

Improving Student Government Elections

Most student council elections use the plurality voting system: each voter picks one candidate, and the candidate with the most votes wins. This system, though widely used in the United States, has a serious flaw: a candidate who is opposed by a majority of the voters can be elected!

The flaw appears when three or more candidates run for an office and the majority split their votes between two candidates, allowing a less-preferred third candidate to win. Robert's Rules of Order strongly recommends against using the plurality system in favor of "preferential voting" or, as it is more commonly known in the U.S., "**instant runoff voting**."¹

Instant runoff voting is used in governmental elections around the world – most notably in London, Australia and Ireland – as well as in numerous American organizations (including the American Political Science Association). There are also bills pending in the Vermont legislature and 12 other states to adopt instant runoff voting.

How instant runoff voting works

Instead of picking just one candidate, each voter is allowed to rank the candidates in order of preference – first choice, second choice and so on. First, you count the number of first choice votes for each candidate. If one candidate has a majority, that candidate is elected. If there is no initial majority winner, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and another round of counting takes place. In each round, your vote counts for your favorite candidate who is still in the race. The process of eliminating the weakest candidate and recounting the ballots continues until one candidate receives a majority.

In each round, each ballot counts for the voter's favorite candidate who is still in the running. If your favorite candidate is still in the race, your ballot stays with that candidate. If your favorite candidate is eliminated, your ballot automatically counts for your next choice.

Instant runoff voting determines the candidate supported by the majority of voters, and it reduces negative campaigning, since winning may require second choice votes from opponents' supporters. The Center can also assist with voting systems better suited for electing multiple candidates. Please contact us for assistance.

Prepared by the **Center for Voting and Democracy**, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC with regional offices in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Vermont, Oregon and Texas. The Center provides education and election assistance to governments, organizations, companies and schools.

For assistance, contact the **Center for Voting and Democracy**
 Phone: (301) 270-4616 e-mail: irv@fairvote.org web: www.fairvote.org

¹ **Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised**, Chapter XIII §45. 10th edition, 2000, pp. 411-414, recommends instant runoff voting "...it makes possible a more representative result than under a rule that a plurality shall elect." "...this type of preferential ballot is preferable to an election by plurality..."

Conducting an Instant Runoff Election is Easy

All you have to do is: **1) Create the ballots, 2) Instruct the students how to vote, 3) Sort the ballots by first-choice votes, 4) If there is no majority winner, successively eliminate the weakest candidates and count their voters' runoff choices until one candidate receives a majority.**

1) Create the ballots

The ballots must allow voters to indicate at least first, second and third choice candidates. If you have more than 5 candidates, you may want to allow voters to rank all the candidates, but giving at least 3 choices is usually sufficient.

Note 1. Below you will find two sample ballot styles that include instructions.

2) Instruct the students how to vote

Voters should be directed to follow the instructions on the ballot and simply indicate their first choice candidate, their second choice candidate, and so on. They are free to vote for as many or as few candidates as they like, but they should vote for as many candidates in order of preference as they support, since ranking additional candidates cannot hurt the chances of electing their favorites.

There is no way to vote strategically or manipulate the system. The best strategy for every voter is to sincerely rank candidates in the order of preference.

Note 2. Voters should be discouraged from ranking the same candidate first and also second, in hopes of helping that candidate more. That doesn't work, because a ballot only counts for your second choice candidate after your first choice candidate has been eliminated. But if your first and second choice candidates are the same, your vote won't count for anyone once that candidate is out of the running.

3) Sort the ballots by first choice vote

Examine each completed ballot to make sure that it is properly filled out. In all cases, try to honor the intent of the voter if it is clear. Only disregard a ballot if the voter's intent is not clear, such as by listing two candidates for first choice, or is obviously a joke (such as writing in "Mickey Mouse"). These are called "spoiled ballots."

As you examine and interpret the ballots, sort them according to the first choice rankings only. This will leave you a pile of ballots for each candidate. Count the number of votes in each pile, and record the totals on your tally sheet. The sum of all of the valid votes (excluding blank and spoiled ballots) determines the base number from which the majority threshold is calculated (more than half). If any candidate has received a majority of the valid votes, that candidate is elected.

*Note 3. A majority means more than 50% of the non-exhausted valid ballots. A majority of 6 votes is 4 (50% of 6 = 3, and a majority is **more** than 3, which means 4). A majority of 7 votes is also 4 (50% of 7 = 3.5, and a majority is **more** than 3.5, which means 4).*

4) Successively eliminate the weakest candidate

If no candidate has a majority, pick up the pile of ballots for the weakest candidate (the candidate with the fewest votes), and redistribute them to each voter's next-ranked candidate on the ballot who is still in the race. Record the new totals for each candidate in the next column of the tally sheet, noting that the new total for the eliminated candidate is zero.

***Note 4.** As you redistribute the ballots from the eliminated candidate to each voter's next choice candidate, cross out the name of the eliminated candidate to avoid getting confused about which candidate the ballot counts for. This eliminated candidate can't receive any new votes during subsequent rounds. If a ballot being moved from another eliminated candidate in a subsequent round lists **this** eliminated candidate second, instead move that ballot to the **third** choice of the voter, and so on. A ballot can only go to a pile of a candidate who is still in the running.*

If a ballot doesn't rank any more candidates still in the race or lists two candidates as second choices, the ballot is declared "exhausted," and goes in a new pile. Record the total number of exhausted ballots on the tally sheet where indicated. These ballots are not counted during the remainder of the election, the same as if that voter had declined to vote in a regular runoff election. After you eliminate the weakest candidate, determine if any candidate now has a majority of the ballots that rank candidates still in the race.

***Note 5.** The majority threshold can get smaller if there are some exhausted ballots, which reduces the base number for calculating a majority.*

If there is still no majority winner, eliminate the candidate that is now the weakest and repeat the process.

***Note 6.** The new weakest candidate may not be the same candidate you expected, because the next weakest candidate in the initial count may have picked up enough votes during the last redistribution to move ahead of some other candidate.*

***Note 7.** In each round you redistribute ballots to the NEXT choice of the voter whose favorite candidate has been eliminated as long. If a voter's first choice candidate is eliminated, the ballot counts for the voter's second choice. If the voter's second choice candidate is also eliminated, the ballot counts for the third choice.*

One candidate will eventually receive a majority of the ballots that are not exhausted.

***Note 8.** If two or more candidates are tied for weakest candidate (and thus elimination), flip a coin to determine whom to eliminate. Such candidates have an equally low amount of support, so are equally deserving of elimination. Ties in large government elections are extremely rare, but in small school elections they do occasionally occur. However, ties are no more likely to affect the outcome of an IRV election than a plurality election. In an IRV election, once you eliminate one of the tied candidates, you usually eliminate the other one in the next round, so the tie doesn't affect the outcome of the election.*

Sample Instant Runoff Voting Ballot

We recommend using the following ballot. It has simple instructions, and voters simply write the names of the first choice candidate, second choice candidate and so on. If you do not have time to print up ballots with the names of candidates on them, you can print up ballots without the names and then write the candidates on the blackboard. It is a good idea to pass out filled-out sample ballots with made-up names, showing the proper way to mark the ballot.

Official Ballot (recommended format)

INSTRUCTIONS: Vote by writing the name of your first choice candidate, second choice candidate and so on. You may vote for as many or as few candidates as you like.

1st Choice: _____
 2nd Choice: _____
 3rd Choice: _____
 4th Choice: _____

Candidates (listed in alphabetical order):

Jennifer Ackerman
 Ashley Davis
 Trevor Jackson-Weiss
 Jose Sanchez
 Jason Wong

Below is another ballot format. Voters circle the number '1' next to their first choice candidate, the number '2' next to their second choice candidate and so on. With this ballot, it is possible for voters to spoil their ballots if they circle more than one number next to a candidate, or circle the same number next to two candidates. That's why we recommend the above ballot, but voters rarely have any trouble with either ballot.

Official Ballot (alternative format)

INSTRUCTIONS: Vote by ranking the candidates in order of preference. Circle the "1" in front of your favorite choice, circle the "2" for your second choice, the "3" for your third choice, and so on. Don't give the same number to more than one candidate, and don't give any candidate more than one ranking.

Ranking	Candidate
1 2 3 4	Jennifer Ackerman
1 2 3 4	Ashley Davis
1 2 3 4	Trevor Jackson-Weiss
1 2 3 4	Jose Sanchez
1 2 3 4	Jason Wang

Instant Runoff Election Tally Sheet

Office: _____ Date: _____ Counted by: _____

Candidates' Names	First Round	Second Round	Third Round	Fourth Round	Fifth Round
A.					
B.					
C.					
D.					
E.					
F.					
G.					
Total Valid Votes					
Majority Threshold <small><u>More</u> than half of valid votes</small>					
Exhausted Ballots					

Instant Runoff Voting: An Example

In Mrs. HescocK's sixth grade class, the 30 students elected a class president. There were 3 candidates: Susannah Benson, Angelina Chang and Jamal Frederickson. Below is a copy of the ballot as well as the tally sheet used to determine the winner.

Official Ballot: Class President	
INSTRUCTIONS: Vote by writing the name of your first choice candidate, second choice candidate and so on. You may vote for as many or as few candidates as you like.	
1 st Choice: _____ 2 nd Choice: _____ 3 rd Choice: _____	Candidates (listed in alphabetical order): Susannah Benson Angelina Chang Jamal Frederickson

To count the votes, all the ballots were sorted by first choice votes, and each candidate's votes were totaled. Jamal had the most votes in the first round.

A majority of 30 is 16 votes. Since no candidate had a majority, the weakest candidate, Susannah, was eliminated. Of the 8 votes for Susannah:

- 6 ballots listed Angelina as a 2nd choice
- 1 ballot listed Jamal as a 2nd choice
- 1 ballot did not list a 2nd choice

In the second round, there were 29 valid votes. A majority of 29 is 15 votes, so Angelina was elected. If plurality voting had been used, Jamal would have been elected, even though a majority of the voters preferred Angelina.

Here's what the tally sheet looked like after finishing the election.

Tally sheet		
Office: <u>Class president</u> Date: <u>Sept 17</u> Counted by: <u>Caleb</u>		
Candidate	First Round	Second Round
Jamal	12	13
Angelina	10	16 – winner
Susannah	8	--
Total Valid Votes	30	29
Majority	16	15
Exhausted	0	1

1st Round Results	
Candidate	Votes
Jamal	12
Angelina	10
Susannah	8
Valid votes	30
Exhausted	0

2nd Round Results	
Candidate	Votes
Jamal	13
Angelina	16
Susannah	0
Valid votes	29
Exhausted	1