

EDITORIAL

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## Changing how we elect could have big payoff

For all the concerns this editorial board regularly voices about citizen-led initiatives, Proposition 131 — establishing an all-candidate primary process and ranked choice voting in the general election — is a good use of this tool because elected members of the Legislature are unlikely to change how we elect our representatives anytime soon.

Indeed, in May, state lawmakers snuck an amendment into a routine elections bill attempting to undermine what has become Proposition 131. The law requires 12 municipalities to adopt and implement ranked-choice voting before Proposition 131 is implemented for state and federal elections — though Gov. Jared Polis, a supporter of the measure, has pledged to have statewide implementation of ranked-choice voting and open primaries no later than the 2028 election cycle, should voters approve it.

We think they should for the moderating effect it's likely to have on election outcomes. The group pushing 131 cites data ranking Colorado's Legislature as the most polarized in the nation.

And it's no wonder. Many races are decided in low-turnout primaries. Mesa County Commissioner Cody Davis, another supporter of 131, uses himself as an example — though Prop 131 would only apply to elections for state and federal offices.

Davis had no primary opponent this year. Having to compete “for the middle” in a primary would be a “wonderful thing,” he said. Using Mesa County as an example, he noted that 25% to 30% of Republicans (roughly 10% of the electorate) will vote in a primary for a candidate who will eventually win the general election.

“Personally that just doesn't sound fair,” he said, adding that 85% of legislative seats are non-competitive.

The arguments for ranked-choice voting are enticing. It allows voters to choose their most preferred candidate first without worrying about wasted votes or spoiler effects. Voters are incentivized to consider the attributes of more candidates because they'll need to rank second and third choices.

And candidates can get into a race without worrying about splitting the vote with a similar candidate — even from the same party. It lowers barriers for running for office, giving voters more choices.

Doing away with party primaries does that too. A registered Democrat could vote for a Democrat in a gubernatorial primary and a Republican — or a Libertarian — in a congressional primary race. Since the top four candidates in each race move on to the general election, voters could have, say, three Republicans and a Democrat to choose from, which they would rank in order of preference.

Parties could still play a role by endorsing one candidate in that party's field. But candidates would naturally be encouraged to compete for the middle of the electorate as moderates outnumber extreme progressives or conservatives.

If none of the four candidates get more than 50% of votes after the first round of ballot counting, the candidate with the fewest votes would be eliminated. Voters who chose the eliminated candidate as their first choice would then have their second-option votes counted, and so on, until one candidate secures a majority.

"While Colorado has among the best voter integrity and access protections, no system of voting is perfect, and I think instant runoff voting is better than our current system because it gives voters more choices," Polis said in a news release of his ballot stances. "I'm hopeful that if it passes it will encourage participation and improve our democracy. I will be voting YES ON Proposition 131."

Backed by former DaVita Dialysis CEO Kent Thiry, this proposition is the latest in a series of election reforms he's supported. Thiry was an advocate for independent state redistricting commissions as well as opening party primaries to unaffiliated voters.

Armed with research data, he says Proposition 131's reforms are something voters want, especially as the ranks of unaffiliated voters grow in the state.

Implementing the changes poses no greater a challenge than opening the primaries to unaffiliated voters, he said. Voters got used to that very quickly and proper voter education would quell confusion.

We acknowledge that because Proposition 131 only applies to about half of candidates listed on Colorado's ballots (U.S. president, district attorneys, county elected officials, municipal officials and other local races would not be affected), voters will be asked to vote in two different ways.

Colorado's clerks and elections administrators are understandably nervous about how to create a new system and a way to conduct risk-limiting audits.

But, as the Yes on 131 Campaign points out, "Colorado is uniquely prepared for reform; Colorado has led the nation in adopting pro-voter reforms, and Prop. 131 would be a natural continuation of that."

Pushing back against criticisms that ranked choice voting leads to confusion and ballot error, backers offer some compelling statistics:

- When Boulder used RCV for the first time, an exit poll revealed that 86% of voters found RCV easy, and 77% were satisfied with their voting experience.
- Alaska's use of RCV is directly comparable to what's proposed in Proposition 131 — voters ranking among the top four candidates. In Alaska's RCV general election in 2022, 99.9% of ballots were valid.
- Overall, RCV elections have comparable ballot error rates to those in non-RCV elections, according to studies from 2016, 2020, and 2021.

We say, don't let the alarmists get in the way of a change that can help us elect more consensus-seeking politicians. Vote for Proposition 131 and Colorado's vaunted elections system will rise to the occasion.