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6930 Carroll Ave., Suite 610  
Takoma Park, MD 20912 - (301) 270-4616  
(301) 270-4133 (fax) · info@fairvote.org  
www.fairvote.org

## Implementing Majority Voting in Vermont

### *Options for Instant Runoff Voting Elections*

*Instant runoff voting (IRV) is an important step forward for Vermont elections. It ensures majority rule, prevents spoiler problems and wasted votes and, most importantly, fosters participation by allowing voters to express their true preferences on the ballot. The successful implementation of IRV in the Burlington mayoral election in 2006 demonstrated that voters like IRV and understand how to use it.*

*The League of Women Voters believes that the majority of voters should directly elect their leaders. IRV allows exactly that. The League of Women Voters of Vermont supports IRV for statewide elections in Vermont. Along with the report from the Secretary of State, this report helps develop a roadmap for implementing IRV in Vermont, both in limited scope in 2008 and more widely in subsequent elections.*

– Catherine Rader,  
President, LWV of Vermont

On March 9, 2007, FairVote released a report describing methods to implement instant runoff voting (IRV) for statewide elections in Vermont. Written by experienced elections analyst Caleb Kleppner, the report offers guidance on ballot design, voter education, and poll worker training. The report is based on Kleppner’s experience helping to implement IRV in San Francisco and Burlington. *Download the full FairVote report at: <http://www.fairvote.org/VTIRV>.*

The FairVote report is complementary to a report released on March 7<sup>th</sup> by the Secretary of State. It has two primary purposes: (1) to apply the range of implementation options considered in the Secretary’s report to the specific requirements of H.196 and S.108 (*Election for statewide and national offices by the instant runoff voting method*) and (2) to place the Secretary of State’s recommendations for 2008 in the context of a fuller range of options available for expanding and improving IRV practices for 2010 and beyond.

IRV legislation should be tailored toward options that provide administrative efficiency, cost effectiveness and voter understanding. An IRV implementation plan should have the flexibility to accommodate transitions from a few races in 2008 to all statewide offices. It should be ready to address a transition from hand count procedures to one that accommodates new voting equipment.

Implementing IRV for at least some offices can be done well and efficiently at a reasonable cost in 2008 and for additional offices in 2010. **Based on the Secretary of State’s report and our own calculations, we believe an IRV ballot statewide count could likely be done in one day for less than \$15,000.**

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**Key Findings from the March 7, 2007 Secretary of State's Report: *Instant Runoff Voting (IRV): Administrative Implementation Options and Costs***

- Using a system of 10-20 regional count centers overseen by the Secretary of State, a hand count is a feasible option for at least some statewide IRV elections in 2008. Machine tabulation is also a possibility for future elections. The costs of a hand count are estimated to be approximately \$15,000 per day of counting.
- IRV tabulations can be performed by hand efficiently, particular given the “top-two” method of IRV described in the legislation under consideration.
- The legislature will need to decide how many races will use IRV. The costs of ballot printing and shipping will increase as the ballot is lengthened.
- Based on experiences in Burlington and other jurisdictions, an adequate statewide voter education program would cost \$60,000-90,000.

**Summary of Recommendations for Voter Education for IRV Elections in 2008**

There are three main components to effective voter education: (1) the ballot itself, (2) voter education materials and (3) poll worker training. The key to designing an intuitive ballot with clear instructions is public feedback during the design process. *See the report's appendix for ballots from Burlington and San Francisco.*

The principal goals of voter education are to inform voters that they will be able to rank candidates 1-2-3 in the IRV races and to instruct them how to rank their choices. Exit polls revealed that most Burlington voters were aware that they would be able to rank candidates for mayor, knew how to do it and found it easy. 99.9% of all ballots cast in the Burlington mayoral IRV election were valid. Components of Burlington's education effort included postcards to all residences, flyers sent with absentee ballots, advertisements on public busses, posters in polling places, flyers in voting booths, error message flyers next to voting equipment, flyers with answers to frequently asked questions, media outreach and effective use of the city website.

Burlington's voter education program cost approximately \$0.50 per registered voter and we believe Vermont could conduct an effective first-time statewide voter education program for approximately \$0.25 per registered voter. This lower cost is based on using or modifying existing materials instead of developing them from scratch, economies of scale for printing costs and educational materials such as websites where cost is not dependent on audience size.

IRV voter education for subsequent elections would be lower and could be folded into existing voter outreach programs for little additional cost. *Appendix 2 has samples of the voter education materials used in Burlington.*

The job of a poll worker is not changed under IRV, but poll workers can play an important role in ensuring a smooth and successful implementation. San Francisco and Burlington both provided an extra hour of training to poll workers about IRV. The training focuses on explaining to voters how to rank choices, understanding voting equipment error messages, responding to frequently asked questions and helping inquisitive voters find more information. It was also helpful for officials to monitor polling places on Election Day to ensure poll workers were following procedures correctly.

### Summary of Options for 2010 Elections and Beyond

A range of options exists to automate all or part of the IRV tabulation process. By continuing to employ the regional count center model described above for hand counts, the amount of new equipment needed is minimal and costs therefore remain reasonable. Options include:

- Using Diebold Accu-Vote scanners for reading ballots combined with freely available tabulation software as used in Burlington and Cambridge, MA.
- Commercial, off-the-shelf scanners and form reading software are a low cost, efficient alternative to new voting equipment and provide unparalleled transparency and accuracy.
- Data entry firms can do on-site data entry quickly and accurately and can provide precise time and cost estimates. New York City used this method for running ranked choice school board elections in 1996.
- As few as four high-speed central scanners could potentially be modified for ranked choice compatibility and would be able to process all ballots from a presidential election year in 14 regional count centers in less than two days.

### Summary of Assumptions Covering All Implementation Options

The implementation methods discussed in the FairVote report are based on a number of important assumptions and considerations, including:

- **Ballot-counting:** Only first choices will be counted in towns on Election Night. If IRV tallies are necessary, they will begin after the statewide canvass, at least one week and one day after the election at regional counting centers.
- **IRV process:** The IRV process will use “batch elimination,” where all candidates except the top two recipients of first choices are eliminated before the IRV tally.
- **Role of clerks:** Election Day demands on local election clerks are limited to the need to respond to questions about the new voting method using state-provided materials. Post-election demands are also minimal because IRV counts will take place at regional counting centers under the supervision of the Secretary of State’s office.
- **Ballot design:** Based on the recommendation of the Secretary of State’s office, a uniform machine-readable ballot is used in both hand count and machine towns.
- **Software demands:** New software for performing the IRV tabulation is not needed.
- **Offices:** Vermont has nine statewide elections, of which seven occur every two years. 2008 implementation may be limited to a subset of these races for logistical reasons; however, legislation should plan for eventual expansion to include all statewide races.

- *IVS' vote-by-phone system* used for disability access can handle ranked ballots.
- *Federal testing and certification* is not required for voting equipment used in Vermont.

The nine methods for conducting a statewide IRV election range from regional hand counts to new IRV-capable precinct-based optical scanners. For 2008, the hand count options are most relevant because the state will not purchase new equipment before the election; however, all options should be considered for future use.

### **Conclusions**

- It is feasible to implement IRV for all statewide elections in Vermont using a range of options from hand counts to a fully automated process using new voting equipment.
- In 2008, a single statewide IRV tally would likely cost less than \$15,000.
- IRV implementation would benefit from an effective planning process including input from experts and the public, as well as the best practices from San Francisco and Burlington.
- IRV has been implemented recently in the United States by hand and by voting equipment vendors in multiple jurisdictions. Some vendors for private elections, as well as many overseas companies, have significant experience administering ranked ballot elections.
- Relatively inexpensive voter education, including attention to ballot design and poll worker training, helped voters adapt easily to IRV in San Francisco and Burlington.