representative in a way that you would never have a chance in our current system. So in terms of accurately representing the wishes of all Americans, this system has tremendous promise. So back to your question, there's different jurisdictions using ranked choice voting. You could sort of give the prize for different things, I guess.

[00:34:09] Mila Atmos
Right, right. Well, so now I have a question about sort of our federal system. Of course, there we have a winner-take-all system still. How does a system of voting in that way reinforce polarization and gridlock here in the U.S.?

[00:34:26] Nathan Lockwood
Yeah, so that's a great question, and I would refer folks to an excellent report that came out by a group called Protect Democracy. The report is called Advantaging Authoritarianism. It's not a light read, but it really breaks down the design of our current electoral system and what the results are, especially around polarization and creating a sort of path to victory for more authoritarian politicians. Long in the short of it is the way we vote right now, because, as we talked about with back to the Ralph Nader example, it sort of deters people outside of the two major parties from running because nobody wants to be a spoiler. It makes people afraid to vote for who they really like. That sets up this two-party dynamic where in terms of strategizing, you sometimes get even more benefit by bashing down the opponent than you do by focusing on your own virtues. There's also problems with our primary system and the fact that, you know, we have these winner-take-all districts, which with gerrymandering, especially, you know, over 80% of them are safe for one party, meaning you can predict with about 97 to 99% certainty what congressional candidate is going to win a given district. So the winners are being determined in low turnout primaries, where strongly coordinated factions can exert a tremendous amount of influence on the candidates who are running in terms of what positions they take or challenging them if they do not take a certain position. So you've got sort of factional, often extreme factional interests with a lot of control in the primaries promoting candidates into districts where we know who's going to win and additional competitors not able to enter the space because of the spoiler problem.

[00:36:26] Mila Atmos
So how can ranked choice voting solve for that polarization? The spoiler problem? All these drawbacks you've now outlined that spring from the winner take all system we currently have?

[00:36:36] Nathan Lockwood
Ranked choice voting can address that in a number of levels. One thing is ranked choice voting with this ranking, sometimes academics work for this as a preferential system because you're saying, "I prefer this is my first choice. This is my second preference, third preference." It turns out in preferential systems, there's a really powerful dynamic which fosters less negative campaigning between the participants and a certain level of coalition building. Because you know you want to put together if it's a single-winner district with ranked choice voting, you want to put together a majority so you can win the election. And to do that when there's multiple candidates running, because now there's no spoiler problem, so you know, whoever wants to run can run, you want to not only win over your base, but you want to earn the support of your opponent's supporters. You want to get their second and third choice votes. So it encourages you to think twice about bashing, you know, pick your spots and find areas where you have common ground in agreement. Maybe some folks who are listening have, you know, campaigned for a candidate before, and they've done door-knocking and they've walked up to a house and they see the opponent sign is in the yard. The way we vote now, it's like, I'm not wasting my time on that, you know, walk on by. With ranked choice voting, you're incented to go up to that house, knock on the door, you know, "hi, I see you're voting for Mila. I'm supporting Sarah, but I want to talk to you about the five things that Mila and Sarah strongly agree on and encourage you to choose Sarah as your second or third choice vote."

[00:38:09] Nathan Lockwood
So this is why, you know, preferential systems have been used to help heal countries in conflict like Northern Ireland, for example, as part of the peace accord process, they implemented the system like Cambridge, which happens to be the system that the Republic of Ireland has used for over 100 years. Because it's also a proportional system, it tends to lead towards coalition building, not just during the election, but after the election when people go to govern. But you're less likely to burn your bridges with a group if you may be talking to them about forming a government or coming together to support legislation that has some mutual appeal. All this to say this system of ranked choice voting with multi-member districts and highly reflective proportional representation, there's a growing consensus that this is how we get the United States on the better track, where we can have a highly functioning government with competitive elections and politicians who know how to work together and solve problems and really take advantage of the incredible potential and opportunities that our country has both culturally and technologically right now. You think about how far we've come and what amazing resources and minds and creative people we have. So it really could be the way we get to making government work so we can be all we can be.

[00:39:31] Mila Atmos
Yeah, well, that sounds very promising that this could deliver good governance, you know, because you're already starting off on the right foot with your opponents and when you get there together, hopefully in some way shape or form that you can continue to foster that kind of relationship and perform for the people. So what are two things that an everyday citizen can do in order to support election reform, such as RCV?

[00:39:58] Nathan Lockwood
Oh, I'm so glad you asked, Mila. So, you know, we're working with a network of now 28 state partners, grassroots groups, so find the group that's promoting ranked choice voting and advancing it in your state. There are so many ways you can volunteer, whether it's doing live outreach and taking a clipboard to events, giving people a quick elevator pitch, showing them a ranked choice voting ballot. Signing them up as a supporter or a volunteer. That's how we were able to grow our numbers in Massachusetts, and that's how you'll be able to start winning ranked choice voting enactments in cities and towns in your state. But there's so many things you can do, whether it's phone banking or becoming a public speaker for those organizations, there's something to fit everyone's talents, maybe starting to educate your local government or your election administrators. Some people are really busy, but they are happy to give money to support causes that they believe in. The ranked choice voting movement across the country, there's groups doing great work, and money translates into success. It costs money to run these organizations, and it costs money to win campaigns, municipal campaigns. It costs money to win legislative campaigns and ballot measures as well. So all these groups on their websites have the ability to donate. You can go to .us/donate. We accept donations and there's other groups doing wonderful work in the space. It's going to give voters more powerful ballot, more choice and really help strengthen and protect our democracy.

[00:41:28] Mila Atmos
Terrific, and so looking into the future, what makes you hopeful?

[00:41:33] Nathan Lockwood
The growth trajectory of the movement makes me quite optimistic. The other thing is there's really a strong national ecosystem of organizations that are have a really clear division of labor. They're working very closely together and they're aligning their goals, and this is corresponding with successes. Winning states in the last few years, winning municipalities and grassroots growth. In Massachusetts, we were able to grow the movement by, you know, between two and fourfold per year, 200 to 400% a year. When you start to look at that type of growth nationally, you can really build a powerful movement over just, you know, three to five years. So the strength and the quality of the reform itself, the way people naturally embrace it, how well it performs when it's enacted to sell itself. Those dynamics really give me a lot of confidence.

[00:42:19] Mila Atmos
Thank you very much for joining us on Future Hindsight.

[00:42:22] Nathan Lockwood
Oh, thanks so much for having me today. It was really a pleasure speaking with you.

[00:42:26] Mila Atmos
Nathan Lockwood is Executive Director of Ranked The Vote, an organization with a vision that the national adoption of ranked choice voting could create a political and social culture, with elections based on a competition of the best ideas, rather than scorched earth politics and a government that is truly accountable to we, the people.

[00:42:49] Mila Atmos
Next time on Future Hindsight, Michigan's Secretary of State, Jocelyn Benson, describes her job as being a referee of democracy. She joins us next week to discuss what's on the line this year, why it's vital to pay attention to this November's elections and the primaries this spring, and the role everyday people can play.

[00:43:08] Jocelyn Benson
Protecting democracy is the most important issue of our time. Through complacency and disengagement, we allow those very well-organized, well-funded, and well-coordinated forces seeking to install bad actors in positions of authority over elections. Voters by being complacent could allow that to happen, and if that does happen, then we can imagine a scenario where democracy withers on the vine in the future because you won't have people in places of authority protecting it. Now, as long as I have breath in my body, whatever position I have, I'm going to continue to protect and defend our democracy and every citizen's right to vote.

[00:43:49] Mila Atmos
Jocelyn Benson joins us next time on Future Hindsight. This episode was produced by Zack Travis and Sara Birmingham. Until next time, stay engaged.

[00:44:07] The Democracy Group
This podcast is part of the Democracy Group.

END OF TRANSCRIPT