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Ranked choice voting would make Illinois primaries less nasty

By David Daley & Rachel Hutchinson

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Political pundits are busy parsing the results from the Illinois primaries for a sense of where the Democratic electorate stands headed into this fall's midterms.

Perhaps the analysis should be this: Who knows?

In Illinois' 7th Congressional District, state Rep. La Shawn Ford won the all-important Democratic primary with just 24% of the vote. In the 9th, Daniel Biss won with 29%. In the 8th, Melissa Bean won with 32%.

These results don't tell us what most Democratic voters want. Here's what we do know: These candidates emerged from bruising campaigns dominated by gamesmanship, attack ads and outside spending. The vast majority of their own party preferred another candidate — no mark on these winners, but a simple math problem in races with so many candidates.

And, though they lack majority support in their own parties, these nominees in deep-blue congressional districts will all coast into victory in November.

The good news is that it's possible to offer voters lots of choices and produce a winner most preferred by the most people — in a way that's good for voters, candidates and parties. Illinois should join a growing number of states and localities nationwide and adopt ranked choice voting for primaries.

In a ranked choice voting race, candidates need a majority to win. Voters can rank their favorite candidates in order: first, second, third and so on. This is a powerful tool in a crowded race. It ends any talk of spoilers, because if your first choice can't win, your vote counts for your second choice. This encourages candidates to make a positive pitch to voters, even seeking to appeal to their opponents' supporters — to earn those voters' second choices.

Most everyone agrees that more choices are better than fewer choices and that elections should be won by a majority. But as the Illinois results show, you usually can't have both.

Just look at Illinois' 7th. U.S. Rep. Danny Davis retired after 15 terms, giving voters the first opportunity for a new face since the 1990s. Thirteen candidates crowded into this

overwhelmingly blue district's primary. Ford will likely head to Washington with just 23,419 votes. He won by just over 3,100 votes — a margin surpassed by the vote totals of eight other hopefuls.

There's an even more complicated and contentious story in Illinois' 9th District. Fifteen candidates sought this seat, which also opened for the first time in three decades, with the retirement of U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky. Generational and ideological battle lines were drawn; perhaps most bitterly, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and aligned super political action committees spent \$7 million in this district alone.

In the final days of the race, AIPAC was accused by several candidates of trying to game the system by dividing progressive voters and creating a "spoiler." One late ad elevated a young progressive long shot and hailed her as the "real deal" fighting for "real economic justice." That candidate, Bushra Amiwala, disowned the support and condemned the ad, widely seen as an attempt to siphon voters from another young progressive, Kat Abughazaleh.

On Election Day, three candidates earned more than 20%: Biss, Abughazaleh and state Sen. Laura Fine. Biss emerged as the nominee, holding off Abughazaleh, who finished second, by fewer than 5,000 votes.

The night's marquee race was to replace retiring U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, who has also served since the 1990s. Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton also won the Democratic primary with a minority — though it was a comparatively whopping 40% of the vote. As in the 9th District, the race turned ugly.

Super PACs poured tens of thousands into the campaign in the final days to boost a long-shot candidate and attempt to split the vote — this time, between the two Black women candidates seeking the office.

Ranked choice voting puts an end to gamesmanship like this. It allows everyone to run without splitting the vote or playing spoiler. Voters need this tool to cast an informed vote in any election this crowded; a new survey suggests about two-thirds of Illinois Democrats would support its use. Candidates and parties should see ranked choice voting as a valuable tool for primaries that unite their party, instead of dividing it further.

New York City's Democratic primary last summer offered a powerful example of ranked choice voting in action. Voters received a campaign unlike most any other. Instead of cutting each other down, candidates lifted each other up: Zohran Mamdani and Brad Lander cross-endorsed each other, cutting joint ads, riding bicycles together to shared events, even sharing the couch with late-night talk show host Stephen Colbert.

Instead, in Illinois, millions of dollars in negative ads from outside spenders dominated the airwaves. A fraction of a fraction decided who represents everyone. As little as 23,000 votes will send someone to Congress — in a district with more than 770,000 people.

The real takeaway from Illinois' primaries isn't the mood of the electorate on President Donald Trump, or Israel, or progressives versus moderates. It's this: Our elections need ranked choice voting.

Without it, contested primaries such as our recent one will continue producing results — and nasty campaigns — that don't capture what majorities of Americans want from their politics.

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Houston Chronicle

John Cornyn vs. Ken Paxton is turning into a Republican bloodbath. There's a better way.

**Texas' costly and divisive runoff system could be avoided with ranked-choice voting,
a reform lawmakers continue to resist.**

**By David Daley
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Texas Democrats are having fun these days.

The bitter runoff between Sen. John Cornyn and state attorney general Ken Paxton promises to drain Republican donors ahead of November and divide the MAGA movement. Cornyn's camp is resurfacing Paxton's indictments, scandals and adultery. Paxton's team is painting Cornyn as ineffective and deeply entrenched in Washington, D.C.

While the two Republicans bloody each other, the most expensive Senate primary in history has soared past the \$100 million mark, draining Republican donors of money they could have spent in the general election. In the meantime, Democratic nominee James Talarico can take advantage of a three-month head start to build his case with voters. If Talarico springs the upset, and Republicans lose control of the Senate — something that seemed the longest of long shots just a few months ago — the GOP may look back on

the Texas primary as a key moment when everything went wrong.

They will have only themselves to blame.

There's a way the GOP could have saved itself this agony: Ranked-choice voting. Instead of dragging voters back to the polls months after the primary, and subjecting everyone to many, many weeks of nastiness and negativity, they could have an instant runoff the same day as the primary.

Here's how it would work. With ranked-choice voting, the primary voters would rank the candidates: first, second, third and so on. If nobody wins a majority of first-choice votes, the race automatically goes to an instant runoff. The bottom-ranked contender is eliminated. If your top-ranked candidate remains in the race, your vote stays with them. But if your top candidate was eliminated, your vote goes to the next person on the list. The process repeats until one candidate has a majority.

All just like a regular runoff — without the 12 extra weeks of negative campaigning or the costs and bother of a runoff election.

So, are Republicans considering ranked-choice voting? Unfortunately, they're doing the opposite. Red states across the country keep trying to ban it. Texas Republicans nearly joined the trend last year, with a bill passing the state Senate and dying in the House. A federal ranked-choice voting ban is also included in the GOP's so-called "Make Elections Great Again" bill that could form the basis of a presidential executive order on voting.

This is probably funny to Democrats headed to Costco for a Texas-sized package of popcorn as they watch Republicans form a vastly entertaining circular firing squad. Cornyn will keep attacking Paxton's "dirty deeds." Paxton will dismiss the veteran incumbent as a RINO.

President Trump is stuck with an impossible endorsement conundrum — and has even suggested he'll endorse one candidate and expects the other to drop out, essentially substituting one person's voice for that of Texas' 2.2 million GOP primary voters.

You'd think that Republicans might learn from their mistakes. Their runoff problem has already cost them control of the Senate once this decade.

In 2020, Senate control came down to a single seat in Georgia. Sen. David Perdue, the GOP incumbent, fell just short of 50% on Election Day, largely due to a Libertarian spoiler who won more than 115,000 votes. The ensuing runoff was a disaster for Republicans. Trump's claims of a "stolen election" helped drive down GOP turnout. Democrat Jon Ossoff — who trailed Perdue by two points in the general election — won. It was the

50th seat that Democrats needed for a trifecta in Washington.

Yet instead of recognizing that ranked-choice voting would have been of value in Georgia, Republicans continued to falsely demonize it and cast it in partisan political terms. Now, six years later, another runoff could do serious damage to the Lone Star State's GOP nominee — whether Cornyn or Paxton — and drain millions in resources necessary to hold the U.S. House and other battleground Senate seats.

Maybe this time will be different. Perhaps the self-inflicted wound of a runoff that might cost Republicans the Senate for the second time in six years will awaken more rational voices. Perhaps those who well understand that ranked-choice voting is a nonpartisan tool that ensures majority winners without a runoff will speak up. Perhaps those confident that majorities share their beliefs will realize they have nothing to fear from ranked-choice voting.

Until then, the Texas runoff promises to be the most entertaining spectacle in politics — for Democrats.

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