

Assessing Instant Runoff Voting in Takoma Park (MD) Executive Summary of Exit Poll Findings of January 30, 2007

Adam Bartolanzo
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ABSTRACT

Takoma Park (MD), a suburb of the District of Columbia, adopted instant runoff voting (IRV) in 2006 after it won 84% approval in an advisory ballot measure on November 8, 2005. Residents first used the system in a city council vacancy election in Ward 5 on January 30, 2007. Three candidates sought to fill the vacancy. FairVote conducted an all-day exit poll, surveying 39% of total voters. Key findings include:

- Only one invalid ballot and two voter errors in any rankings.
- Over 80% of voters used two or more rankings.
- Public education led to over 83% knowing they would use IRV.
- Over 88% thought IRV was easy to use.
- Over 55% thought the campaign under IRV was less negative than under winner-take-all.
- Over 88% wanted to use IRV in future elections.

An expanded report is available from www.fairvote.org.

Acknowledgements

FairVote is a non-profit electoral reform organization and think tank located in Takoma Park. Adam Bartolanzo, research assistant, designed and administered the exit poll. He is principal author of the report and this summary. FairVote's executive director Rob Richie, IRV America program director Ryan Griffin and analyst Jack Santucci provided additional support and suggestions. Richard DeLeon, professor emeritus of political science at San Francisco State University (SFSU), provided advice and conducted statistical analyses of the data. The format of the survey and extended, final report was based primarily on a previous report conducted by the Public Research Institute (PRI) of SFSU on a municipal election held in San Francisco that used IRV. To see the full text of the San Francisco report, visit the reports page of PRI's website at <http://pri.sfsu.edu/reports.html>.

Introduction

On November 8, 2005, the residents of Takoma Park (MD) approved an advisory referendum supporting a city council proposal to adopt instant runoff voting (IRV) for municipal elections.

IRV is an alternative to winner-take-all systems that allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. It greatly reduces spoiler dynamics and ensures winners with majority support in races where more than two candidates run. If no candidate has a majority of first choices, the candidate with fewest first choices is eliminated. Ballots cast for the eliminated candidate are then added to the totals of the next choice candidate ranked on each ballot. Rounds continue until a majority winner emerges.

The results of Takoma Park’s advisory referendum by city ward are presented below:

Table 1: Referendum results by city ward, November 8, 2005

	Yes	No	Total	Percent
Ward 1	612	103	715	85.6%
Ward 2	521	102	623	83.6%
Ward 3	469	91	560	83.8%
Ward 4	113	24	137	82.5%
Ward 5	130	15	145	89.7%
Ward 6	104	37	141	73.8%
Absentee	43	18	61	70.5%
Total	1992	390	2382	83.6%

As shown by Table 1, the proposal passed with overwhelming support. 83.6% of voters voted “Yes” on the proposed electoral reform. The City Council unanimously voted to revise the City Charter to use IRV for all city elections beginning in 2006.

In November 2006, a member of the city council from Ward 5 was elected to the county council. When his seat became vacant, a special election was called. The election took place on January 30, 2007, using IRV for the first time. Three candidates contested the election, all of whom devoted time and resources to their campaigns and were generally perceived to be serious candidates. When first choices were counted, the results were as follows, with Reuben Snipper winning on the first count:

	First Choices	% of Total First Choices
Reuben Snipper (ELECTED)	107	53%
Eric Hensal	72	35%
Alexandra Quéré Barrionuevo	23	11%
Write-Ins	1	0.5%
Invalid Ballots	1	0.5%
Total	204	100%

Takoma Park is the first jurisdiction in Maryland to use IRV to elect local officials. San Francisco in 2002 was the first city in the United States among those currently using IRV to adopt an IRV system (called ranked choice voting by city election officials), in 2004. IRV is also currently used in Burlington (VT) and is slated for use in several additional jurisdictions in 2007-2009, including Minneapolis (MN), Oakland (CA), Pierce County (WA) and several cities in North Carolina. IRV-style absentee ballots are used for overseas votes cast in runoff elections in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Arkansas. In 2006, a Colorado vacancy committee used IRV, making Colorado the first state to use IRV to fill a legislative seat. Several other municipalities and states have passed resolutions supporting IRV, and many jurisdictions are considering implementing it for upcoming elections. Given its recent success on the local and state levels, it is valuable to study the effectiveness of IRV in Takoma Park.

The primary purpose of this report is to collect voter response to IRV. In particular, five common indicators of successful IRV implementation are considered. In general, they touch on efficacy of public education and voter satisfaction. Differences across demographic groups are taken into account to see whether there are relationships between them and the main indicators. These differences include race, ethnicity, age, gender, household income, political preference, and education.

Methodology

Study Design

Voters were surveyed in order to collect information about public opinion on IRV. The questions asked of voters were based on five selected indicators of IRV success.

Sample Design

During the election, 204 total ballots were cast. The entire population of registered Ward 5 voters who participated in the election, except for 10 absentee voters, showed up to the polling location in Wilkinson Hall at Columbia Union College. Since the entire sample was chosen directly from the overall population, typicality of the respondents can be assumed. E-mails were sent to the absentee voters in order to create an absentee sample, but unfortunately no responses came back. Because absentee voters amounted to fewer than 5% of the population, their absence should not significantly affect the exit poll results.

The Instrument

The questionnaire used during the exit poll was based on one used for the PRI San Francisco report. Many of the same questions and options used in the San Francisco report appeared on the Takoma Park questionnaire. Questions original to this survey were also included.

The questions examined five main areas of inquiry:

- 1.) Did voters know about IRV before coming to vote, and if so, how did they learn about it?
- 2.) Was the IRV system easy or difficult to use, and were voters at least familiar with how IRV works?
- 3.) Did voters tend to rank their candidates, or did they prefer voting for just one?
- 4.) How did voters like the IRV system compared to the previous electoral system?
- 5.) Do voters support or oppose IRV for city, state and national elections?

The survey took up one piece of legal-size paper, front and back, and asked 23 multiple-choice questions. It took approximately two minutes for a respondent to fill out the survey completely. For a copy of the survey, see the full report at www.fairvote.org.

Surveying Voters

The exit poll was conducted at Wilkinson Hall, Columbia Union College, in a stairwell annex attached to the polling room. At the request of the city clerk, the exit poll was situated in the annex so as to not interfere with the voters entering the polling place through the front entrance. Voters were instructed to exit through the doorway leading out from the stairwell annex. The election officials also made sure to inform the voters that a survey was being conducted in the annex and that it was voluntary. Poll respondents were to a degree self-selecting because, even though all voters were encouraged to exit through the annex and participate in the survey, they were nonetheless free to exit out of the front entrance if they wished. However, the interviewer who conducted the poll recognized the importance of the city clerk’s instructions in maintaining the integrity of the election, so every request was fully respected despite the inherent risks to data collection.

As voters passed through the stairway annex, the poll administrator asked them if they would like to participate in the survey, and he also informed them that the survey was voluntary. The Ward 5 polling place opened at 7 a.m. and closed at 8 p.m. The poll administrator was present from 7:10 a.m. until 7:30 p.m.

Voters who completed the survey did so voluntarily and independently. Upon completing the survey, voters were informed to fold them and place them into a nearby box so as to preserve anonymity. Throughout the day, FairVote employees came to remove surveys from the box.

Response Rates

Of the entire population of 204 voters, 80 participated in the poll, a response rate of 39%. 77 voters filled out the survey at the place where the exit poll was conducted. Two respondents submitted their responses via e-mail the day after the election, and one respondent mailed in responses a week after the election (some voters asked if they could mail in their responses because they did not have the time to take the survey immediately after voting; the interviewer told them they could, and only one respondent responded this way). Even though they were contacted via e-mail and asked to participate, none of the 10 absentee voters responded.

Key Findings

Voter Awareness of IRV and Level of Education about IRV

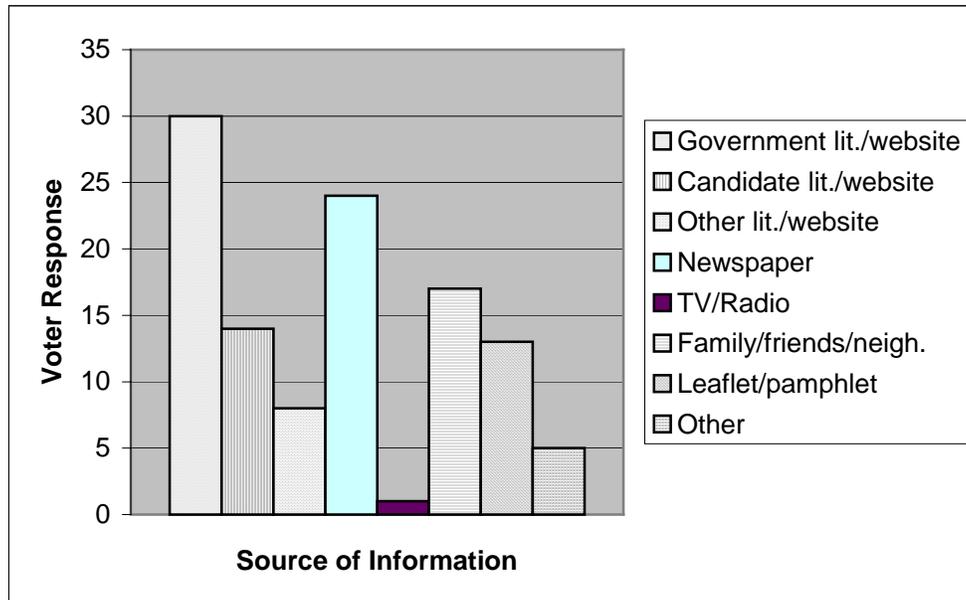
Nearly 84% of the sample knew they would be asked to rank candidates before coming to vote.

Table 2: Responses to question 8 (Before coming to vote, did you know you would be asked to rank your choices for council member?)

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	67	83.75%
No	13	16.25%
Total	80	100%

The city government mailed sample ballots and voting instructions to the residents of Ward 5. It also sponsored articles about IRV in the local newspaper, *The Takoma Voice*, and produced a 10-minute video that aired on city cable and was available for viewing on a special page on the website about the vacancy election. The two most common sources of information about IRV were city government literature and/or its website and the newspaper. Three quarters of respondents found out about IRV from a source provided or sponsored by the city.

Chart 1: Frequencies for question 10 (If you knew about IRV before coming to vote, how did you find out about it?)



College graduates and post-graduates were more likely than voters who attended some college or less to have heard about IRV from city government literature and/or the website. Conversely, voters who attended some college or less were more likely than other voters to have found out about IRV through a leaflet or pamphlet.

Ease or Difficulty of the IRV System and Voter Understanding of IRV

Over 88% of surveyed voters thought the concept of ranking candidates was easy or very easy, and 97.47% of respondents did not have to erase or cross out anything while voting. Only one out of 204 cast ballots was determined by the city to be invalid. An examination of all rankings found only one additional error in any later ranking.

Table 3: Responses to question 12 (How difficult or easy did you find the concept of ranking your candidates?)

	Frequency	Percent
Very Easy	51	63.75%
Easy	20	25%
Neither Difficult nor Easy	8	10%
Difficult	1	1.25%
Total	80	100%

Voters who claimed to always vote were more likely than other voters to find the concept of ranking candidates very easy. 57.5% of respondents said they understood IRV fully. 30% said they understood IRV partially. Voters who graduated from college and/or had post-graduate education were more likely than other voters to understand IRV completely. 92.5% of the sample understood both the voting instructions and the ballot design completely.

Utilization of the Ranking Option

61.25% of surveyed voters said they ranked all three candidates, and 21.25% said they ranked two candidates. According to the official ballot count, 56.77% of the general population ranked all three candidates, and over 80% of the population ranked two or more candidates.

Table 4: Analysis of the official ballot count (Source: TrueBallot, Inc.)

	Frequency	Percent
Ranked All Three & Write-In	7	3.34%
Ranked All Three	109	53.43%
Ranked Two	48	23.53%
Voted for Only One	37	18.14%
Invalid/Contained Mistakes	3	1.47%
Total	204	100%

Moderates and conservatives were more likely to rank all three candidates than other voters.

	Very Liberal	Liberal	Moderate or Conservative
Ranked All Three	21 67.74% of subgroup	11 37.93% of subgroup	17 85% of subgroup
Ranked Only Two	5 16.13% of subgroup	12 41.38% of subgroup	0 0% of subgroup
Voted for Only One	5 16.13% of subgroup	5 17.24% of subgroup	3 15% of subgroup
Something Else	0 0% of subgroup	1 3.45% of subgroup	0 0% of subgroup
Total	31 38.75% of sample	29 36.25% of sample	20 25% of sample

Voter Perception of IRV Compared to Previous Elections

46.25% of surveyed voters collected more information on candidates in this election than in past elections. 52.56% of respondents felt more inclined to vote for their preferred candidate in this election than in past elections. Voters who claimed to always vote were more likely than other voters to feel more inclined to vote for their preferred candidate in this election than in past elections. 55.13% of respondents felt there was less negative campaigning in this election than in previous elections. Only 2.56% said there was more.

Level of Voter Support for IRV

Over 88% of respondents said they would like to see IRV used for at least some kind of election in the future, with 58.33% of respondents stating they would like to see IRV used in all local, state, and national elections. 66.25% of respondents said they either support or strongly support

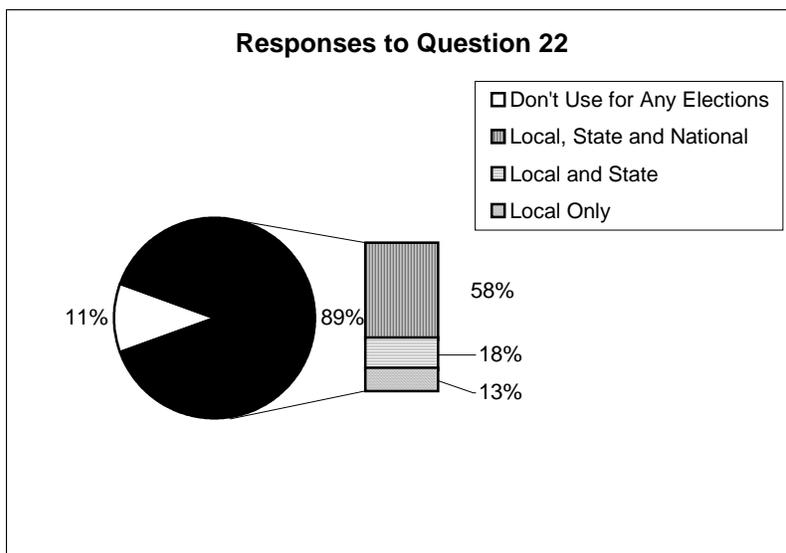
IRV. Voters who have received post-graduate education were more likely than other voters to strongly support IRV. Voters with some college education or less were more likely than other voters to neither support nor oppose IRV.

Chart 2: Responses to question 22 (Would you like to see IRV used in state and national elections?) (The dark section of the pie graph represents voters who would like to see IRV used for at least some future elections.)

Summary

The purpose of the exit poll was to collect information about the first use of instant runoff voting in Takoma Park. Voters answered questions related to five IRV issues: levels of prior knowledge and understanding, use of ranking, perceived fairness and general satisfaction.

Because future city council elections will also use IRV, it is important for the community to see whether voters are adapting to the transition from winner-take-all to ranking their choices. These findings should also be helpful to other jurisdictions considering implementing IRV in the future – particularly those about what forms of education work best for what groups. None was especially expensive.



The general population that this report examines is the population of voters who participated in the Ward 5 special election. This report does not attempt to generalize about the entire population of registered voters in the city of Takoma Park or voters in other jurisdictions. FairVote plans to conduct a similar exit poll for the November 2007 general elections in order to gauge the whole city's response to IRV. Nevertheless, voter reaction is a result of many factors no matter what electoral system is in place.

Caveats notwithstanding, a few points are worth noting. Prior knowledge of IRV was high among voters. Around 84% of the respondents knew they would be asked to rank their candidates before coming to vote. The city council played a crucial role by taking proactive measures to educate the residents of Ward 5 about IRV. Three quarters of respondents said they found out about IRV from a source of information that the city council provided or sponsored.

IRV proved to be an easy alternative to winner-take-all for most voters. It appears that Ward 5 voters took advantage of the option of ranking their candidates. In the exit poll, 61.25% said they ranked all three candidates. The official ballot count shows that 56.77% of all voters ranked all three candidates and that over 80% ranked at least two. Voters were comfortable with the ballot design and notion of ranking. 97.47% of respondents did not have to cross out or erase anything. This finding is supplemented by the results of the official ballot count. Only one ballot was considered invalid, and only two others were marked in error in any of their rankings. Over 88% of respondents thought the concept of ranking candidates was easy or very easy. 57.50%

understood IRV completely, and an additional 30% understood it partially. An overwhelming 92.50% of the surveyed voters understood the ballot design and voting instructions completely.

Comparisons of IRV to past elections also seem positive. A majority of surveyed voters said they felt more inclined to vote for their preferred candidate in this election than in past elections. A majority of respondents also felt there was less negative campaigning in this election than in previous elections. This is consistent with winner Reuben Snipper's comment to FairVote staff:

I think it did affect the campaign in a positive way. I talked with the other candidates, and they more or less agreed: if you encountered a person who was going to vote for another candidate as number one, then you still wanted the second spot. That meant you still wanted to make the best case for yourself that you could. There was less incentive to "bad mouth" your opponents, since many voters are turned off by that. Of course, contrasting yourself with another candidate is still the name of the game, but just going negative is less effective. In general, I think it leads to less negative campaigns since there are more downside risks to doing it. Of course, this only works if there are three or more viable candidates. With only two candidates, it makes no difference.

Support for IRV was high among Ward 5 voters. Roughly two-thirds of respondents either support or strongly support IRV. Voters who received post-graduate education were more likely than other voters to strongly support IRV, whereas voters with some college education or less were more likely than other voters to neither support nor oppose IRV. Over 88% of the respondents said they wanted to see IRV used for at least some future elections. 58.33% said they would like to see IRV used for local, state, and national elections. Only 11.11% said they did not want to see IRV used for any future elections.

Implementation of IRV was a success during the 2007 Ward 5 special vacancy election. Most were aware of IRV, and the city successfully educated Ward 5 residents about the new system. Voter education efforts should be replicated for the November elections. Generally, IRV was an easy alternative to non-majority voting. Understanding of and support for IRV were strong. Overall, IRV has had a favorable start in Takoma Park. As the voting system becomes more familiar to the residents of the city, it would be useful to continue measurement. Further studies on future elections are therefore highly recommended.



FairVote
6930 Carroll Avenue
Suite 610
Takoma Park, MD 20912