



INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING: MAKING YOUR VOTE COUNT

OVERVIEW

California's winner-take-all electoral system is responsible for polarized politics, a balkanized legislature and declining voter turnout. Advanced electoral systems like instant runoff voting offer voters the opportunity for better choices at the ballot box, improved political debate and broader-based politics.

THE PROBLEM

Loss of Moderates. Party primaries in California empower the political extremes and discourage moderates, creating a Legislature that is unable to reach compromise and is therefore subject to gridlock. Primaries are low turnout elections mostly restricted to registered party voters. Candidates can win their party's nomination with low percentages of the vote, relying on a narrow core of voters for victory. This makes it much more difficult for candidates with politically moderate views to reach a general election.

Spoiler candidacies. Winner-take-all elections also are vulnerable to "spoiler" candidacies, where like-minded voters supporting different candidates run the risk of splitting their vote and helping to elect a rival. This dynamic makes it virtually impossible for a serious candidate to run outside of the two major parties, leaving voters with a choice of candidates that is limited to those who have won favor with traditional party stakeholders. This in turn alienates voters who get tired of voting for the "lesser of two evils," instead of voting for the candidates they really like.

Mudslinging campaigns. Winner-take-all elections encourage negative campaigns, where the winning strategy becomes driving

voters away from your opponent through mudslinging rather than building coalitions and consensus. Runoff elections in particular are certain to produce mudslinging campaigns that turn off voters, lower public trust in government and damage the eventual officeholder. The winner of a divisive runoff faces a much more difficult time rebuilding the public trust that is essential for strong leadership.

THE SOLUTION: INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING (IRV)

How it works

Instant runoff voting (IRV) elects candidates who win majority support in a single election. Voters rank candidates in order of preference: a first ranking for your favorite candidate, a second ranking for your next-favorite, and so on. If a candidate wins a majority of first rankings, he or she wins. If not, the "instant runoff" begins.

The candidate with the least number of first rankings is eliminated. Supporters of the eliminated candidate give their vote to their second ranking, i.e. their runoff choice. All ballots are recounted, 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.fairvote.org/?page=1668).

The Benefits

Discourages mudslinging. IRV discourages negative campaigns because candidates know they often cannot win without support from supporters of other candidates. In other words, winners need

to be listed as the second or third choice on ballots cast for other candidates. The result is a major shift in traditional campaign strategy. In San Francisco, where California's first instant runoff election was held in November 2004, the most contested districts saw candidates endorsing their 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 in the midst of a campaign is certain to benefit the eventual winner during the process of governing, especially compared to the destructive attacks in a traditional runoff.

Empowers the political center.

Candidates who can build coalitions by attracting support beyond their core supporters are more likely to be successful. In party primaries, candidates would need to win with a majority of votes, so politically moderate candidates would have a greater chance to reach the general election.

Eliminates spoilers. With IRV, if your first choice can't win your vote moves to your second choice. This eliminates the "spoiler" effect and liberates voters to choose the candidates they really like instead of being forced to vote for the "lesser of two evils." The result is that elections will more accurately reflect the level of support for all candidates. This in turn will attract a higher caliber of alternative candidates, giving voters a broader range of choices.

Gives voters more choice. Among the biggest problems with today's politics is the lack of viable choices on the ballot. Not surprisingly, the Legislature does not reflect the diversity of the electorate. Instant runoff voting would inspire greater participation and trust by offering voters a wider range of higher quality choices. Perhaps most important, instant runoff voting could help restore public trust in government and encourage greater participation.

Eliminates costly and divisive runoffs, which are used in many local elections, saving millions of tax dollars in unnecessary election expenses and sparing candidates the burden of raising money for two elections instead of one.

Background

Instant runoff voting is new to California, but it's widely used elsewhere. It has been used in San Francisco for the 2004 and 2005 local elections. Louisiana and Arkansas use IRV for military overseas voters. In Utah, the Republican Party has used IRV to nominate candidates for Congress and Governor to ensure their choices have support from a majority of GOP voters. IRV has been used for decades to elect the President of Ireland and Australia's national House of Representatives. It is also used to elect the Mayor of London.

IRV has broad, bipartisan support. It has been endorsed by Republican Sen. John McCain as well as Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean. In California, it has also received support from the state Democratic Party as well as good government and minority advocacy groups like Common Cause, League of Women Voters, California PIRG, the Greenlining Institute, Asian Law Caucus, Chinese for Affirmative Action, and Southwest Voter.

Interest is spreading quickly in California. Three charter cities and one charter county in the Bay Area are making plans to follow San Francisco's lead, with voters in Berkeley scheduled to use IRV in November 2006. Los Angeles City Council members also voted near-unanimously to study the San Francisco experience with IRV. San Diego has established a task force to evaluate using IRV for local races.