Some Ohio cities want to allow ranked choice voting. State lawmakers want to stop it

Ohio voters overwhelmingly support bond measure that pays for local roads, bridges and other infrastructure projects

By **Haley BeMiller**
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Over 100 years ago, Ohio was at the heart of efforts to popularize ranked choice voting.

Ashtabula was the first U.S. city to enact what was then called proportional representation, according to Rank the Vote. Cincinnati, Hamilton, Cleveland and Toledo followed, only to reject the idea years later. In Cincinnati's case, the repeal came after a Black candidate won a city council seat.

Now, advocates in Cincinnati and other cities are debating whether to bring ranked choice voting back – if the state Legislature doesn't get in their way.

A bipartisan Senate bill would prohibit Ohio from using ranked choice voting and withhold funding from municipalities that adopt it for local races. Backers of Senate Bill 63, which include Democrats and conservative election groups, contend it's a confusing system that violates the principle of "one person, one vote."

The bill cleared a Senate committee last month and awaits a full vote.

"It's the Bernie Sanders left-wing part of my party that thinks this is a good idea, but those people don't win elections," said Sen. Bill DeMora, D-Columbus, one of the bill's sponsors. "Ranked choice voting is a pipe dream. It's just something that doesn't work."

What is ranked choice voting?

Ranked choice voting is either beloved or reviled, depending who you ask.

There are multiple versions of the system, but it generally works like this: Voters rank the candidates from favorite to least favorite. If their top candidate loses, the vote is transferred to their next choice. This process can play out over several rounds, eliminating the least popular candidates, until one wins a majority of the vote.

Backers say it reduces polarization and forces elected officials to be accountable to all constituents. Currently, candidates in crowded primaries only need a plurality of the vote to win – and some never make it over 50%.

"Whenever any political party takes control of an area, they stage manage things and have a day-to-day level of control that really isn't healthy," said Steve Goodin, an attorney and former Cincinnati City Council member. "It stifles debate."

Goodin is among advocates pushing for ranked choice in Cincinnati, motivated by corruption at City Hall and a controversial zoning overhaul. He said they hope to put the issue on the ballot later this year or in 2026.

Officials in Stow, Lakewood and Hudson are also mulling the idea. But local leaders who support ranked choice voting say Senate Bill 63 would stifle their efforts and violate the principle of home rule.

"They are setting a precedent to take away any powers of local self-government by coercing cities by defunding us," said Kyle Herman, a Stow City Council member and advisor for Rank the Vote Ohio.

Does ranked choice voting work?

If enacted, these cities wouldn't be alone. Two states, three counties and 47 municipalities in the United States use ranked choice voting, according to FairVote, an organization that advocates for election reform.

Ranked choice voting made national headlines after former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin lost to Democrat Mary Peltola in a 2022 special

congressional election. President Donald Trump panned it as a "total rigged deal" during a rally for Palin, and many Republicans blamed ranked choice for her defeat. Palin was the 2008 Republican nominee for vice president.

Alaska voters narrowly rejected an effort to repeal the law last year, while several other states said no to ranked choice voting.

Attorney Scott Kendall, who helped craft Alaska's voting law, contends it's working as designed. He said ranked choice voting pushed out extreme politicians and increased the number of independents in the state legislature. Candidates also have to work harder on the campaign trail, he said.

"These elections have now pushed the competition to the general," Kendall said. "You don't get to make your party happy and then sleepwalk through the general elections anymore."

Not everyone is convinced it's a silver bullet. Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose said ranked choice voting "becomes this esoteric black box" that confuses voters, puts more work on election officials and prolongs the counting of ballots.

And whether voters understand the system is a matter of debate.

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania found nearly 5% of voters improperly mark their ballot in a typical ranked choice election. A survey conducted by the city of Portland last year found most voters understood how to complete their ballots. At the same time, some New Yorkers are struggling to navigate the process as they prepare for the city's mayoral primary, the New York Times reported.

"No change ever is enacted overnight," said Denise Riley, executive director for Rank the Vote Ohio. "You don’t say today I’m going to use ranked choice voting tomorrow without doing a whole lot of prepping.”