



For Fair Representation, Choice Voting

Instant runoff voting is one extremely important way to make voting and elections more fair and representative. But there are a number of reforms and initiatives that FairVote supports in order to restore students' understanding and exercise of democracy.

Choice Voting

What is it?

While instant runoff voting (IRV) provides spoiler-free majority rule for executive offices (ie: Student Body President), choice voting provides fair representation for legislative bodies (ie: Student Senate). Choice voting is a proportional voting method, meaning a method that ensures that governing bodies accurately reflect the political spectrum of voters. As it is, 51% of voters get ALL of the representation, leaving nearly half of the voters without a voice in deliberative bodies. In contrast, choice voting provides cohesive groups of voters a fair share of seats. Like with instant runoff voting, choice voting allows students to rank their candidates.

Why use it?

Firstly, it eliminates the problem of like-minded candidates running and splitting the vote ("spoiling"). Most importantly, however, it ensures that representation of the student body is balanced and fair. It combines the principle of majority rule with the idea that everyone deserves representation – 51% of the voters get a majority of seats, but a 15% voting bloc gets 15% of the seats. Choice voting is one way of ensuring that women, racial minorities and marginalized political groups are fairly represented.

Where is it used?

A growing number of campuses nationwide use choice voting to elect their student representatives, including UC Davis, Harvard, UC Berkeley and MIT. Cambridge, MA uses choice voting to elect its city council. Voters in Davis, CA may also switch to choice voting as a result of its high popularity on the UC Davis campus.

How does it work?

Just like instant runoff voting, there is a threshold to be reached by candidates. Whereas 50%+1 vote leads to a winner in IRV, it takes fewer votes to elect someone under choice voting, since there is more than one seat up for election. To figure out how many votes it takes to be elected, this formula is used:

$$1 \text{ vote} + \frac{\text{votes}}{(\text{seats} + 1)}$$

During counting, when someone meets the threshold they are elected and only need exactly the number of votes needed to cross threshold. If a candidate receives more votes than they need to be elected, these surplus vote (ie: votes greater than the threshold) are instead counted for voters' next favored candidate. This is done to guarantee that results are proportional to voter choices and that popular candidates do not take more votes than necessary. After all surplus votes are distributed, the weakest candidates are dropped and their votes are counted for their supporters' next favored candidates. Counting continues until all seats are filled.

Mathematically, choice voting may sound more complicated than IRV or your current system of electing student government offices, but it can easily be accomplished with voting software.

What do I do now?

If you are pursuing IRV on your campus or already have it, choice voting is a great complementary reform to consider. FairVote would like to help you in your transition to better choices and fairer representation on your campus. Contact us and visit our website to get more detailed information on choice voting!