

Instant Runoff Voting

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The U.S. political system has been shaken in recent years by increasing partisan polarization, unresponsive government, and ethical scandals—all of which have resulted in a crisis of confidence in our elected officials. Opinion polls routinely reveal the public's disdain for Congress and both major political parties, and grave concern about the direction of the country. Despite the high stakes in the 2006 elections over which party would control Congress, a mere 40 percent of eligible voters bothered to vote. Americans need a broadly representative and responsive government that can build a political consensus capable of addressing the nation's challenges, yet our political system is founded on antiquated practices that produce this polarized, paralyzed politics.

Our outdated electoral methods and institutions are greatly responsible for the widening chasm between the electorate and those who hold office. Plurality-wins-all elections allow “spoiler” candidates and “lesser of two evil” dilemmas to bedevil voters. Party primaries empower the political extremes in each party and discourage moderates, creating legislatures that are unable to reach compromise and are subject to gridlock. A plurality-wins-all system also discourages competition from independent and third-party candidates.

It's time to bring our electoral system into the 21st century by adopting modern electoral methods, including instant runoff voting (IRV), which will result in leaders who better represent the broad range of Americans. IRV produces winners with majority support in a single election by allowing voters to rank first, second, and third choices on their ballots. If a voter's first choice cannot win and is eliminated from the runoff, his or her vote goes to the candidate he or she ranked second; this is the voter's runoff choice. Instant runoff voting liberates citizens to vote for the candidates they really like instead of the lesser of two evils. And IRV encourages candidates to campaign by building coalitions rather than tearing down opponents. If used in party primaries, IRV would empower the political center because candidates would need to win with a majority of votes, and politically moderate candidates would thus have a greater chance of advancing to the general election.

Using instant runoff voting to elect members of the U.S. House and Senate will expand voter choice, inaugurate a new era of bipartisan cooperation in Congress, and encourage pragmatic problem solving over partisan bickering on countless issues. Using IRV for congressional primary elections would loosen the stranglehold party extremists have on the nomination process.

The Problem

When asked whether they would prefer to have more political choices on Election Day, including independent and third-party candidates, a clear majority of Americans say yes. Yet our 18th-century

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electoral methods perpetuate the two-party system and restrict voters' choices. That's because under our current electoral system, there's a crowd. Our plurality election process, in which the candidate with the most votes wins—even if that candidate receives less than a popular majority—can produce skewed results when more than two candidates run for the

same office. For example, in a three-way race, a candidate with only 37 percent of the vote can win, even though 63 percent of the voters wanted a different candidate.

This is not merely a theoretical consideration. In three of our last four presidential elections, the winning candidate in a multi-candidate field did not have a majority of the national popular vote. Since 2000, the governors of 20 states have won without a majority of the popular vote, five governors in 2006. From 1994 through 2004, there were 247 plurality wins in U.S. House primaries and 35 in U.S. Senate primaries (with 77 more House plurality winners and 14 more Senate plurality winners avoided by the use of second-round runoff elections).

Our plurality-wins-all electoral system leads to the following problems:

■ **Nonmajority winners.** We can send a man to the moon, we can map the human genome, yet we use an electoral method that cannot guarantee that the candidate with the most support will win. This undermines majority rule, one of the cornerstones of our democracy.

■ **Spoiler candidacies.** Plurality-wins-all elections

are vulnerable to spoiler candidacies. In such cases, the votes of like-minded voters are split between candidates with similar positions, resulting in their least favorite candidate winning. Independent and less popular candidates thus feel pressure not to run or, even worse, their candidacy helps elect someone whom a majority of voters oppose. This dynamic tends to suppress new candidates and their ideas, which in turn suppresses political debate. This alienates voters who get tired of voting for the lesser of two evils instead of for candidates they really like.

■ **Partisan primaries and loss of moderates.** Primary elections are typically restricted to registered party voters (though specific rules differ from state to state) and usually have very low turnout. In our plurality-wins-all system, candidates can win their party's nomination with low percentages of the vote, relying on a narrow core of voters. As a result, the extremes in each party have an influence over national politics that is far out of proportion to their actual numbers in the electorate. Candidates with politically moderate views have a much more difficult time winning primary elections and advancing to the general election. Yet since moderate politicians play a crucial role as legislative bridge builders, their absence leads to a polarized government in which representatives have great difficulty working together.

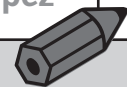
■ **Mudslinging campaigns.** Plurality-wins-all elections encourage negative campaigns, where often the winning strategy consists of driving voters away from an opponent by mudslinging rather than attracting voters by building coalitions and consensus. The head-to-head combat of plurality-wins-all elections inevitably leads to bruising, attack-style campaigns that alienate voters, lower public trust in government, and damage the eventual officeholder. The winner of a divisive election is likely to have to work much harder to gain the public trust that is essential to strong leadership.

HOW INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING WORKS

You vote for your favorite candidate, just like you do now. But you also RANK your runoff choices at the same time – 1, 2, 3, on your ballot. If a candidate has a majority of first rankings, he or she wins. If not, the second and third rankings are used to determine the majority winner – instantly – in a single November election.

Instant Runoff Voting has been used for years in many places – including San Francisco. It is a proven way to improve democracy.

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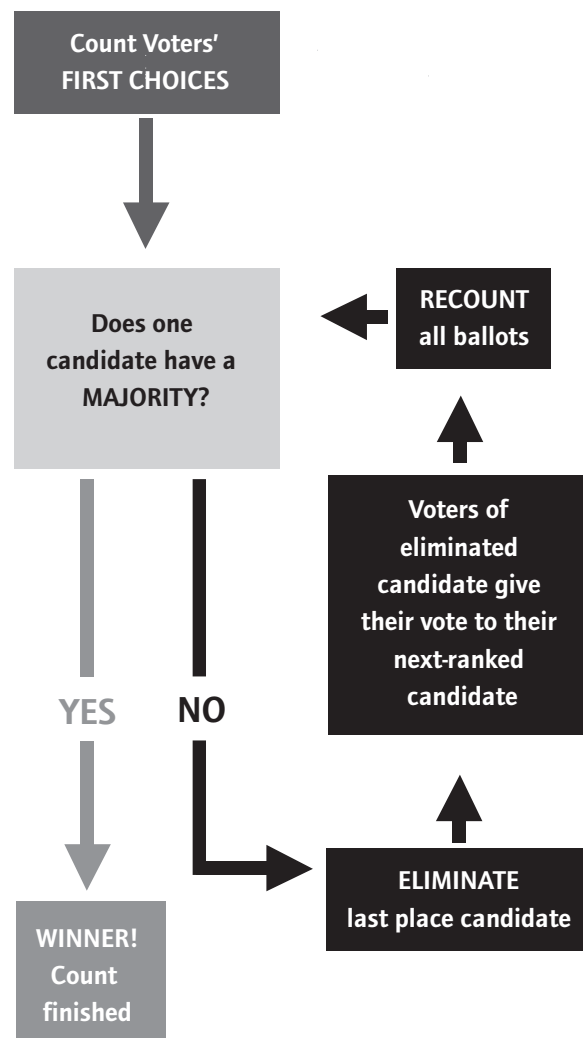


The Solution: Instant Runoff Voting

Instant runoff voting is a reliable and tested solution to our broken plurality-wins-all politics. It produces winners with majority support in a single election. You 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-choice rankings, he or she wins the election. If not, the “instant runoff” begins.

The candidate with the fewest first-choice rankings is eliminated, and voters for the eliminated candidate have their ballots counted immediately for their second-ranked candidate—i.e., the candidate they would have supported if forced to come back to the polls for a traditional two-round runoff. All ballots are recounted, and if a candidate has a majority, that candidate is the winner. If not, the process is repeated until one candidate has majority support. In other words, voters are ranking their runoff choices at the same time as they are indicating their first choice, and these runoff rankings are used to determine instantly which candidate has support from a popular majority in a single election.

With IRV, voters are liberated to vote for the candidates they really like instead of the lesser of two evils, and they don’t have to worry about spoiler candidates splitting the vote. IRV would help moderate candidates break the stranglehold that partisan



voters now have on the congressional primary process. Instead of congressional elections being dominated by the most partisan Democratic and Republican nominees, more centrist candidates would have a chance of making it through the primary gauntlet and ending up on the November ballot.

In effect, instant runoff voting asks the voters to reveal more of their political thinking. Okay, you're a moderate Republican, but what about this moderate Democratic candidate? Might that candidate be acceptable as your second or third choice? Or maybe you are a Libertarian Party or a Green Party supporter—which would be your second or third choice if your Libertarian or Green candidate can't win? Voters can think more about which candidates they like regardless of partisan labels. This in turn fires the synapses of voters and liberates them to send a message with their first rankings in ways that the current system can never do. The nation receives a much better snapshot of where the electorate really stands.

This is not some academic exercise. Instant runoff voting can change outcomes and produce fairer results. If IRV had been in place for the 1992 presidential election, President George H. W. Bush might have won enough second-choice rankings from Ross Perot supporters to have beaten Bill Clinton, who won the presidency with only 43 percent of the popular vote. And if, in 2000, the nearly 100,000 Ralph Nader voters in Florida had had the option of ranking a second choice, probably thousands of them would have turned to Al Gore, who would have been the recipient of all their runoff rankings, most likely winning Florida and the presidency.

The Benefits of Instant Runoff Voting

There are many good reasons for using instant runoff voting, but the following are especially important.

- **Majority winners.** With IRV, a number of candidates can run and not worry about the split votes that lead to nonmajority winners, and majority winners are elected in a single race.
- **No more spoiler dilemmas.** With IRV, voters are liberated to vote for the candidates they really like without worrying about spoilers wasting their vote. If your first choice can't win, your vote moves to your second choice, so you aren't forced to vote for the lesser of two evils. Election results will more accurately reflect the level of support for all candidates. Like-minded candidates can form coalitions without splitting the vote and knocking each other off. This in turn will attract a higher caliber of alternative candidates, giving voters a broader range of choices.
- **Increased political debate.** The spoiler dynamic suppresses new candidates and their ideas, which in turn suppresses political debate. Third parties and independent candidates have often played an important role in the American political system as “laboratories for new ideas.” Third parties and independents first proposed the abolition of slavery (Free Soil Party), prohibition (Prohibition Party), the income tax (Populist Party), the New Deal coalition (Progressive Party), balanced budgets (Reform Party), women's suffrage, the 40-hour workweek, food and drug safety laws, public libraries, direct election of U.S. senators, and government regulation of monopolies.

Third parties and independent candidates not only introduce new ideas and issues but also a new type of candidate who speaks directly to various constituencies and mobilizes them with a personal touch that only an authentic voice can provide. Ross Perot, during his two candidacies in 1992 and 1996, gave expression to the frustrations of a Middle America fed up with budget deficits and an indifferent two-party tango, and wanting to “toss the bums out.” IRV would open up the electoral system and empower voters to support such candidates—and their ideas—without the unintended consequences of spoiling. And that would encourage more political debate, which would be good for America.
- **Less mudslinging.** IRV would also cut down on the negative campaigning that has become a

fixture of American political campaigns. That's because currently in our winner-take-all elections, candidates win as easily by driving voters away from their opponents as by attracting them to their own candidacy. The last candidate standing wins, so the optimal campaign strategy becomes attacking your opponent and taking as few stands on issues as possible to avoid alienating a potential bloc of voters. This strategy is greatly augmented by the use of polling and focus groups to figure out what sound bites will work most effectively against an opponent, as well as what the least risky positions are on the most pressing issues. Unsurprisingly, our elections are sorely lacking in substance, and alienating to many.

Instant runoff voting discourages this sort of negative campaigning. In order to win under this system, a candidate may need to attract the second or third rankings from the supporters of rival candidates, so candidates will have to be more careful about what they say about each other. IRV will result in a major shift in campaign strategy because finding common ground and building coalitions with other candidates, rather than tearing them down, will pay dividends at the polls. In San Francisco, where instant runoff voting is used to elect local officeholders, some races have seen candidates endorsing their opponents, sharing slate mailers, and cosponsoring 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 in governing. For those tired of polarized politics and mudslinging campaigns, IRV has much to offer.

- **Empowering the political center.** Instant runoff voting provides a solution to the problem of partisan primaries. With IRV, 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 politi-

cally moderate candidates would have a greater chance of advancing to the general election in November.

An even better idea would be to get rid of partisan congressional primary elections entirely and hold a single election in November with instant runoff voting. This structure would mimic a blanket primary (sometimes known as an open primary), which was very popular with voters in several states but was eliminated following an adverse U.S. Supreme Court ruling. The blanket primary, which allowed voters to choose from all candidates regardless of party affiliation, gives voters more choices. Getting rid of the low-turnout primary elections would save the tens of millions of tax dollars currently spent to administer them. Since the Supreme Court has ruled that a political party's primary is a private affair and that a state cannot force parties to open their primaries to all voters, why should taxpayers foot the bill? Let the parties pay for a primary or a caucus themselves, and nominate as many or as few candidates as they wish for each race in November. And then instant runoff voting can be used to elect the majority winners in a single election.

Eliminating primaries will also spare candidates the burden of raising money for a second election. Having to raise money for two elections instead of one gives the advantage to incumbents and other well-connected candidates who can raise more money, undermining the good that comes from campaign finance reform. Eliminating party primaries and electing congressional representatives using instant runoff voting would transform our politics. Together, these reforms would significantly boost voter choice, reduce

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mudslinging, improve political debate, inaugurate a new era of bipartisan cooperation, and save the taxpayers money.

IRV Is Gaining Momentum

Instant runoff voting favors neither the left nor the right; it is a nonpartisan reform measure that seeks simply to make our electoral process more democratic and efficient. It has

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been used for decades to elect the president of Ireland and Australia's House of Representatives. It is also used to elect the mayor of London and the presidents of Malta and Sri Lanka. India uses IRV to indirectly elect its president. And it has been used to good effect in divided societies: ranked ballots have been instrumental in facilitating cross-ethnic or cross-tribal coalitions in troubled nations like Bosnia, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea.

Instant runoff voting is also used by many organizations, including the NCAA, the International Olympic Committee, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and the Federal Reserve board (to elect regional directors). In Utah, the Republican Party has been using IRV to nominate candidates for congressional seats and for governor to ensure that its choices have support from a majority of GOP voters. The Conservative Party in Canada uses IRV in electing its leadership, as do numerous American colleges and universities in electing student or faculty governments, including Harvard, Stanford, MIT, Princeton, UCLA, UC-Berkeley, Georgetown, Duke, Dartmouth, Cornell, and Caltech. The American Political Science Association also uses IRV to elect its president—and its members know a thing or two about elections.

The movement toward use of instant runoff voting in government elections is gaining momentum

throughout the United States because it answers a real need. In the November 2006 elections, IRV was passed by voters in four different locations: Oakland, California, with 67 percent of the vote, Minneapolis with 65 percent, Davis, California, with 55 percent and Pierce County, Washington, with 53 percent. What is interesting about the four victories is that they occurred in quite different locations. Oakland is a very diverse, working-class city; Minneapolis is a Midwestern values city; Pierce County is mostly a rural county with large numbers of independent voters that replaced a partisan primary with a single November election using IRV; and Davis is a smaller university town. Yet in every place instant runoff voting provided a unique solution to problems with representative government and democracy.

Like San Francisco, Burlington, Vermont, has adopted IRV for its mayoral elections, and this has spurred the introduction of several bills in the Vermont state legislature for its use in state elections. The city council of Takoma Park, Maryland, approved the use of IRV in local elections following a city referendum in which 84 percent of voters said yes to the idea; it will be used for the first time in November 2007 to elect the mayor and city council members. Cambridge, Massachusetts, has been using a ranked ballot method very similar to IRV to elect its city council and school board since 1941. The voters in Ferndale, Michigan, Vancouver, Washington, Santa Clara County, California, and in the California cities of San Leandro and Berkeley have overwhelmingly approved the use of IRV for local offices. These measures will be implemented as soon as issues with respect to voting equipment and election administration have been resolved.

IRV has broad, bipartisan support and has been endorsed by Sen. John McCain as well as by Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean; Alaska's Republican Party and California's Democratic Party have both endorsed it. It also has support from good government and advocacy groups like Common Cause, the League of Women Voters, California PIRG, the Greenlining In-

stitute, the Asian Law Caucus, the National Latino Congress, and Southwest Voter.

The state of North Carolina has passed groundbreaking legislation that allows instant runoff voting to be used for elections to fill vacancies for judicial offices to ensure that winners have majority support without requiring a separate runoff election. The North Carolina law also allows IRV to be used in ten cities and ten counties for local elections. Driving the interest in IRV in North Carolina (and other states) are elections like the runoff in 2004 for the Democratic nominee for the state's superintendent of public instruction. The election cost \$3.5 million and produced a voter turnout of only 3 percent. Recently Louisiana, Arkansas, and South Carolina, which already use traditional two-round runoff elections for various

elections, decided to begin using IRV for their military and civilian overseas voters in state and federal primary elections since there is not enough time to mail a second ballot to their overseas voters when a runoff election is required. Colorado recently became the first state to use IRV to fill a vacancy in a state legislature. To date, bills for IRV have been introduced in the legislatures of 22 states.

Our current plurality-wins-all voting system is a horse and buggy relic of the 18th century. It does not meet the most basic requirements for fair and efficient elections in the 21st century. Instant runoff voting is an idea whose time has come. It will produce a more robust political debate, and it will give voters more choices and a greater voice in the American political process.❖