



The Center for  
Voting and Democracy

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**TESTIMONY OF DAVID H. MOON, PROGRAM DIRECTOR  
FAIRVOTE – THE CENTER FOR VOTING AND DEMOCRACY**

HONOLULU CHARTER REVIEW COMMISSION  
FEBRUARY 6, 2006

SUBJECT: PROPOSAL 87 - Elections; Instant runoff voting for city elections.

Introduction: As Program Director of FairVote - The Center for Voting and Democracy, I wanted to thank the members of the Honolulu Charter Review Commission for agreeing to review Proposal 87, to adopt instant runoff voting for city elections. I am pleased to submit the following testimony on this matter, to give you as much information as possible as you deliberate how to build a better democracy for Honolulu's residents. FairVote is a non-partisan, national non-profit organization focused on electoral systems reform in the United States. For over 13 years, we have been at the forefront of advocating electoral systems that better serve the needs of America's diverse communities and better reflect our democracy's principles, such as ensuring and encouraging broad participation from all voters, while adhering to both the values of majority rule and inclusive government.

Plurality Elections and the Prospect of Minority Rule: Throughout our existence, we have studied many aspects of elections, and through our research have come to believe that instant runoff voting is a far superior method of conducting single-seat elections than both simple plurality and two-round or delayed runoff systems. Plurality voting, whereby the candidate with simply the greatest number of votes wins, is the norm in most American elections. As a result, time and again we witness powerful elected offices filled with candidates who were not supported by the majority of voters. While it is true that in races with only two candidates it is certain that one will receive a majority of the votes, without a majority requirement for victory, a plurality race with three or more candidates can see a winner elected with far less than half of the vote. In fact, the prospect becomes very real that the winner of an election may even have been *disliked* by a majority of the population. This is the first and most basic problem with the plurality system. We are faced, in this case, with the prospect of minority rule. Those elected should have the support of a majority of the voting population, not simply more than each of the other candidates.

The Problem with the Two-Round Runoff System: Unfortunately, this promise is not guaranteed under plurality voting. A two-round, or delayed runoff system can seemingly provide a partial answer to this problem, but brings with it additional problems. For example, two-round runoff elections still preserve the "spoiler effect" and the problems linked to it. Again, with a crowded field of candidates in a first round election, voters must often make strategic calculations about which of their favored candidates is the most likely to make it into the second round election. This discourages voters from voting for their preferred candidate, as doing so may result in vote-splitting with a like-minded candidate, resulting in less favored candidates advancing to the second round runoff. These

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dynamics can lead to bizarre and undemocratic results in two-round runoff systems, given that a consensus candidate who is liked by a majority of voters can fail to make it to the top-two when challenged by two candidates with significantly smaller but more passionate support. This is especially likely when multiple like-minded candidates run against each other.

Election Administration Problems: The costs of conducting this second round runoff can also be substantial, as jurisdictions must print ballots, recruit and train pollworkers, locate precincts, and prepare voting equipment -- not once, but twice. In addition, second round runoffs are often held shortly after the first round election, creating numerous administrative hurdles for election officials. For example, ballots must be printed quickly after the first round, but not until officials know who the top two vote-getters are. Likewise, this process can often disenfranchise overseas and absentee voters, who will not have enough time to return their ballots after they have been printed and mailed to them.

Double the Special Interest Influence: Lastly, two-round runoff elections require candidates to raise money twice, often requiring an influx of additional special interest contributions for the second round runoff. Coupled with low turnout in the runoff, this can allow these donors to leverage their campaign dollars for even greater influence, sometimes against the public interest. Similarly, well-organized groups who do not represent a majority of voters can take advantage of low turnout in the second round runoff to try and exert disproportionate influence over the result.

The Instant Runoff Solution: In contrast to this system, instant runoff voting (IRV) simulates a series of runoffs on one ballot. By ranking candidates in order of preference, the voter expresses his/her will in each round of counting, rendering moot the need for a second election. In a traditional runoff system, if your candidate makes it to the runoff, you would continue to support that person by voting for him/her a second time. Similarly, under IRV, if your favorite candidate advances after the first round of counting, your ballot would continue to support him/her. However, since the tallying is conducted on one ballot, taxpayers save the cost of a second election, voters don't have to return to the polls, and candidates don't need to fundraise and campaign for an extended period. Avoiding the turnout drop associated with second round elections also means that the majority required to win under IRV represents the support of a much larger number of voters than in traditional two-round runoffs. Lastly, IRV often has the added bonus of creating more civil and cooperative campaigns due to new incentives for candidates to reach out to their opponents supporters for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> choice rankings. As witnessed under San Francisco's first IRV elections, candidates, in an unprecedented move, began endorsing each other and hosting joint fundraisers – in order to earn the 2<sup>nd</sup> choice support of their allied candidates' voters.

Where IRV is Used: San Francisco, CA (all city races); Burlington, VT (March 2006 Mayoral elections); Takoma Park, MD (city races starting in 2007); London, UK (Mayor); Australia (House of Representatives); Ireland (President); and Papua New Guinea (special vacancy elections). IRV has also traditionally been used in numerous college campus elections, the Utah Republican Party Caucuses, and for military and overseas absentee

ballots in Louisiana and Arkansas (starting in 2006). IRV has also been approved for use and pending implementation in Ferndale, MI (all city races) and Berkeley, CA (all city races). Additionally, IRV pilot project legislation has been signed into law in Washington State and recently passed the North Carolina House. Just this month, new IRV enabling legislation was introduced in Maryland and Arizona, and the momentum continues to grow.

Conclusion: Given our extensive research and advocacy history, we are happy to provide you with further information regarding the instant runoff voting system. Though we have known much about the benefits of IRV through its use in other nations, San Francisco's recent implementation of the system – the first modern U.S. implementation in a number of years - provides us with further evidence of the system's benefits. We are constantly learning more about the implementation side of instant runoff voting, as well as more about the merits of the system (see discussed attachments below). Should you have any need for further discussion, please do not hesitate to contact me at [dmoon@fairvote.org](mailto:dmoon@fairvote.org) or (301) 270-4616. For the purposes of your hearing, however, we have attached three items of particular interest herein:

- A. **Legal Memorandum (attachment one)** from FairVote to Sen. Les Ihara discussing the legality of instant runoff voting under both the Hawaii Constitution and the state code. Our conclusion is that adoption and implementation of instant runoff voting is well within the power of charter counties in Hawaii, and that such power is affirmatively granted through both the Hawaii Constitution and state code.
- B. **Research Paper (attachment two)** studying San Francisco's use of instant runoff voting (aka "ranked choice voting") and finding that IRV boosted voters' impact by increasing voter participation in the decisive round of counting by approximately 2.7 times. In fact, in the poorest and most diverse neighborhoods, voters' impact in the decisive round of counting was nearly tripled.
- C. **New York Times Articles (attachment three)** describing how in San Francisco's first IRV elections, candidates running for office under the city's new runoff system engaged in a new cooperative campaigning, whereby they endorsed each other and co-hosted fundraisers.

Sincerely,



David Moon  
Program Director  
FairVote – The Center for Voting and Democracy