



The Center for  
Voting and Democracy

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## A Report on Instant Runoff Voting

Prepared for the Brown Undergraduate Council of Students

### What is Instant Runoff Voting?

Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) is a majority voting system in which voters rank candidates according to their preference, rather than simply selecting their top choice. If no candidate receives a majority of first choices, the candidate with the fewest number of votes is eliminated and successive runoffs are counted, according to the voter's preferences, until one candidate receives a majority of votes.

The system has become increasingly popular in cities across the United States, from San Francisco (CA) to Burlington (VT) to Cary (NC). IRV is used for military ballots in states with traditional runoff systems like Louisiana, and has been endorsed by national leaders like Sen. John McCain, Howard Dean and Sen. Barack Obama. IRV is used by the American Political Science Association and is recommended by Robert's Rules of Order.

IRV is also used widely among universities, including at least half of the *US News and World* ranked "top 30" colleges and universities. FairVote is the leading national organization promoting IRV and other forms of Ranked Choice Voting.

### IRV on Campus

The Spring 2008 student election season brought another successful round of IRV elections at campuses across the nation. University of Iowa's first IRV election was met with record participation.

MIT, CalTech, Harvard, Dartmouth, Cornell, Stanford, Georgetown, Princeton and many others are successfully using Instant Runoff Voting and other forms of Ranked Choice Voting. The implementation of IRV for the first time this year at schools like the University of Iowa,, the University of California -San Diego, and North Carolina State University showcased IRV's growth on college campuses.

IRV allows more voter choice and broader voter participation by accommodating multiple candidates in single seat races and assuring that a "spoiler effect" will not result in undemocratic outcomes. IRV allows all voters to vote for their favorite candidate without fear of helping elect their least favorite candidate, and it ensures that the winner enjoys support from a majority of the voters. For bodies with delayed runoff elections, IRV offers the prospect of clearer, cleaner, more efficient and less costly elections.

## **IRV at Brown**

Instant runoff voting was [considered](#) by the Undergraduate Council of Students at Brown during the 2004-2005 academic year, in the wake of a tumultuous [four-way race](#). While there was broad support on the council, the measure was deemed to demand a constitutional amendment, because the UCS constitution was interpreted to mandate a runoff between just two candidates. The resulting referendum [achieved 64% support](#) in a 2005 WebCT vote – 2 percentage points shy of the requirement for passage. In the wake of the referendum, the [Brown Daily Herald](#) opined the disbanding of the Elections Review Commission without the implementation of IRV.

Student elections at Brown are a perfect fit for IRV: They frequently feature three or more candidates seeking one executive office. They are run through computer networks, making ballot design and IRV procedures simple and optimally effective. For voters, participating is simple; rather than merely vote for one candidate for each office, they vote their preferences, ranking as many candidates as they want.

Most importantly, an instant runoff conserves the time, energy, resources, and student attention that must be expended on two elections, and that are generally exhausted as finals period begins. IRV is also a fairer, more representative system, and, in implementing IRV, UCS makes a strong, positive statement about student representation and election fairness.

## **Recommendations**

UCS should immediately implement IRV for student elections, and move to take up a broader conversation about voting methods and representation. The UCS Constitution (VIII-1.A) says that *“Elections ...shall be by majority vote. In the event that no candidate for a position obtains a majority vote, a run-off election will be held between those two candidates having the largest plurality for a position in order to establish such a majority.”*

IRV elections fulfill the fundamental proscriptions of Article VIII- they have a built in majority requirement, and a built in runoff should no candidate receive a first ballot majority. While the UCS Constitution mandates that the runoff be held between the two candidates with highest pluralities, it leaves open the question of how those pluralities are determined. In a four-person-plus race, IRV would maximize voter choice, continue to meet the standards of Article VIII, and deliver a majority opinion on behalf of the student body at all times.

UCS could also implement a modified IRV election which conforms to a strict, literal reading of Article VIII. In a “Two Step” IRV process, voters would rank their choices, and then, if there was no majority winner, all but the top two would be immediately eliminated, and their voters preferences counted on a second instant runoff ballot.

FairVote offers these recommendations.

1. Immediately implement instant runoff voting in the UCS Code in a manner consistent with Article VIII section A of the UCS Constitution, either through implementation of standard IRV process or a modified “two-step” IRV process.

2. In the 2008-2009 year, amend the UCS Constitution to specifically mandate instant runoff elections
3. Consider the use of Single Transferable Vote and other forms of proportional representation in the election of class representatives.

### **Additional reading**

- The New Yorker's [Hendrik Hertzberg on IRV](#)
- [Quotes](#) from campus leaders on using IRV
- FairVote Executive Director [Rob Richie](#) on IRV and comparative elections systems in *Election Law Journal*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, 2004.
- [Sample Ballot](#) from Stanford's online IRV elections.
- [Sample language](#) for an IRV code change/resolution.
- More IRV Student Resources from [FairVote](#).

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