

## Instant Runoff Voting: What Mexico (and Others) Could Learn

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**I**N MEXICO'S JULY 2000 presidential race, change was in the air. The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) had lost its monopoly control of Congress and was stumbling in the polls, giving the opposition a chance to gain the presidency for the first time in seven decades. But just like the United States and Canada, Mexico relies on plurality voting in its elections. In a system designed for a choice between two candidates, the winner need not get 50% if opponents divide the majority vote between them. With Mexico's well-established three-party system, the PRI had a real chance to benefit from a divided opposition and stay in office for another six-year term.

As is now typical in major elections in Canada and Mexico and increasingly frequent in the United States, Mexican voters spread their votes so that the three leading candidates each won at least 17% of the vote and the first-place winner fell well short of a majority. Vicente Fox of the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) won with 43% of the vote, ahead of the 36% for the PRI's Francisco Labastida Ochoa and the 17% for Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

Fox likely was the candidate who was most representative of the electorate's will, but without a majority requirement, outcomes in multi-candidate elections held under plurality rules all too easily can degenerate into a game of chance. In Canada, where a majority of constituencies have at least three relatively strong

parties, some Members of Parliament almost certainly serve over strong objections of a majority of their constituents. In the United States, both the 1992 and 2000 presidential elections arguably could have changed winners if states had changed their rules to ensure that their Electoral College votes were awarded to a candidate with majority support in that support. In 1992, 49 states were won with less than a majority of the vote, with Ross Perot's 19% of votes coming from more traditional Republican voters. In 2000, Ralph Nader's 3% of the national vote and 2% in Florida vote came largely from Al Gore's base of support.

Multi-party systems in Mexico and Canada show no signs of going away, and indeed, with proportional representation partly used to elect Mexico's Chamber of Deputies, other parties may offer presidential candidates in the future who are able to gain a significant vote share. Unless it changes its rules, Mexico may not have a president elected by a majority of the vote for years to come—as indeed Great Britain hasn't had a government elected with majority support since the 1950s, Canada hasn't had a government elected with majority support for two decades and the United States hasn't had a president elected with a majority of the popular vote since 1988.

Yet Mexico, Great Britain, Canada and the United States have been hold-outs in international norms for elections. Most well-established democracies now use forms of proportional representation for legislative elections and runoff elections for presidential elections. These electoral systems accommodate a broader range of choices for voters, providing them with more nuanced means to define their representation and better assuring governance

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grounded in majority support, or at least majority acceptance.

To live up to international standards of accommodating voter choice and ensuring majority rule, these countries must modify rules in reaction to the multi-party reality that is firmly established in Canada and Mexico and to the number of voters willing to support non-major party presidential candidates in the United States. For presidential elections, one approach would be to adopt the two-round runoff, as used in many Latin American presidential elections. But runoffs present their own problems. In large countries, holding elections is no easy task, and having to go through the exercise twice is an expensive, unwieldy proposition. Voter turnout can be highly uneven in runoff elections, depending on what relatively popular candidates might be eliminated in the first round. Runoffs also heighten pressure on candidates' campaign financing, doubling the demands they may face in order to be competitive.

Fortunately, the rapidly growing movement for instant runoff voting in the United States suggests a viable alternative. Instant runoff voting (also called "preferential voting" and "the alternative vote") has a long history in Australia and Ireland, recently has been adopted in Fiji and Papua New Guinea and is under serious consideration in countries like the United Kingdom and the Dominican Republic. In the United States, since starting to receive serious scrutiny in the late 1990s, instant runoff voting has drawn the support of presidential candidates such as Senator John McCain and Governor Howard Dean, and it has been adopted for elections for mayor and other high offices in San Francisco, enacted by Utah Republicans to nominate federal candidates and party leaders, and considered by more than 20 state legislatures.

Instant runoff voting provides a majority winner without extra campaign costs for candidates and extra taxpayer demands. It also promotes good government values of boosting voter turnout in the decisive election and reducing personal attacks in campaigns. With modern technology making it easy to tabulate and several states like California calling for machines to be ready to implement ranked-choice systems, instant runoff voting promises to

spread quickly as an improvement over both plurality elections and traditional two-round runoffs. We can learn more about the potential case for instant runoff voting in all three North American democracies by examining the basis for the current growth of interest in the United States.

### DEFECTS IN PLURALITY VOTING

Plurality voting has a long history in Mexico, Canada and the United States. When these nations started holding elections—particularly in the case of the United States and Canada—there was little experience around the world with different voting methods. In the United States of the eighteenth century, the only recognized alternative to plurality voting's failure to ensure majority rule was holding repeated elections, in hopes that a natural culling of candidates or modification of voter sentiments would lead to a majority winner.

Several states indeed did generate majority winners in their elections this way, but it was unwieldy, and eventually nearly all states settled on one of the two available pragmatic "solutions"—one-round elections with plurality rules, often combined with laws making it difficult for candidates to gain access to the ballot, and two-round elections with a runoff between the first round's two top vote-getters.

That both of these systems are frequently used despite their obvious limitations suggests that no electoral system is perfect. In fact, economist Kenneth Arrow won a Nobel Prize for proving that there can never be a perfect voting system—they all inevitably have a weakness, and not all jurisdictions will have the same goals for elections. Instant runoff voting is gaining support in the United States because it nicely balances competing goals for electoral systems and fixes important defects in our traditional voting systems: plurality elections and two-round runoff elections.

Plurality voting suffers from three principal defects:

- It does not provide for majority rule, allowing candidates to win with a narrow band of support.

- It can create opportunities for “spoiler” candidacies.
- It creates incentives for negative campaigning.

*Violates majority rule*

By definition, a candidate in a plurality election can be elected with less than a majority of the vote. As a result, it is quite possible that most voters dislike the winner who “represents” them. At the very least, minority-vote winners have a weaker mandate to govern.

In the 1992 presidential elections in the United States, for example, the winner of all the electoral votes in 49 out of 50 states was opposed by a majority of that state’s voters. George Bush failed to win a majority of the popular vote in any state, while Bill Clinton only won a majority in Arkansas and the District of Columbia. In 1993, Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole fingered Clinton’s 43% of the popular vote as a rationale for Republicans’ frequent filibusters with 43% of Senate seats. In the states, fully half of the United States’ 50 current governors have been elected by a plurality vote in one of their primaries or general elections, including several governors who won with less than 40%.

Winning office with less than majority support is not necessarily wrong for all elections—in legislative bodies, proportional representation (which American reformers now call “full representation”) can provide fair representation to both the majority and the minority—but it is unjust for one-winner elections in which the intent of the majority should be respected.

*Permits “spoiler” candidacies*

Plurality elections also suffer from the “spoiler” phenomenon in races with more than two candidates. Someone with no chance of getting elected can gain enough votes to swing the race between the two leading candidates—sometimes by conscious design.

By gaining the power to determine the winner, unscrupulous candidates can gain leverage over major candidates or one major party can covertly try to boost the profile of a minor candidate that cuts into another major party’s base. At the same time, many minor candidates

genuinely seek to raise important issues. Under plurality rules, their supporters must make a tough decision: to vote for their favorite candidate, knowing that the candidate won’t win and might even throw the race to the supporters’ least preferred candidate, or to settle on the less preferred candidate who has a chance to win. In a February 2004 telephone survey of 1,100 registered voters in Illinois conducted by the Center for Voting and Democracy barely half of respondents said they would vote for their favorite candidate in the multi-candidate U.S. Senate primary if that candidate had little chance to win. In other words, voters must accurately judge not only which candidate they prefer, but also whether that candidate has a chance of winning. Making this judgment can be difficult, both because of misplaced optimism about the chances of a particular candidate (as revealed in a 2003 *Electoral Studies* article by Andre Blais and Mathieu Turgeon, only half of voters in the 1988 Canadian elections were able to correctly identify the party that would finish in the “spoiler” position of third in their constituency) and because of loyal voters not wanting to abandon a preferred candidate without being able to indicate support for that candidate.

This need for calculation illustrates a profoundly undemocratic feature of an outwardly democratic and simple system. Yes, it is easy for everyone to cast one vote, and have the candidate with the most votes win. But it is hardly simple or democratic for some worthy candidates to have a disincentive to participate and for their supporters to have a disincentive to vote for them, and it is hardly fair for a candidate to be elected for an executive office despite strong opposition from a majority of voters. With the rise in support for third party and independent candidates today and with bigger fields in many non-partisan elections, plurality voting’s anti-participation bias and allowance for non-majority winners are an increasing problem.

*Promotes negative attacks*

Plurality elections create incentives for negative attacks that, with ever-increasing sophistication about how to win office in today’s

multi-media world, drive far more voters away from politics than bring them to it. Knowing that most voters will ignore minor candidates because they can't win, the leading candidates in plurality elections can focus their attention on each other in what usually amounts to a zero-sum game. Turning a voter away from an opponent is just as effective—and often considerably easier and cheaper—as persuading an undecided voter to support you or a new voter to participate. Given these incentives, candidates generally will only eschew negative campaigning if they think they can win without it.

With instant runoff voting, on the other hand, a winning candidate often will need to be the second-choice of supporters of other candidates. Candidates have to balance the demands of gaining more first choices than opponents with not wanting to alienate their supporters with over-the-top attacks. The campaign for the Democratic Party's 2004 presidential nomination provided a graphic example of the perils of overly negative attacks in a large field where voters' second choices can matter. In Iowa's caucuses, the two frontrunners for most of the previous year—Richard Gephardt and Howard Dean—attacked each other in the campaign's final weeks. These attacks hurt their intended targets, but the chief beneficiaries were John Kerry and John Edwards. Kerry and Edwards not only picked up the support of most caucus participants who abandoned Dean or Gephardt, but also were well-positioned to be the second-choice of supporters of these candidates at the caucuses, where second choices are counted if one's first choice runs too weakly to elect delegates. Candidates in IRV elections would have clear incentives to take the edge off of negative attacks when there were more than two strong candidates, particularly when there was uncertainty about which major candidate would be eliminated first.

#### DEFECTS IN TWO-ROUND RUNOFFS

Two-round runoff elections were developed in response to non-majority victories in plurality voting. In addition, they allow voters to

scrutinize the final two candidates more thoroughly during the period between the two rounds of election. Runoffs first came into wide use in the United States at the end of the 19th century, with the advent of party primaries, because primary elections in races without an incumbent frequently had more than just two candidates vying for a particular office. Seventeen states have used runoffs in federal primaries at some time. A dozen states, mostly in the south, use runoffs today for primaries. Runoffs also are frequently used in non-partisan elections because, like primaries, they tend to draw more than two candidates. A 1986 survey of American cities with populations above 25,000 revealed that most of the 946 cities contacted had a runoff provision. Around the world, most directly elected presidents are elected with runoff elections.

Although successful in guaranteeing that winners receive a majority of the second round vote, runoff elections create new problems and fail to correct all of plurality voting's defects. Problems with runoff elections include:

- Candidates must have money for a second campaign, often with little time to raise funds.
- Taxpayers must pay for administration of two elections.
- Voter turnout can be significantly lower in one election round because voters must pay attention to two campaigns and go to the polls twice.
- Runoffs do not correct plurality voting's defects; they still can thwart majority rule, create opportunities for "spoiler" candidates and promote negative campaigning.

#### *Exacerbates problems with money in politics*

Campaign costs at all levels of election continue to mount. Runoffs create a particular burden for candidates, who usually have to raise money for a runoff election on a very short timeline. Candidates in the first round often spend nearly all their campaign funds in seeking to avoid a runoff or to fight their way into one. They then can have as little as two weeks to mount a second campaign.



Runoff elections thus increase opportunities for donors and potential donors to influence candidates. A study by the San Francisco Ethics Commission in 2003 found that in recent city runoffs, independent expenditures on behalf of one candidate or targeted at another candidate had increased by four-fold in the runoff round. At the same time, many campaign contributors grow weary of the increased demands created by runoffs.

*Adds costs to taxpayers and burdens for election officials*

Elections are not cheap. It costs significant money to set up polling places, train and pay poll workers, print ballots and voter guides and count ballots. Election administration in the United States typically costs \$1–\$2 per resident for a given election and can cost much more in small and special elections.

*Discrepancies in voter turnout*

Although not universally the case, voter turnout often varies widely between the two rounds of voting in runoffs, particularly when either the first or second round coincides with elections that draw more interest. In the 1992 U.S. Senate race in Georgia, for example, incumbent Wyche Fowler won 1,108,416 votes in the November general election, but fell just short of a majority. In the December runoff (Georgia at that time was one of the few states with a majority requirement in general elections) without the draw of the presidential race, Paul Coverdell beat Fowler with 635,114 votes—a majority of the December runoff vote, but nearly half a million votes *fewer* than Fowler's vote total a month before.

Declines in turnout in federal primaries with runoffs are the norm. A June 2003 study by the Center for Voting and Democracy (<http://fair-vote.org/turnout/federaldecline.htm>) found that voter turnout declined in 82 of the 84 federal primary runoffs that took place from 1994 to 2002—often dramatically, with a 35% median decline in turnout.

In California, on the other hand, many jurisdictions have local election runoffs in which the first-round takes place in March, when turnout is usually relatively low, and the runoff is in

November. If the top finisher falls short of 50% plus one, the top two candidates have eight more months of campaigning and face a runoff in the November election with much higher turnout. But a candidate with 50.1% in the March round will be elected, although the candidate must wait nearly a year to take office.

In either scenario—sharply lower turnout in the first round or lower turnout in the runoff—a decisive election can take place when far fewer voters participate than at a time when the decisive election might have occurred. The whole concept of runoffs producing majority rule is brought into question by such contradictions.

Finally, the more times that citizens are asked to vote, the less likely they are to vote in any given election. Many political scientists attribute low voter turnout in the United States to our unusually high number of elections. Runoffs increase that burden.

*Fails to correct plurality voting's defects*

At the same time, runoff elections fail to fully correct any of plurality voting's major defects. Runoffs still can thwart majority rule, create opportunities for "spoiler" candidacies and promote negative campaigning.

In addition to voter turnout discrepancies, majority rule can be violated by fractures in the vote in the first round. If there are several candidates and no clear frontrunner—as is often the case when no incumbent is running—the combined vote total of the two candidates who advance to the runoff can be less than a majority of the first-round vote. In Salt Lake City's mayoral race in 1999, for example, the two candidates making the runoff gained only 42% of the first-round vote—the second-place finisher made the runoff with 19.5%, while the third and fourth place finishers were eliminated with 19.4% and 18%, respectively.

Runoff elections also still can suffer from "spoilers." There are no spoilers in a head-to-head runoff election, but in the first round, voters still must decide whether to support their favorite candidate or a candidate with a better chance of getting into the runoff. In 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the French presidential

election runoff with 17%, edging out Prime Minister Lionel Jospin who lost substantial numbers of votes to several minor candidates. The resulting lopsided runoff between Le Pen and incumbent president Jacques Chirac was hardly reflective of the choice French voters deserved.

Finally, just as with plurality elections, runoff elections promote negative campaigning, particularly in the runoff itself. In a head-to-head runoff, campaigning can become extremely negative because it is a zero-sum game—"I win when you lose." In a statewide runoff in Louisiana in November 1999 for insurance commissioner, the incumbent overcame a recent indictment with a slashing attack against his opponent's integrity; only 27% of registered voters ultimately participated in the runoff. Having more than two candidates can moderate negative campaigning in the first round, at least, but it still is an "all-or-nothing" vote. Candidates know that they won't benefit from reaching out to voters who are sure to support other candidates.

#### HOW INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING WORKS

Instant runoff voting corrects the defects found in plurality and runoff elections. Although new to many North Americans, it is recommended by Robert's Rules of Order and is a proven system that has been used for more than a century in major elections around the world.

Instant runoff voting works much like a traditional runoff, but with significant improvements. In a traditional runoff, each voter casts one vote in the first round. If a candidate gains a majority, that candidate wins. If not, the top two candidates advance to the second round. In that second round, those who voted for one of the advancing candidates in the first round likely will continue to support that candidate, but the remaining voters must choose between the two advancing candidates.

Instant runoff voting simulates a traditional runoff, with the added refinement of eliminating only one candidate at a time rather than all but the top two candidates. (As detailed in

Robert's Rules of Order, this gradual elimination avoids the problem of the top two candidates having less than a majority of the first-round vote. To be consistent with traditional runoffs, however, one can simplify the instant runoff count to a second round of counting between the top two candidates, as done in London's mayoral race.) Instant runoff voting can occur in a single election because its inventor had a simple realization: that voters can indicate which candidate they would support in a runoff without having to return to the polls.

Rather than vote for just one person, then, voters in instant runoff voting can rank candidates in order of choice: a first choice for their favorite candidate, a second choice for their next favorite and so on. Ranking candidates indicates which candidates voters would support if their top choice were defeated. Doing so is literally as easy as "1, 2, 3," and voters have shown a quick capacity to use instant runoff voting wherever it has been adopted.

Ballots are counted like a series of runoffs. If a candidate wins a majority of first choices, that candidate wins. If there is no initial majority winner, the last-place finisher is eliminated, and a second round of counting takes place. In each round, ballots count as one vote for the top-ranked candidate who has not been eliminated. In other words, your vote counts for your first choice candidate as long as that candidate remains in the running. If your first choice candidate is eliminated, then your vote counts for your next-choice candidate, and so on. The election is over when one candidate wins by gaining a majority of votes.

Although full rankings are required in Australia, in most nations ranking more than one candidate is optional. Voters set in their ways or unfamiliar with more than one candidate are free to vote for a single candidate just as they do in plurality voting. In fact, in most elections a majority of voters' first choice will be one of the final two candidates, meaning that their ballot will count for their top choice throughout the ballot-count.

Even so, a voter has every incentive to rank more than one candidate because ranking additional candidates never harms a voter's top-ranked candidate. If there is any chance that a voter's top choice candidate will be eliminated

in the course of the count and if that voter has any preference among the remaining candidates, that voter should rank his or her next favorite candidate—just as the voter might still return to the polls for the second round of a runoff election after the preferred choice lost in the first round. Ranking other candidates increases the electoral chances of voters' next-choice candidates in case their first choice loses. Voters in countries ranging from Bosnia/Herzegovina to Papua New Guinea, Australia and Ireland have shown the ability to handle this ranking of choices, with invalid ballot rates often under 1%. Papua New Guinea had its first special election in December 2003 in a rural constituency after re-instituting IRV for parliamentary elections. More than 98% of voters cast a valid ballot, and a candidate obtained a majority in the second round of counting after initially having a plurality.

Note that voters usually are allowed to rank all candidates in a race, but to simplify ballot design and ease the administration of the election, the number of permitted rankings can be limited to three with relatively minor impact on the performance of the system.

#### HOW INSTANT RUNOFFS FIX THE DEFECTS OF PLURALITY AND RUNOFF ELECTIONS

Instant runoff voting addresses each of the defects found in plurality voting and traditional runoffs. In contrast to two-round runoffs, instant runoff voting only requires one election to produce a majority winner. Doing so cuts the cost of campaigns nearly in half and saves taxpayers the cost of administering a second election. By scheduling the election when voter turnout is highest or when other state or local elections take place, turnout is maximized for the decisive election.

In contrast to plurality voting, instant runoff voting provides that winners have majority support and eliminates fears of "spoiling." Even if a majority of voters split votes between two or more candidates, the candidate with the most overall support will win in an instant runoff.

Eliminating fears of "spoiling" and maximizing the number of people who influence the

outcome of elections could significantly improve our electoral process.

- Voters would probably have more choices, but more importantly, they would be more likely to like at least one of their choices on Election Day.
- With the need for winners to appeal to other candidates' supporters, there would likely be more acknowledgment of other people's concerns, more coalition-building and more positive, issue-oriented campaigns.
- Opportunities for good governance would increase. Winners would take office after more inclusive, positive campaigns. They also would often have a clearer mandate due to receiving majority support and learning more about the issue priorities of supporters. Such a mandate could establish greater accountability.

The combination of better choices, less money in politics, clearer mandates and less negative campaigning could lead to higher voter turnout and increased overall participation in politics.

#### WHY ISN'T INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING MORE WIDELY USED?

Instant runoff voting in fact is widely used. For decades, millions of people in Australia and the Republic of Ireland have used instant runoff voting for their most important elections, and Malta has used a similar candidate-ranking system in multi-seat districts. Malta and Australia have had the highest voter turnout in the world in the 1990s.

More nations are moving to instant runoff voting. It has been adopted in Fiji and Papua New Guinea for parliamentary elections and for Bosnia/Herzegovina's presidential elections; in these cases, its incentives for candidates to build coalitions across ethnic and racial lines were seen as crucial. Instant runoff voting (with only two preferences permitted) also was used in London's first-ever election for mayor in May 2000, while New Zealand's capital city of Wellington has adopted the propor-

tional representation variant of instant runoff voting (choice voting, or the “single transferable vote”) and Scottish cities are expected to be elected by choice voting in their next elections as well. The Dominican Republic’s governing party in 2004 supported legislation to implement instant runoff voting for presidential elections.

In the United States, the general rise in interest in instant runoff voting has led to many private American organizations and universities deciding to adopt it; since 2000 students have adopted instant runoff voting for their elections at many universities, including the University of Illinois, University of Virginia, Duke, William and Mary, Stanford, the University of California–Davis and UC–San Diego, and most Ivy League schools have used instant runoff voting for years.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, four states—Florida, Indiana, Maryland and Minnesota—adopted versions of instant runoff voting for some party primaries. Seven other states used another candidate-ranking system known as “the Bucklin system” for important offices, including gubernatorial races. In Bucklin, voters ranked only two candidates. If the first-count did not produce a majority winner, *all* second-choice ballots were counted simultaneously. Bucklin was found to be defective as it sometimes resulted in a voter’s second-choice vote helping to defeat that voter’s first choice. As a result, most voters learned to refrain from indicating second choices, which thwarted the goal of discovering which candidate was favored by a majority of voters.

By the 1930’s all of these ranked-ballot systems had been eclipsed, generally by two-round runoffs that at that time were easier to administer. In the years since, some cities used the system, including Hopkins (Minnesota) for mayoral elections and New York City for electing Staten Island’s city councilor at the same time that the rest of the city council was elected by the choice voting form of proportional representation.

The most recent use of instant runoff voting in a United States city election was in Ann Arbor (Michigan) in its 1975 mayoral race. A third party, the Human Rights Party, had created lively, three-way elections that caused concerns

about splintering the vote. After adopting instant runoff voting in a 1974 initiative, it was used for the first time a few months later. The Democratic nominee, the city’s first-ever black mayor, won a cliffhanger on the strength of being the second choice of nearly all supporters of the Human Rights Party candidate; he trailed the Republican incumbent 49% to 40% after the first count, but ultimately won a majority.

Republicans, who had benefited from split liberal votes under plurality rules, sought to eliminate the system. A legal challenge failed as the U.S. Circuit Court upheld the constitutionality of instant runoff voting (*Stephenson v Ann Arbor Board of Canvassers*, November 1975, File Number 75-10166), but a repeal succeeded in a low turnout special election in 1976. Although tinged with racial undertones, the repeal effort focused on the difficulty of counting ballots by hand—and indeed there had been problems given the short time for election administrators to prepare. Importantly, however, the percentage of invalid ballots dropped sharply from the previous election.

Aside from novelty, election administration is the biggest reason why instant runoff voting hasn’t been more widely used in the United States. Most jurisdictions for years have used voting equipment that was incompatible with instant runoff voting. Only recently, in 1997, did Cambridge, Massachusetts become the first city to use modern ballot-scanning voting machines with the type of rank-order ballots used in instant runoff elections. Implementing instant runoff voting in the past would have required jurisdictions to switch to counting ballots by hand, which few were willing to do. In places doing hand-counts, the length of time necessary for hand-counts by inexperienced administrators raised concerns. In contrast, nations like Ireland and Australia that use instant runoff voting have historically counted ballots by hand; Ireland typically counts more than a million ballots in its presidential elections with IRV rules in less than nine hours.

The defects of plurality voting and traditional runoff elections also generally escape rigorous scrutiny. Relatively isolated from the rest of the world, most North Americans aren’t aware that alternative voting systems even exist; they rarely



are taught about them in school, and few follow the details of other nations' elections. Some might notice that winners of many athletic awards are elected by journalists who rank the contenders, but even these elections are misleading. They are weighted systems, where a first choice might mean five points, a second-choice four points and so on—systems that in public elections would lead to many voters only ranking one candidate due to not wanting expression of support for a lesser-preferred candidate to count against their top choice.

However, several developments are drawing attention to instant runoff voting in the United States. Spoilers are knocking out major candidates more frequently, with three consecutive presidential elections decided by plurality and a sharp increase in gubernatorial elections decided with low pluralities. The percentage of voters registered as independent has risen to more than 25% for the first time in at least 70 years, and votes won by independent and third party candidates are growing. More money is being spent in campaigns than ever before. The downsides of costly, time-consuming runoffs are becoming better understood. At least 20 states considered instant runoff voting legislation in 2003–2004, with bills in three states falling short after passing one house of the legislature. San Francisco voters approved instant runoff voting by a 10% margin in 2002 for city elections despite proponents being outspent and will use it annually starting in November 2004. Utah Republicans now nominate congressional candidates and party officers at conventions with instant runoff voting. Former high-profile presidential candidates John McCain (Republican Senator from Arizona), Howard Dean (former Vermont Governor), and John Anderson (former Republican Congressman) publicly support it. A survey of 1,100 likely voters in Illinois in February 2004 showed majority support for adopting IRV.

### ADDRESSING CONCERNS

In spite of instant runoff voting's obvious benefits, concerns are natural. Although recognizing that no voting system is perfect, most of these concerns are easily answered.

#### *Instant runoffs are not too confusing*

Instant runoff voting in fact has proven to be simple for voters. They can choose to vote as they do now or rank some number of candidates in order of choice: 1, 2, 3. Voters in Australia and the Republic of Ireland, where turnout is far higher than in the United States, have used the system for decades. Voters quickly adapted to it in diverse circumstances, such as Fiji and Papua New Guinea. If the system isn't too confusing for them, why should it be too confusing for North Americans? Indeed many North Americans have used rank-order systems with little trouble. In 1999, hundreds of high school students in Vermont were surveyed about how they liked the system after participating in mock instant runoff elections. More than nine out of ten students said that instant runoff voting was not too difficult. Only 1% said it might make them less likely to vote after they turn 18, while 46% said it would make them more inclined to vote. At the largest mock election, at St. Michael's College, 197 students voted in a mock instant runoff election without casting a single invalid ballot.

People make decisions through ranking choices all the time: in choosing what meal to order at a restaurant, what video to watch, what television program to watch and so on. In elections, most people choose a candidate to support after an internal process of weighing and ordering candidates. They mentally divide candidates into "worth considering" and "not worth considering," then further divide the candidates into serious contenders for their vote and long-shots, and finally settle on one, their top pick.

Finally, note that in plurality and runoff elections, some voters have to make complicated strategic decisions about whether to vote for their favorite candidate or for a candidate with a better chance of winning. In an instant runoff, voters are free from such calculations, which in turn makes voting decisions easier and more enjoyable.

#### *Instant runoffs do not give extra votes to supporters of losing candidates*

In instant runoff voting, most voters typically only have their vote count for their first

choice candidate because their candidate won't be eliminated before the field narrows to two. Given that other voters will have their second-choice or subsequent choices count, some allege that supporters of eliminated candidates get more votes than supporters of more popular candidates. But of course each voter has only one vote count in any given round. Just as all voters get to vote in both rounds of a traditional runoff, everyone's ballot counts as one vote in each round of an instant runoff voting.

Some critics then will rephrase the argument, pointing out that only supporters of losing candidates get a chance to switch their vote to another choice. But surely these voters would have preferred the election of their first choice than their less-preferred second-choice. Just like in a traditional runoff, only supporters of losing candidates must switch to different candidates, while supporters of more popular candidates can continue to support the candidate they most want to win: their top choice.

*Elimination of candidates in the count is not arbitrary*

Some express concern that the process of eliminating candidates is arbitrary and can change the results. But eliminating candidates in order of their strength of support is a sensible standard consistent with our political traditions.

Of course most of the candidates who are eliminated during the course of an instant runoff are too weak to have any chance of winning the election. However, it is possible that a third-place finisher in a three-candidate race could be the second choice of most supporters of the other two candidates and thus could have been able to defeat either of the other two candidates in a hypothetical one-on-one race.

But such a candidate of course also would lose in a plurality election or a two-round runoff, and indeed such results occur in our system—some believe that Ross Perot could have won the 1992 presidential race if matched against either George Bush or Bill Clinton. The only reason we would even know of such a possible result in an instant runoff election is because the system allows voters to provide more information about their preferences than is possible in plurality voting or runoffs.

Every election system must reflect the priorities of its designers. Plurality elections put a high premium on strong core support. An alternative system might emphasize the importance of having the broadest possible support even if the support were so shallow that the candidate would be unable to ever win in a plurality election.

Instant runoff voting is a compromise between these positions. As with plurality voting and runoff elections, winners must have enough core support to avoid early elimination. At the same time, in contrast to plurality voting, winners must have the capacity to reach out to supporters of other candidates to forge a real majority. We believe that such a balance preserves important values of our current system while creating conditions for cheaper, better and fairer elections.

*Modern voting equipment can accommodate ranked-ballots*

Until recently, most American jurisdictions used older voting equipment such as lever machines and punch-cards that is incompatible with instant runoffs. Administering instant runoff voting would require these jurisdictions to acquire new voting equipment or use a time-consuming hand count. Current legislation to enact instant runoff voting in Vermont is founded on the idea of handling the count of ballots beyond first choices in the same way that a re-count would be handled, but some jurisdictions would be unwilling to consider any counting of ballots by hand.

But in the wake of the controversial 2000 presidential election and passage of the 2002 federal Help America Vote Act, the country is rapidly modernizing equipment. Modern voting equipment, such as optical scanners already in wide use and computer touch screen equipment, can handle instant runoff voting at no additional cost beyond a one-time upgrade of software. Cambridge (Massachusetts) had to spend only \$40,000—most of it in paying for one-time software—to get optical scan equipment for its ranked-choice elections, while the Republic of Ireland already has successfully tested touchscreen voting equipment for its ranked-choice parliamentary elections.

Vote-by-mail elections, already the law in Oregon, and Internet voting make ballot-counting that much easier. As jurisdictions modernize their voting equipment for reasons of efficiency, speed and security, they can adopt instant runoff voting at the same time at little cost.

*Instant runoff voting gives voters enough time to evaluate candidates*

Some defenders of traditional runoffs point to voters having additional time to scrutinize the leading candidates. If voters don't learn enough about all the candidates in the first round, they can benefit from more time to study the top two candidates.

Americans of course typically don't have this extra time in most major elections because runoffs are so rarely used. With instant runoff voting, voters have incentives to learn about more of the candidates because of their chance to rank more than one of them in a meaningful way. All of the candidates have incentives to put their ideas forward, and the media have reason to cover all the candidates. Instant runoff voting thus gives voters the benefits of runoff elections—additional scrutiny of the candidates—without the costs.

*Instant runoff can win at the polls*

Some commissions and elected officials might like the idea of instant runoff voting, but fear that it would lose at the polls or be unpopular. In fact, rank-order systems have a strong history with voters, both here and abroad. Voters in Vancouver (Washington) in 1999 and Santa Clara County (California) in 1998 approved stand-alone charter amendments to allow instant runoff voting with hardly any money spent on their behalf. The San Francisco success in 2002 came despite opposition spending of more than \$100,000—more than proponents spent on all mailings, phone calls and advertisements.

Cambridge (Massachusetts) uses the proportional representation variant of instant runoff voting. The system survived several repeal attempts—organized by those opposed to the fairer representation of diversity provided by proportional representation—and now is

widely accepted. Similarly, Ireland's proportional representation variant of instant runoffs has survived two national referendums seeking its repeal. There currently is no movement to change rank-order balloting for presidential elections in Ireland or Australia's parliament, and all indications are the system is very popular in both nations.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

How long will North Americans maintain antiquated rules like plurality voting in the coming century? Our societies evolve quickly in many areas, but often not with their political institutions. That continuity can be a strength, but not when old rules like plurality voting and two-round runoffs fit poorly with the modern world and the reality of more than two candidates seeking election.

Instant runoff voting has burst onto the political landscape rapidly in the United States. In 1997, Texas became the first state to consider a statute on instant runoff voting in decades. By 1998, legislation to enact instant runoff voting for statewide and federal offices had been introduced in New Mexico and Vermont. In 1998, a charter commission in Santa Clara County (California) placed an amendment on the November 1998 ballot that explicitly allowed instant runoff voting to replace runoffs in future county elections. The measure won after gaining the endorsement of the *San Jose Mercury News*, Chamber of Commerce and other key political players.

In 1999, legislation to enact instant runoff voting for statewide and federal offices passed the New Mexico state senate, again was considered in Vermont and was passed by voters in Vancouver (Washington) as an option in their charter. In 2000, Utah Republicans adopted instant runoff voting for their convention elections and in 2002 gave congressional nominations to candidates through instant runoff voting. In 2002, even as San Francisco voters adopted instant runoff voting for all major city elections Vermont participants in 52 out of 55 town meetings voted to support it for gubernatorial elections. In 2003, at least 20 states debated instant runoff voting elec-

tions, and presidential candidates like Howard Dean and Dennis Kucinich regularly advocated it on the campaign trail. In 2004, nearly three-quarters of voters in Berkeley (California) voted to adopt instant runoff voting.

These developments indicate that when public officials believe that instant runoff voting solves a problem—whether it be overcoming spoilers, meeting a majority requirement, shortening an overly-long campaign season or accommodating new campaign finance reform laws—their support for reform can crystallize rapidly. As we look to the future of American politics, we can see numerous potential problems that instant runoff voting could be seen as addressing: split votes and spoilers in major elections, the debate over how to run a direct election for President if the Electoral College is re-considered, the sharp decline in voter turnout in congressional primaries leading to more extreme candidates that deny more centrist options in general elections, racial tensions in urban runoffs and more. Certainly whatever the impetus for consideration of instant runoff voting, its ultimate strength is that it is a non-partisan, good government reform that benefits everyone—the voter, the taxpayer and candidates—over time. As long as election administration concerns can be fully addressed—and they can be—instant runoff voting has great promise to build support.

## CONCLUSION

Plurality voting, runoff elections and instant runoff elections more often than not elect the same candidate: the one with the greatest support. But both plurality and runoff elections are susceptible to breakdowns generating undemocratic results: plurality voting when more than two reasonably strong candidates run and runoff elections when turnout discrepancies and campaign spending differences are large.

Instant runoff voting prevents such breakdowns of majority rule, but perhaps more importantly, it is about improving our politics. In an era of shrinking participation in elections and government, it is critically important to look at a simple reform that would take at least some money out of politics, promote positive public debate, save tax dollars and encourage winners to reach out to more of their constituents. The rapid rise of interest and support for instant runoff voting suggests that Americans are ready for a change. Leaders in Canada, Mexico and the United States would do well to study it seriously for their elections to single-winner offices.

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