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Richie and Gronke: Ranked-Choice Ballot Upholds Voter Rights

By **Rob Richie and Paul Gronke**

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Once Texas Gov. Rick Perry and former Ambassador to China Jon Huntsman dropped out of the Republican presidential nomination contest, their South Carolina and Florida backers who cast ballots early, including many military voters living overseas, essentially wasted their votes. They voted for candidates who didn't want their support.

Florida and South Carolina voters are not alone. Several upcoming primary states allow “no excuse required”

absentee voting, meaning a far higher percentage of votes are now cast early. More than a quarter of Florida's 400,000 absentee ballots had already been returned before Perry and Huntsman withdrew, and in 2008 nearly two-thirds of all Tennessee ballots were cast early.

If you add in other states, more than a million voters have received ballots with the names of Perry, Huntsman and fellow candidate dropouts Herman Cain and Rep. Michele Bachmann (Minn.). Although many "early voters" cast ballots close to Election Day, that option isn't available to service personnel whose ballot may need to traverse 10,000 miles.

Florida and South Carolina election returns demonstrate the concrete effect of candidate withdrawals. For instance, in eight populous Florida counties, almost three-quarters of the 7,317 votes for Perry, Huntsman and Bachmann were cast early. In South Carolina, those candidates earned only 0.5 percent of Election Day votes but nearly 10 times that share of absentee votes.

The irony is painful. Many military voters serving their country cast ballots that effectively didn't count. The 2009 Military and Overseas Voters Empowerment Act sought to protect voting rights for voters overseas but did not address the unique character of primaries in which major candidates inevitably withdraw.

Fortunately, there is a proven solution, both for military voters and the millions of others who, for reasons of necessity or preference, vote early. Ranked-choice voting re-empowers these voters by allowing them to return a single ballot on which they rank candidates in order of preference.

Ranked-choice voting is well-tested but new to many Americans. Voters indicate their first choice and their backup choices by ranking candidates in order of preference. It's used in national elections in Australia and Ireland and to choose the mayors of London, Minneapolis, St. Paul and San Francisco. The Best Picture for the Academy Awards is chosen this way.

Ranked-choice ballots make particular sense for early voters in volatile presidential nomination contests. If an early voter supported a withdrawn candidate as a first choice, that ballot would count for the next-ranked choice rather than be “wasted.”

This logic shows why all voters would benefit from ranked-choice voting. If your first choice runs poorly, you could have a backup choice among the frontrunners. Ex-Speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.) argued before the South Carolina primary that “any vote for Santorum or Perry, in effect, is a vote [for] Romney.” With Santorum now surging past Gingrich, his backers are making the same claim about votes cast for Gingrich. They both can be

right only because of the perverse math of plurality voting that allows unrepresentative candidates to “win” with low shares of the vote if a “spoiler” splits the majority vote.

If adopted for all voters, ranked-choice voting would simulate a series of runoff elections. If there is no majority winner after tallying first choices, the last-place candidate loses, and that candidate’s ballots are added to the totals of the next-ranked candidate. This continues until a candidate wins with a majority of votes among active candidates. As a result, voters can vote sincerely and stop worrying about the advice of pollsters and pundits.

Along with Arkansas and Louisiana, South Carolina, in fact, already sends ranked-choice ballots to its overseas voters in federal primaries that could have a runoff. In runoffs, those ballots count for the candidate ranked highest on the ballot. Election officials report that the system works well.

Why deny military voters overseas these same rights to have a “backup” choice in presidential contests? In 2016, let’s give early voters in presidential primaries the right to cast a ranked-choice ballot. Doing so would strengthen voting rights — and provide a model for a means to increase the power of all voters.

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