

Instant Runoff Voting in North Carolina

A Simple and Secure Solution for Better Runoff Elections

Background: In 2006, the North Carolina legislature approved an instant runoff voting (IRV) pilot project to take place in up to ten cities in 2007 and ten counties in 2008. State election officials are now working with local governments to implement these pilot projects.

Recommended by Robert's Rules of Order for postal elections, IRV has been adopted for county executive and mayoral elections in American cities with a total population of nearly three million people and has a long history of successful use for national elections in Australia and Ireland. A majority of our top rated universities use IRV for student elections. In North Carolina, IRV will replace traditional runoff elections with a single round of voting. Voters rank candidates in order of preference. If the candidate with the most first choices crosses the threshold for election (40% for partisan races and 50% for nonpartisan races), he or she is elected. If not, all candidates except the top two are eliminated. Ballots cast for eliminated candidates are added to the totals of whichever of the remaining candidates is ranked higher on each ballot. The candidate with a majority of votes wins. The following pages provide answers to some frequently asked questions about IRV as well as sources for further information.

Does IRV comply with the principle of “one person, one vote”?

Yes. In an IRV election, every voter casts one ballot and that ballot never counts for more than one candidate in any round of counting. The only difference between IRV and traditional “vote for one” elections is that voters are more likely to elect a candidate because they can rank the candidates and have their ballot count toward their highest-ranked candidate remaining in an election. The courts have ruled that IRV complies with the one person, one vote standard because every voter possesses equal voting strength.¹ The U.S. Department of Justice has approved IRV under the preclearance provision of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act.²

Does IRV have support outside of the advocacy community?

Yes. IRV has earned editorial endorsements from major newspapers across the country. A partial list includes the *USA Today*³, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*⁴, *Oakland Tribune*⁵, *Seattle Times*⁶, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*⁷, *Sacramento Bee*⁸, *Trenton Times*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *San Jose Mercury News*, *Ford Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel* and *Detroit Free Press*. The League of Women Voters has also been a strong supporter of IRV almost everywhere it has been introduced. State Leagues that have endorsed IRV include Arizona⁹, California, Vermont¹⁰, Minnesota¹¹ and

¹ Stephenson v. Ann Arbor Board of City Canvassers, 1975.

² Louisiana R.S. 18:1306(A)(4) & (E)(2), precleared 10/27/1989.

³ *A Better Way to Vote*, 4/19/2007.

⁴ *Minnesota Needs New Voting System*, 11/17/2006.

⁵ *Yes to Measure ‘O’, Instant Runoff Voting*, 10/25/2006.

⁶ *A Welcome Experiment with Runoff Votes*, 11/24/2006.

⁷ *Democracy: New Way to Vote*, 11/14/2006.

⁸ *A Worthy Experiment*, 10/14/2006.

⁹ LWV of Arizona website, <http://www.lwvaz.org/azvoterservice/>.

¹⁰ LWV of Vermont website, <http://www.lwvofvt.org/Advocacy.html>.

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Washington¹². A number of local Leagues have also endorsed IRV. IRV has also generated strong support among national Democratic leaders and state party organizations. Leaders supporting IRV include DNC Chairman Howard Dean¹³, Senator Barack Obama¹⁴ and Senator John McCain.¹⁵ State parties endorsing IRV include Maine¹⁶, Colorado¹⁷ and California.¹⁸ In Vermont, Rep. Peter Welch, Sen. Bernie Sanders, Secretary of State Deborah Markowitz and a majority of Democrats in the state legislature support using IRV in the 2008 congressional elections.

Will voters be able to vote effectively using a new voting system?

Yes. Analysis of the first IRV elections in San Francisco, Burlington (VT) and Takoma Park (MD) demonstrate that voters were able to make a successful switch to IRV. More than 99% of voters in San Francisco¹⁹, Burlington²⁰ and Takoma Park²¹ cast valid ballots in the first IRV elections in these cities. Among San Francisco voters expressing a preference between IRV and the old two round runoff system, nearly 83% preferred IRV.²² Voters in every single demographic in the city (by race, party, geography, gender, age and so on) supported IRV over the current system. Exit poll surveys in Burlington and Takoma Park also found overwhelming support for the system and ease of use.

Is IRV a fair system for racial minorities?

Yes. IRV is a voting system that treats all voters equally and therefore neither advantages nor disadvantages particular racial or ethnic groups. However, because IRV elects candidates in a single round election instead of a low turnout runoff, it often has a mitigating effect on the existing turnout discrepancies between many racial and ethnic minority groups and the majority population. During campaigns for IRV in 2006, IRV earned endorsements from the Minneapolis Urban League, the California NAACP Youth and College Division and Congressional Black Caucus members Jesse Jackson, Jr., Barbara Lee and Keith Ellison.

¹¹ LWV of Minnesota website, <http://www.lwvmn.org/PosGovernment.asp#VotingSystems>.

¹² LWV of Washington website, Fall 2006 VOTER, http://www.lwwa.org/voter_newsletter/voter_index.htm.

¹³ *What We Do Now*, Dennis Loy Johnson and Valerie Merians, Eds., Melville, 2004.

¹⁴ As an Illinois State Senator, sponsored 2002 IRV legislation SB 1789.

¹⁵ Senator McCain endorses IRV in Alaska, <http://www.fairvote.org/irv/mccaintranscript.htm>.

¹⁶ 2006 party platform, <http://www.mainedems.org/about/platform-rules.aspx>.

¹⁷ 2006 party platform, <http://coloradodems.org/content/view/393/1/>.

¹⁸ 2006 platform, http://www.cadem.org/site/c.jrLZK2PyHmF/b.1193757/k.A452/Political_Reform.htm.

¹⁹ Board of Supervisors elections, 11/2/2004, http://www.sfgov.org/site/election_index.asp?id=47495.

Note that San Francisco initially reported a higher invalid ballot rate due to combining undervotes (ballots that did not express preferences in a particular race but were still valid for other races) with overvotes (ballots invalidated for a particular race due to a voter giving more than one first choice ranking).

²⁰ Mayoral election, 3/7/2006, <http://www.burlingtonvotes.org>.

²¹ Ward 5 special election, 1/30/2007, <http://www.takomaparkmd.gov/clerk/election/07-ward5/index.html>.

²² Study commissioned by the City and County of San Francisco from the Public Research Institute at San Francisco State University, <http://pri.sfsu.edu/reports.html>.

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The following chart looks at voter participation in the final decisive vote in San Francisco’s tradition runoff in 2001 and its first citywide IRV elections in 2005, comparing the 2005 elections of the auditor (with three candidates and no majority winners) to the 2001 election for that position. It shows that participation in the decisive runoff round of voting increased by 268% with IRV, and even more for voters in more heavily African American neighborhoods (321%). Voters in those heavily African American neighborhoods were also slightly less likely NOT to make a second choice (4.5%) with IRV than voters in other neighborhoods (5.1%).

Table 1. Contrasting Turnout Before & After IRV in San Francisco, contrasting Black v. Non-Black Neighborhoods²³

Number of precincts	% pop. Black	Neighborhood	Turnout in 2001 Runoff	Turnout in 2005 (Ranked two or more choices)	Ratio of 2005/2001 participation in runoff round	% voters not making a 2 nd choice in 2005
26	47%	Bayview/Hunter’s Point	10.1%	35.5%	352%	6.3%
15	25%	Ingleside	14.1%	45.7%	325%	3.6%
38	23%	Western Addition	13.7%	42.4%	309%	3.5%
16	17%	Visitation Valley	9.5%	38.8%	407%	6.7%
11	17%	Potrero Hill	16.2%	44.0%	272%	3.5%
106	28%	Top 5 Black Neighborhoods	12.8%	41.0%	321%	4.5%
472	4%	Other 30 Neighborhoods	17.2%	44.8%	261%	5.1%

Does IRV improve the election process for voters?

Yes. One of the most important features of IRV is that it allows voters to express their preferences sincerely instead of strategically. Because voters are able to rank multiple candidates, there is no danger of a voter wasting her vote by ranking a long-shot candidate first. Because the top candidates advance to an instant runoff if no candidate reaches the winning threshold, the risk of helping spoil an election (a vote for a favorite candidate helping elect a least favorite candidate) is nearly eliminated. Additionally, because a lower ranking on a ballot can never count against a higher ranking, there is no need for voters to make strategic calculations and try to “game” the system by not ranking candidates beyond their first choice. This is something that some other proposed voting methods are not able to offer.²⁴

²³ Prepared by Democracy North Carolina, June 2006, from data from “Ranked Choice Voting and Voter Turnout in San Francisco’s 2005 Election,” by Dr. Christopher Jerdonek (Ph.D., Mathematics, University of California, Davis).

²⁴ For a comparison between IRV and alternative voting systems, visit <http://fairvote.org/?page=1920>.

In the North Carolina version of IRV, the top two candidates face off after the first round of counting. The system is guaranteed to elect the runoff candidate who has more support among all voters.

Can IRV be implemented at a reasonable cost?

Yes. The two main expenses associated with the transition to IRV are voting equipment upgrades and voter education. Both of these are one-time costs that will be quickly balanced out by the savings coming from eliminating a runoff election in each election cycle. In San Francisco, for example, the city and county saved approximately \$3 million by not holding a separate runoff election in 2005, easily covering the money spent in 2004 to implement the system.²⁵ In North Carolina, counties spent \$3.5 million for the Superintendent of Public Instruction runoff in 2004, for an election with statewide turnout of only 3%.²⁶

An effective voter education program can also be done for relatively little money by learning from what types of education worked well in other jurisdictions and what types did not – with the biggest factor being a good ballot design and clear voter instructions. In a report to the Vermont General Assembly, the Vermont Secretary of State estimated that, based on how well IRV was implemented in Vermont’s largest city of Burlington in 2006, voter education for statewide IRV in Vermont would cost less than \$0.25 per registered voter.²⁷

Is the IRV process secure and verifiable?

Yes. IRV is a transparent and secure process that can be counted by hand, and in the short-term first-choices can be counted on either North Carolina’s optical scan ballots or DRE’s. For North Carolina cities participating in the 2007 pilot project, state officials are developing efficient ballot-counting procedures that can be easily audited and recounted by hand if necessary. For 2008 and beyond, state officials are working with their equipment vendor to develop IRV-ready voting machines. These machines capture an electronic ballot image for each paper ballot. Audits are a straightforward process, with the electronic images checked directly against the original paper ballots for each IRV contest.

If necessary, IRV also can be recounted with little more difficulty than traditional vote-for-one elections. The number of additional ballots to count due to IRV will typically be less than 50% of the overall total. It is also very simple to conduct exit polls with IRV elections: participants simply need to tell their rankings to the pollster. Indeed there already have been valuable exit poll analyses done in non-IRV races where pollsters have asked participants to rank choices in order to simulate results using other voting methods.

²⁵ *Ranked Voting: Less Money, More Turnout*, San Francisco Examiner, 2/5/2006.

²⁶ *Runoffs Without the Costs*, Carolina Journal Online, 8/18/2006.

²⁷ *Instant Runoff Voting (IRV): Administrative Implementation Options and Costs*, 3/7/2007.