



INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING FOR THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES: “ONE ELECTION, NOT TWO”

OVERVIEW

The City of Los Angeles currently uses a two-round runoff system to elect its mayor, city attorney, city council and controller. One election is held in early March, and if no candidate wins a majority of the vote, a second election between the top two finishers is held in May. Voter participation is usually low: only 10 percent of registered voters participated in the March 6, 2007 election, and that was followed by 6 percent turnout in the May 15, runoff, a 40 percent decline. Turnout in the precincts was only 1-2 percent, with some precincts having no voters at all.

Adding insult to injury, LA taxpayers paid about \$5 million for administering the May runoff, \$40 per voter. Candidates also had to raise more funds for the second election, undermining campaign finance reform.

Instant runoff voting, which allows voters to rank a first, second and third choice, would elect majority winners in a single election, saving Los Angeles the cost and difficulty of a separate runoff election. It would allow campaigns and voters to focus attention and resources on a single election, preventing voter fatigue that contributes to low turnout.

THE PROBLEM

Holding two elections instead of one is expensive, inconvenient and is burning out voters with too many elections. It leads to:

Expensive Elections. At a time of budget deficits, the City, along with the LA Unified School District and the LA Community College District, is spending a whopping \$14 million to administer a March primary and May runoff election. Since 1993, Los Angeles, LAUSD and LACCD have spent \$30.9 million administering runoff elections. From 2001 to 2005, the City of Los Angeles spent \$9.2 million, \$4.7 million in 2005 alone, as costs have escalated in recent years.

Voter Fatigue. Despite these high costs, hardly anyone bothers to vote. The March 6

election had a voter turnout of barely 10 percent, and in the May runoff only 6 percent -- \$40 *per voter* spent on election administration. Turnout among absentee voters was 58%, while turnout in the precincts was a mere 1-2 percent, with some precincts having no voters at all. Since 1997, voter turnout has declined in more than half the runoff elections. Even when there's no May runoff (because winners are decided in March), election officials still must spend money preparing for the May election, in case it's necessary—a waste of taxpayer money.

Little Competition. In the March 6, 2007 election, five of the eight city council races featured incumbents who ran unopposed. In 2005, three incumbents ran unopposed; meaning over half of the current city councilors ran unopposed. Most of the other races are won by landslides. People are unlikely to interrupt their busy workday to vote when the result is predictable.

Undermines Campaign Finance Reform.

Candidates need to raise and spend vast amounts of money for their runoff campaigns. Since 1993, \$27.8 million have been donated to local candidates for their runoff campaigns, over six million dollars in 2005 alone as fundraising has escalated in recent years. Runoff elections also lead to huge increases in independent expenditures. Since 1993, \$7.5 million have been spent by independent expenditure committees in runoff elections. In the 2005 mayoral race, independent expenditures ballooned from \$602,009 in the primary to \$3.1 million in the runoff — *a five-fold increase*.

Mudslinging campaigns. The current system encourages negative, hack attack campaigning, where the winning strategy becomes driving voters away from your opponent rather than debating ideas and policy. In recent LA elections, voters have been bombarded with campaign attacks and TV ads telling them the worst about their political leaders. Runoff elections have been notorious for mano-a-mano, head-to-head contests that have alienated voters, lowered public trust and damaged the eventual officeholder.

Environmental costs. Runoff elections waste more than just time and money—at least 20.7 million pieces of paper were needlessly wasted in the 2005 runoff on voter info pamphlets mailed to 1.5 million voters and sample ballots available at 1,599 polling sites. A blizzard of multiple campaign mailers sent out by candidates or organizations wasted an untold amount more.

THE SOLUTION: Instant Runoff Voting

The best remedy for expensive, low turnout, mudslinging runoff elections is an electoral method called instant runoff voting. Instant runoff voting (IRV) allows voters to rank their candidates, 1, 2, 3, and the rankings are used to elect a majority winner in a single election. This saves the cost and hassle of holding a second election. With IRV, Los Angeles could combine the primary and runoff into one effective election.

THE BENEFITS: “One election, not two”

Increased voter participation. Voters, candidates and voter mobilization organizations in Los Angeles could focus on a single election and maximize voter participation. San Francisco has been using IRV for the past four years in a November election, and voter participation has nearly doubled; in many minority neighborhoods voter turnout has increased by 300 to 400 percent.

Eliminate costly runoffs. By combining the primary and runoff into a single election, tens of millions of tax dollars will be saved that currently are wasted on an unnecessary second election where few voters bother to participate. Those tax dollars could be better spent on other pressing needs in Los Angeles, including reducing the deficit.

New voices, more choices. With IRV, if your first choice candidate can't win your vote goes to your second choice. This liberates voters to choose the candidates you really like instead of always voting for the “lesser of two evils,” or “wasting” your vote on spoiler candidates. It brings new candidates and their issues into the debate, leading to a more robust “marketplace of ideas,” and inspiring greater participation.

Better debate, less mudslinging. IRV discourages negative campaigns because candidates know they may need the second or third ranking from other candidates' supporters to win. The result is a major shift in traditional campaign strategy. Instead of mudslinging, candidates have an incentive to run civil, issues-based campaigns and find common ground. In San Francisco's IRV elections, some of the most contested races have seen candidates endorsing like-minded opponents, sharing slate mailers and co-sponsoring fundraisers. One *New York Times* headline read: “New Runoff System in San Francisco Has the Rival Candidates Cooperating.” Such coalition-building is certain to benefit the eventual winner when governing.

Better supports campaign finance reform and public financing. IRV spares candidates the burden of raising money for two elections instead of one. Since 1993, the City's program to partially fund political campaigns has given \$8.9 million to candidates in runoffs. That public money all could be saved. Combined with the tax savings from eliminating the administration of runoff elections, tens of millions of dollars will be saved over time. That money could be used to fund an expansion of the current partial public financing of campaigns to one of full public financing.

HOW IT WORKS

Instant runoff voting (IRV) allows voters to rank the candidates in their order of preference, 1-2-3, instead of just picking one candidate. All the first rankings are counted, and if a candidate wins a majority the election is over, just like now. But if no candidate wins a majority, each voter's second and third rankings are used to determine the winner—*instantly*.

The candidate with the fewest first rankings is eliminated and voters who ranked that candidate now have their vote counted for their second choice—that's their runoff choice. All ballots are recounted in the “instant runoff,” and if a candidate has a majority, that's the winner. If not, the process repeats until one candidate has majority support (To view a Web-based demonstration of how IRV ballots are counted, visit www.newamerica.net/irv_resources).

GROWING MOMENTUM

Instant runoff voting is widely used around the world and is spreading in California and the U.S. It is used in San Francisco for local elections, where exit polls have shown that voters across all racial/ethnic lines like the system and find it easy to use. Voters in Oakland, Davis, Berkeley, and Santa Clara County recently passed ballot measures to adopt IRV. Student governments at UCLA, Cal Tech, Stanford, UC-Berkeley and others are using such electoral methods. In California, IRV has broad support from good government, voting rights, labor and other groups like the state Democratic Party, San Francisco Labor Council, Alameda County Central Labor Council, SEIU, Common Cause, League of Women Voters, PIRG, Greenlining Institute, Asian Law Caucus, Latino Congreso, Chinese for Affirmative Action, Green Party, Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, Sierra Club and more.

To find out more info about IRV in Los Angeles, visit www.newamerica.net/irv_la.