



Center for
Civic Design

Best Practices Designing Ranked Choice Voting Results Displays in News Articles

**Guidelines for news articles about
Ranked Choice Voting results**

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Introduction

Reporting the winners and losers is an important part of any election. Voters need the right amount of info to understand what happened, how it happened, and the counting status. Voters also need to be able to easily access additional information about the election when and if they want to.

Results displays for ranked choice voting that clearly answer those questions increase trust in the election and reduce confusion about a new way of voting.

Who are these guidelines for?

These guidelines are for newspapers and media outlets of any size to use when designing RCV results displays. But, we also think that many of the guidelines are relevant to election office results displays!

Why follow these guidelines?

Poorly designed RCV results displays lead to voter confusion and less trust.

What's included in these best practices?

These best practices cover 3 RCV results categories:

- General guidelines for displays and articles
- Best practices for static data visualizations
- Specific guidance for discussing and displaying Incomplete Results

What are these guidelines based on?

- CCD's research on what works for voters including 2023 interviews with 40 New York City voters (See [Page 21](#) for more details)
- FairVote and RCV Resource Center's experience advocating for RCV and advising state and national partners on implementation

What makes Ranked Choice Voting different?

Instead of selecting just one candidate, voters can select multiple candidates ranking them in their order of preference.

Ranked Choice Voting elections are counted in rounds. The first round of RCV tabulation is just like any other election, counting all 1st-choices.

- If a candidate receives enough 1st-choices to pass the threshold, they win.
- If no candidate passes the threshold, counting continues in rounds.
- In each vote tabulation round, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. If your highest ranked candidate is eliminated, your vote will move to your next highest ranked candidate. This process continues until there is a winner.

[Watch this video by NYC Votes explaining how RCV is counted in NYC.](#)

What's different about RCV is that the round-by-round process of eliminating candidates and counting those ballots for the voters' next choices can also change the result.

Every jurisdiction determines its own procedures, so make it a priority to learn from your election office before the election!

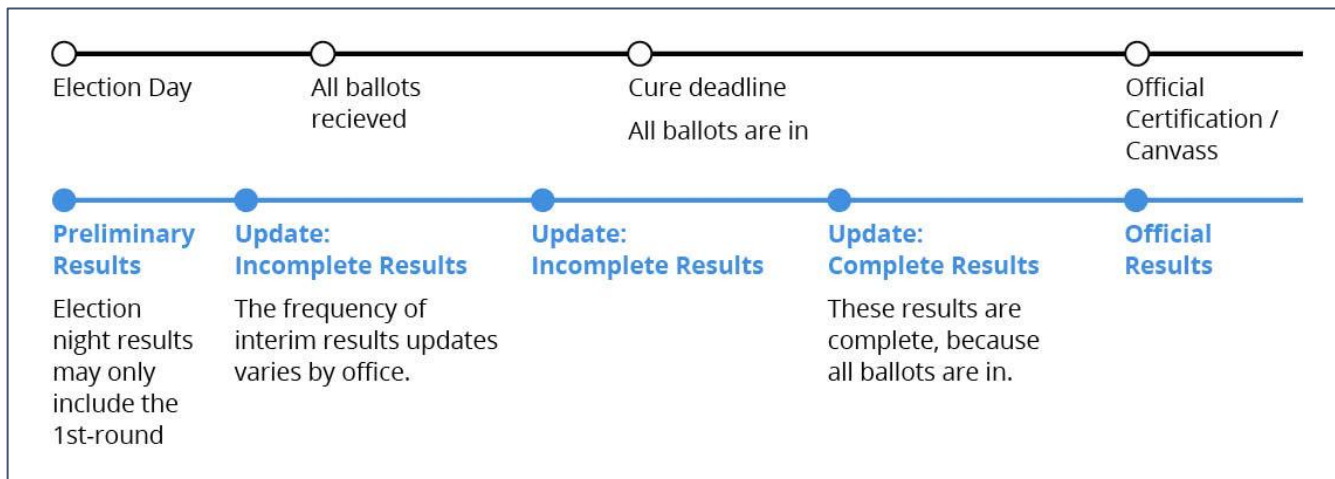
What makes Ranked Choice Voting different?

Results timelines for RCV are different than plurality elections. In these best practices, we talk about the difference between Incomplete Results and Complete or Final Results.

In RCV contests, it is important to clearly indicate the difference between incomplete and complete results, because we can't know the winner until all valid ballots are counted and vote tabulation rounds are run:

- In some jurisdictions, all of the ballots are ready to be counted on Election Night.
- In others, mail ballots can be received several days later (as long as they are postmarked by Election Day). Giving voters a chance to fix problems (called "curing") extends the date when all the ballots are in and there can be complete results.

The timeline below is an example of the process of getting from Preliminary Results on Election Night to the Official Results. Election officials decide how often they update results while they are still receiving ballots.



It is important for readers to know the status of the results to make sense of news about the election.

- **Preliminary** results are the count of the ballots available on Election Night.
- **Incomplete** results are displayed when not all ballots are in during the period between Election Night and when all valid ballots have been counted.
- **Complete** results (also called "final") include all ballots for the election.
- **Official** results are the results certified by the Election Board

Best Practices

Designing RCV Media Results Displays

In general:

- **Communicate with your local election officials** about RCV, so you understand the rules and procedures before you begin writing.
- **Display all key information about the contest and RCV in both the text and the visual.** Name the winner or leader in the article header. Include as much context as possible inside the visual including eliminated candidates, transferred or redistributed votes, 50% to win, and inactive ballots. [Page 9](#)
- **Help readers learn how RCV is counted.** [Page 10](#)
- **Make it easy for people to access additional information** including round by round numbers, RCV tabulation, and candidates. [Page 11](#)
- **Include all candidates, even in complete results.** When candidates are eliminated, write “Eliminated in Round n” in the visual. [Page 12](#)

When creating data visualizations:

- **Include candidate photos** next to names in the visualization. [Page 13](#)
- **Include both the vote percentage and vote total** next to each candidate for each vote tabulation round in the visual. [Page 14](#)
- **Label vote tabulation rounds with numbers** in the data visualization. In complete results, add the label “Final Round” to the last round of results. People conflate “Final Round” with complete / final results. [Page 15](#)
- **In Preliminary or Incomplete Results, show candidates in 1st-round order.** In complete results, update the order to show all candidates with the winner at the top and other candidates in order of elimination. [Page 16](#)
- **Only use Sankey diagrams or maps in combination with other data visualizations.** [Page 17](#)

When communicating Incomplete Results:

- **Use cautious language about the outcome** when sharing preliminary or incomplete RCV results. For example, use the phrase “in the lead.” [Page 18](#)

When communicating Complete Results:

- **Use multiple indicators (like a check mark) on complete results.** Do not use any of these indicators for candidates moving to the next round. Only use these signifiers when there is a winning candidate. [Page 19](#)

Putting it all together: Incomplete RCV Results

Display all key information about the contest and RCV in both the text and the visual

Show candidates in 1st-round order

Include candidate photos

Last updated on Date

Title says who is in the lead


By News











Brief summary of contest including how many ballots are left to count and when the next update will be.

Incomplete Results

Ranked Choice Voting Results for Oakland Mayor 2022

[See round by round counting](#)



Oakland Mayor 2022 Incomplete Results		Round 1		Round 9	
<i>Includes ballots counted as of Nov 10, 2022</i>					
Candidate	Party	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes
 Loren Taylor	D	34.19 %	12,821	53.28 %	17,541
 Sheng Thao	D	28.73 %	10,775	46.72 %	15,383
 Ignacio de la Fuente	D	12.89 %	4,834	<i>eliminated in Round 8</i>	
 Allyssa Villanueva	D	6.93 %	2,598	<i>eliminated in Round 7</i>	
 Treva Reid	N	5.93 %	2,225	<i>eliminated in Round 6</i>	
 Gregory Hodge	N	4.27 %	1,601	<i>eliminated in Round 5</i>	
 Seneca Scott	N	3.81 %	1,430	<i>eliminated in Round 4</i>	
 John Reimann	N	1.17 %	438	<i>eliminated in Round 3</i>	
 Peter Liu	R	1.14 %	426	<i>eliminated in Round 2</i>	
 Tyron Jordan	N	0.95 %	356	<i>eliminated in Round 1</i>	
Inactive Ballots: blank ballots, ballots with errors, and ballots with no more candidate rankings.			2,879	7,459	
Total reported				40,383 Estimated 30% in	

[Read more about our coverage of these candidates here.](#)

[Learn more about how ranked choice voting works.](#)

Use cautious language about the outcome like "in the lead"

Link to round by round counting that shows all tabulation rounds. Show the first and last rounds on the display.

Label the vote tabulation rounds with numbers

Include both the vote percentage and vote total next to each candidate for each vote tabulation round

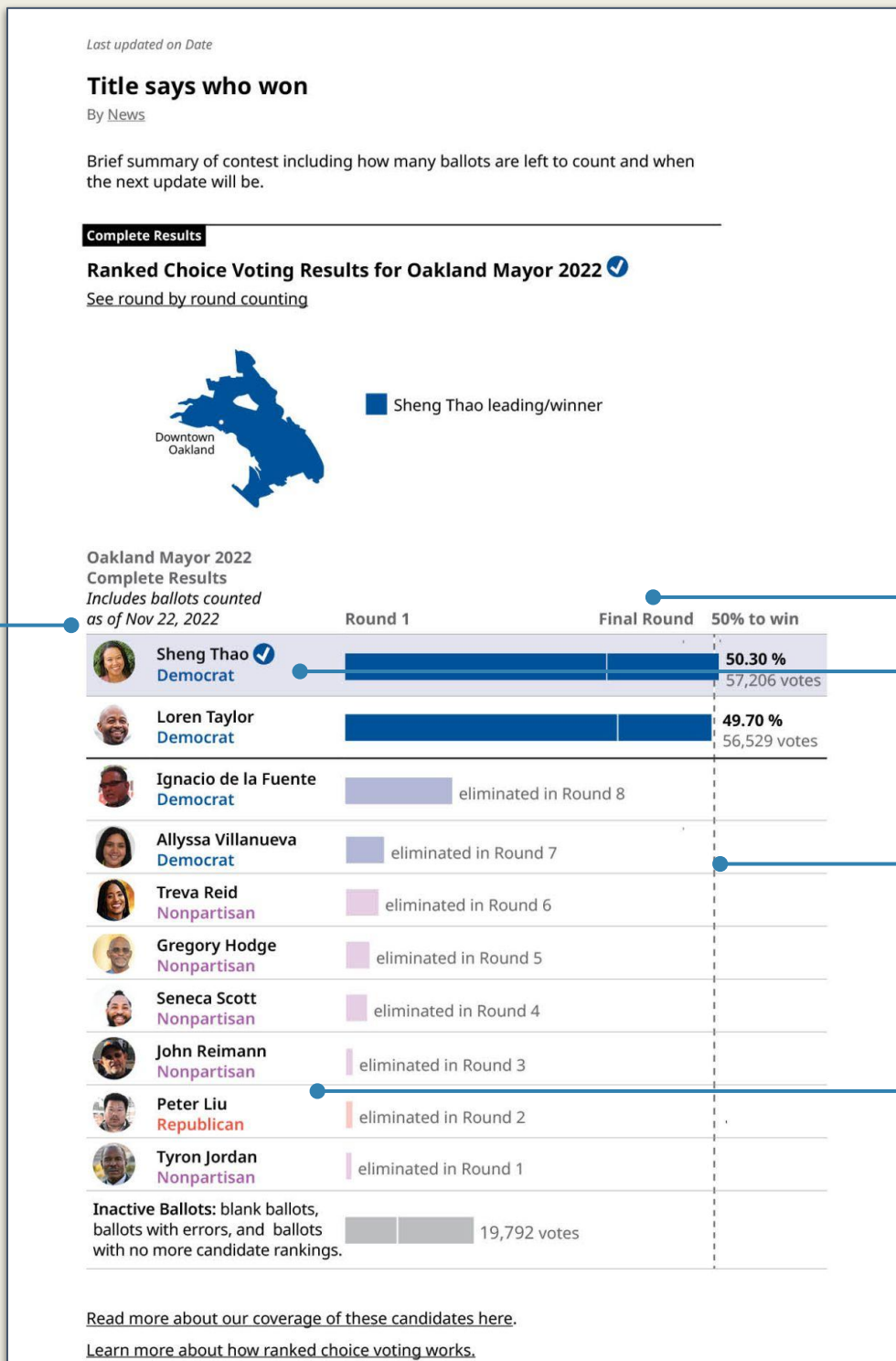
Include all candidates

Include inactive ballots with an explanation of what they are

Make it easy to access additional information

Show readers how RCV is counted

Putting it all together: Complete RCV Results



Show the winner at the top and other candidates in order of elimination

Label the last round "Final Round"

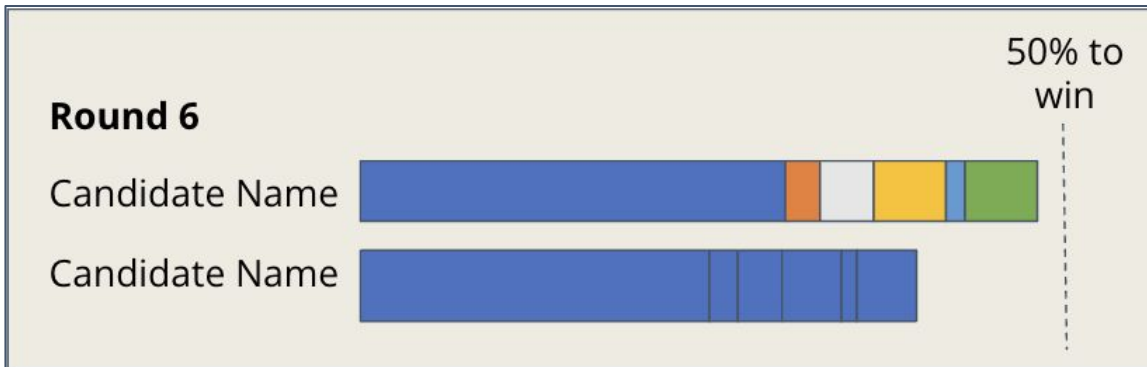
Use multiple final results indicators

If you use a bar graph, show a line at the percentage needed to win

Include all candidates

A note on data visualization types...

In our research, we tested both **Tables** (like on Page 6) and **Horizontal Stacked Bar Graphs**.



Example of a horizontal Stacked Bar Graph (also called a ribbon) showing accumulated votes

Both accurately communicate the winner of many candidate contests.

But we found some issues with stacked bar graphs:

- The segments for added votes from each round can be too small to distinguish
- In wide fields, it's hard to map many different colors back to each candidate
- There isn't enough semantic information to accompany the visual

Stacked bar graphs are good illustrations to show how winners picked up votes as the rounds progress, but they aren't ideal for communicating round by round information for contests with more than 2 rounds.

Display all key information about the contest and RCV in *both* the text and the visual

People look at the visual display first, then at header, then at text.

What information to include about the contest:

- Office
- Location
- Status of results. Are the results Preliminary, Incomplete, or Complete?
 - Approximate number of ballots left to count
 - Percent reporting
 - Timeline of next election office update

What information to include about RCV:

- Name the winner or leader in the headline and visual
- Call the election a Ranked Choice Voting election in the headline and visual
- Definitions and explanations of
 - Inactive ballots
 - Eliminated candidate
 - Redistributed votes (also called transferred votes)
 - % needed to win
- Total number of tabulation rounds
- The first and last tabulation rounds, with a link to round-by-round counting

Help readers learn how RCV is counted


Readers need to know how candidates are eliminated and what happens to those votes.











You can do this by:

- Including eliminated candidates and redistributed votes in your visual
- Adding a short explanation of RCV tabulation in your article text or in the visual
- Linking to another source that explains RCV tabulation, like your election office website, or another article on your site

Preliminary Results

Ranked Choice Voting Results for Oakland Mayor 2022
[See round by round counting](#)



Oakland Mayor 2022 Incomplete Results		Round 1			
<i>Includes ballots counted as of Nov 8, 2022</i>					
Candidate	Party	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes
 Loren Taylor	D	34.19 %	12,821		
 Sheng Thao	D	28.73 %	10,775		
 Ignacio de la Fuente	D	12.89 %	4,834		
 Allyssa Villanueva	D	6.93 %	2,598		
 Treva Reid	N	5.93 %	2,225		
 Gregory Hodge	N	4.27 %	1,601		
 Seneca Scott	N	3.81 %	1,430		
 John Reimann	N	1.17 %	438		
 Peter Liu	R	1.14 %	426		
 Tyron Jordan	N	0.95 %	356		
Inactive Ballots: blank ballots, ballots with errors, and ballots with no more candidate rankings.			2,879		
Total reported			40,383		

[Read more about our coverage of these candidates here.](#)

[Learn more about how ranked choice voting works.](#)

“[Read more about how ranked choice voting works](#)”

Make it easy for people to access additional information

People want their results to be “simple.” But they also want information to help them understand how and why the winner won.

It should be easy for people to access this information when they’re curious. If it isn’t, they will go back to Google to find it!











Include links to:

- **Round by round numbers** with all candidates and all available rounds included
- **Additional information about the candidates.** For example, “Read more about our coverage of the candidates”
- **Explanations of RCV.** For example, “Learn more about how ranked choice voting works”

Include all candidates, even in final results

When candidates are eliminated, write “Eliminated in Round n” in the visual.

All participants in our research correctly identified when candidates were eliminated because of this addition.

Oakland Mayor 2022 Interim Results November 10, 2022		Round 1		Round 2		Round 3		Round 4		Round 5		Round 6		Round 7		Round 8		Round 9	
Candidate	Party	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes
 Loren Taylor	D	34.2%	12,821	34.3%	12,905	34.5%	12,942	34.6%	12,978	35.9%	13,332	37.7%	13,847	40.8%	14,772	43.5%	15,417	53.3%	17,541
 Sheng Thao	D	28.7%	10,775	28.8%	10,850	29.2%	10,975	29.5%	11,054	30.2%	11,236	31.6%	11,611	33.6%	12,173	39.1%	13,844	46.7%	15,383
 Ignacio de la Fuente	D	12.9%	4,834	13.1%	4,922	13.2%	4,954	13.3%	4,992	14.1%	5,239	14.8%	5,451	16.0%	5,787	17.4%	6,146	eliminated in Round 8	
 Allyssa Villanueva	D	6.9%	2,598	7.1%	2,658	7.1%	2,681	7.4%	2,757	7.7%	2,870	8.7%	3,200	9.7%	3,518	eliminated in Round 7		-	-
 Treva Reid	N	5.9%	2,225	6.1%	2,307	6.2%	2,336	6.3%	2,372	6.6%	2,466	7.3%	2,672	eliminated in Round 6		-	-	-	-
 Gregory Hodge	N	4.3%	1,601	4.4%	1,650	4.5%	1,678	4.6%	1,720	5.4%	2,013	eliminated in Round 5		-	-	-	-	-	-
 Seneca Scott	N	3.8%	1,430	3.9%	1,475	4.0%	1,509	4.3%	1,591	eliminated in Round 4		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
 John Reimann	N	1.2%	438	1.2%	458	1.3%	491	eliminated in Round 3		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
 Peter Liu	R	1.1%	426	1.2%	446	eliminated in Round 2		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
 Tyron Jordan	N	0.9%	356	eliminated in Round 1		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Inactive Ballots: blank ballots, ballots with errors, and ballots with no more candidate rankings.			2,879		2,712		2,817		2,919		3,227		3,602		4,133		4,976		7,459
Total reported																			40,383

In this round by round example, “Eliminated in Round n” is written in the column for the round where the candidate is eliminated

Include candidate photos next to names in the data visualization

We found that people relate to candidate photos. In our research, they preferred results displays and articles with photos.

"I liked [it] because there's pictures of all the candidates, not just names. You see who's running" –Voter

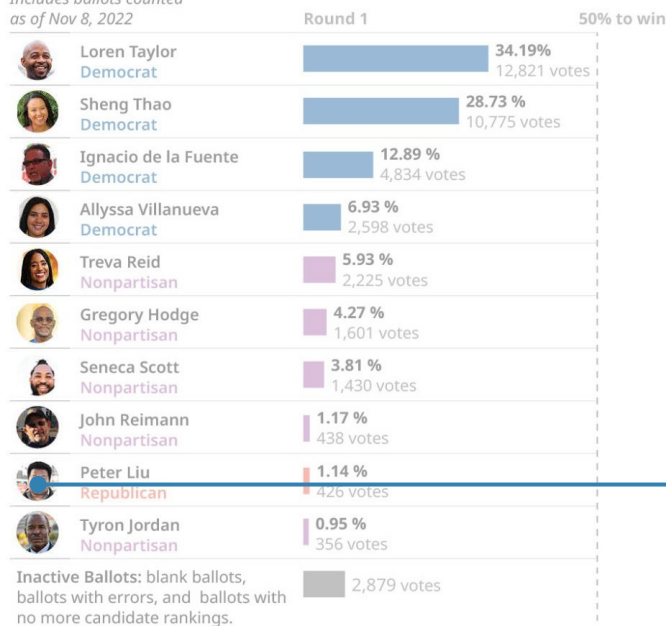
Preliminary Results

Ranked Choice Voting Results for Oakland Mayor 2022

[See round by round counting](#)



Oakland Mayor 2022
Incomplete Results
Includes ballots counted
as of Nov 8, 2022













Include photos for all candidates

[Read more about our coverage of these candidates here.](#)

[Learn more about how ranked choice voting works.](#)

Include the vote percentage and vote total next to each candidate for each round in the visual

People want to be able to see both the vote percentage and vote total to understand the contest.

Oakland Mayor 2022 Complete Results <i>Includes ballots counted as of Nov 22, 2022</i>			Round 1		Final Round Round 9	
Candidate	Party	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes	
 Sheng Thao ✓	D	31.79 %	39,909	50.30 %	57,206	
 Loren Taylor	D	33.07 %	41,510	49.70 %	56,529	
 Ignacio de la Fuente	D	10.27 %	12,895	<i>eliminated in Round 8</i>		
 Allyssa Villanueva	D	8.72 %	10,949	<i>eliminated in Round 7</i>		
 Treva Reid	N	6.08 %	7,627	<i>eliminated in Round 6</i>		
 Gregory Hodge	N	4.62 %	5,798	<i>eliminated in Round 5</i>		
 Seneca Scott	N	2.98 %	3,745	<i>eliminated in Round 4</i>		
 John Reimann	N	1.01 %	1,268	<i>eliminated in Round 3</i>		
 Peter Liu	R	0.76 %	960	<i>eliminated in Round 2</i>		
 Tyron Jordan	N	0.69 %	862	<i>eliminated in Round 1</i>		
Inactive Ballots: blank ballots, ballots with errors, and ballots with no more candidate rankings.			8,005	19,792		
Total reported				133,527 100% in		


Vote % is bold font. In our research, participants looked for the percentages first.

Vote total is regular font


Label the rounds with numbers

When the results are complete, add the label “Final Round” to the last round of results.

People assume that “Final Round” means complete results, even when the results are labelled incomplete.

Oakland Mayor 2022 Incomplete Results <i>Includes ballots counted as of Nov 10, 2022</i>			Round 1		Round 9	
Candidate	Party	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes	
 Loren Taylor	D	34.19 %	12,821	53.28%	17,541	
 Sheng Thao	D	28.73 %	10,775	46.72%	15,383	
 Ignacio de la Fuente	D	12.89 %	4,834	<i>eliminated in Round 8</i>		

Incomplete Results rounds are labelled “Round n”

Oakland Mayor 2022 Complete Results <i>Includes ballots counted as of Nov 22, 2022</i>			Round 1		Final Round Round 9	
Candidate	Party	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes	
 Sheng Thao ✓	D	31.79 %	39,909	50.30 %	57,206	
 Loren Taylor	D	33.07 %	41,510	49.70 %	56,529	
 Ignacio de la Fuente	D	10.27 %	12,893	<i>eliminated in Round 8</i>		











In Complete Results the label “Final Round” has been added above Round n. This is an additional signal that all valid ballots have been counted and the results are complete.











In Incomplete Results, show candidates in 1st-round order

In Complete Results, change the order to show all candidates with the winner at the top and other candidates in order of elimination.

In **Preliminary or Incomplete Results**, show candidates in order of 1st-round results.

In **Complete Results**, show the winner at top, then the 2nd place candidate, and all the others in the order they were eliminated.

Oakland Mayor 2022 Incomplete Results <i>Includes ballots counted as of Nov 8, 2022</i>			
		Round 1	
Candidate	Party	Percent	Votes
 Loren Taylor	D	34.19 %	12,821
 Sheng Thao	D	28.73 %	10,775
 Ignacio de la Fuente	D	12.89 %	4,834
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Oakland Mayor 2022 Complete Results <i>Includes ballots counted as of Nov 22, 2022</i>					
		Round 1		Final Round Round 9	
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 Tyron Jordan	N	0.69 %	862	<i>eliminated in Round 1</i>	

Only use Sankey diagrams or maps in combination with other data visualizations

Maps give context to understand the election.

Participants in our research mentioned that a map helps them understand the numbers. But, maps alone are not enough to explain RCV elections.

If you use a map, include a key.



Don't use complex visualizations like Sankey diagrams as the only results display.

Some people love Sankey diagrams and other complex data visualizations.

But many people are confused by them. If you choose to use a complex data visualization, use it in combination with a simpler visual like a table or bar graph.

Use cautious language about the outcome when sharing preliminary or incomplete RCV results

The phrase “in the lead” or “leading” works well.

Last updated on Tuesday, November 08, 2022; 8:18 PM

Loren Taylor Leading on Election Night in Ranked Choice Voting election for Oakland Mayor

By CCD News

Loren Taylor is leading in 1st round results in the ranked choice voting election to succeed Libby Schaaf as mayor of Oakland, according to election night returns. The elections office will release results of the counting rounds early next week.

Headline says that one candidate is “**leading**”

Candidate is “**leading in 1st round results**”

Example of Preliminary Results release

Last updated on Thursday, November 10, 2022; 4:45 PM

Taylor Leading Over Thao in Oakland Mayor’s Race

By CCD News

The Oakland Mayor’s race was still too close to call Thursday night. The Alameda County Registrar of Voters said they estimate that there are 120,000 more votes remaining to count for the entire county. There will be another ballot update Monday night.

Headline says that one candidate is “**leading**”

The race is “**still too close to call**”

Example of Incomplete Results

Use multiple ways to indicate complete results

People look for a variety of indicators to know when results are complete and final. Don't use any of these indicators until there is a winner.

Different people refer to different indicators. So, to indicate final results and the final winner, use as many as possible, within reason.

Last updated on Date

Title says who won

By News

Brief summary of contest including how many ballots are left to count and when the next update will be.

Complete Results

Ranked Choice Voting Results for Oakland Mayor 2022 ✓

[See round by round counting](#)

Sheng Thao leading/winner

Oakland Mayor 2022 Complete Results		Round 1		Final Round Round 9	
<i>Includes ballots counted as of Nov 22, 2022</i>					
Candidate	Party	Percent	Votes	Percent	Votes
Sheng Thao ✓	D	31.79 %	39,909	50.30 %	57,206
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Tyron Jordan	N	0.69 %	862	<i>eliminated in Round 1</i>	
Inactive Ballots: blank ballots, ballots with errors, and ballots with no more candidate rankings.			8,005	19,792	
Total reported				133,527 100% in	

Visual title says "Complete Results"

Checklist

Designing RCV Media Results Displays

- Talk to your local election officials to understand local procedures

Does your results display include:

- Both a written and visual explanation
- Name the winner or leader in both the headline and visual
- An explanation of or link explaining the RCV counting process, [like this Ranked Choice Voting Facts video by FairVote](#)
- Link to more information about the candidates
- Link to round by round count
- Definitions of eliminated candidate, transferred or redistributed votes, % to win, and inactive ballots
- Results for all candidates in the contest

Does your visualization include:

- A photo of each candidate
- Both vote totals and percentages
- Numbered tabulation rounds
- “Eliminated in Round n” next to eliminated candidates

For Preliminary or Incomplete Results only:

- Cautious language about the leader
- Candidates are in 1st-round order

For Complete Results only:

- Winner is at the top of the visual, followed by other candidates in order of elimination
- Last round label updated to say “Final Round / Round n”
- Multiple final results indicators (See [Page 19](#) for a list)

The research behind these best practices

Between February–April 2023, CCD tested ways of displaying RCV results displays in news media articles with participants in NYC.

The research sessions took place in the months before NYC’s second RCV primary elections. Working in public libraries, we talked with 39 people in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens in neighborhoods where ranking was under-used in the 2021 primary.

- In the first round of testing, we tested 10 articles from local and national news outlets covering recent RCV elections in Alaska, Maine, and Oakland. The articles were selected for the variety in how they presented the rankings and status of the election.
- For the second round of testing, we created sample results displays designed based what we learned in the first round. Controlling the designs allowed this round of the research to focus on elements in the layout and text and how people reacted to them as they read about an RCV election.
 - The samples included an Election Night (Preliminary) results display, an Incomplete (1 week out) results display, and a Final results display.
 - Participants were assigned a ballot with ranked candidates to follow when they gave feedback.

This research built on early work on Best Practices for Displaying Official RCV Election Results.

[Read more about our research for Ranked Choice Voting at **civildesign.org**](https://civildesign.org)

Additional Resources

Ranked Choice Voting

FairVote: fairvote.org

Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center: rcvresources.org

Center for Civic Design: civicdesign.org/topics/rcv

CCD's demonstrations of interactive RCV results: election-results.civicdesign.org/

RCV tools and other resources: fairvote.org/resources/rcv-applications-and-ballot-tools/

NYC Votes explanation of how RCV works: www.nycvotes.org/how-to-vote/ranked-choice-voting/

Plain Language

Field Guide Vol 1 [Writing instructions voters understand](#)

Field Guide Vol 4 [Effective poll worker materials](#)

Information Design

Workbook [Designing a voter guide to an election](#)

- [Using colors effectively](#)
- [Planning for multiple languages](#)

Toolkit [Civic icons and images](#)

Toolkit [Election materials color palette](#) (accessible colors in 4 shades)

Usability Testing

Field Guide Vol 3 [Testing ballots for usability](#)

Toolkit [Usability testing kit](#)

Language Access

Workbook [Planning Language Access](#)



Center for
Civic Design

**In collaboration with FairVote and
Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center.**

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