

Instant Run-off Voting: Progress, and false promises

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(a very short version of this appeared in News and Views)

Before the legislatures of Maine and twenty other states are instant run-off voting bills that could significantly democratize the electoral process. Instant Run-off voting has been used for 90 years for certain offices in Ireland and Australia, and will be used in San Francisco elections this fall. According to the Center for Voting and Democracy,

“Instant runoff voting is a winner-take-all, constitutionally protected, voting system that ensures a winning candidate will receive an absolute majority of votes rather than a simple plurality. IRV eliminates the need for runoff elections by allowing voters to rank their candidates in order of preference.”

Here is how it works. Voters, instead of casting a vote for their favorite candidate, rank order the candidates for an office. If no candidate wins a majority on the first round, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and the ballots of those for whom this candidate was the first preference are transferred to their second preferences, and so on until one candidate emerges with a majority. There are several obvious advantages to this method. No candidate would be elected without the support of a majority of voters. Voters could vote for the candidate most closely representing their views without risking “throwing away their votes” or throwing the election to their least favored candidate. Costly run-off elections could be avoided. Voter turnout would be higher. Candidates would need to court second and third place voters, promoting more issue-oriented campaigns. Unlike proportional representation, instant runoff has a reasonable chance of becoming law in many states, and if successful there, on a national level. (Howard Dean has spoken in favor of IRV on the national level (NPR, 11/10/03).)

Such arguments initially persuaded me that IRV was an unqualified improvement over the present system, and should be strongly supported. I still support the bill, but my support has become more qualified, after becoming aware of some major flaws in IRV, and a superior alternative that would not require any more sophistication from voters or more complicated voting technology than does IRV. The appeal of IRV is that it seems to open space for third parties, and eliminate the “spoiler effect.” But this works only so long as third parties (such as Greens or Libertarians) remain marginal. Once they begin to get enough votes to rival the two major parties, IRV can have the perverse effect of throwing the election to one’s worst alternative. In the following example, from ElectionMethods.org, you may want to substitute “Green” for “Libertarian,” and switch “Democrat” and “Republican,” to see how IRV could affect the prospects for progressive parties.

“Suppose my true preference is for the Libertarian first and the Republican second. Suppose further that the Libertarians are the strongest "minor" party. At some round of the IRV counting process, all the candidates will be eliminated except the Republican, the Democrat, and the Libertarian. If the Libertarian then has the fewest first-choice votes, he or she will be eliminated and my vote will transfer to the Republican, just as I wanted. But what if the Republican is eliminated *before* the Libertarian? Unless all the Republican votes transfer to the Libertarian,

which is extremely unlikely, the Democrat might then beat the Libertarian. If so, I will have helped the Democrat win by not strategically ranking the Republican first. But that's the same situation I'm in now if I vote my true preference for the Libertarian!"

So the dilemma with IRV is that either minor parties remain minor, or in practice voters revert to voting strategically as they would in a two-party system (as in fact they tend to do in Australia), and part of the promise of electoral reform proves to have been an illusion.

This perverse effect can be diminished with pair-wise voting (also known as Condorcet voting), which compares each candidate with every other candidate. All that is required of voters is a simple ranking, as in IRV, but the tabulation is more complicated—although not a problem for the sort of electronic voting machines that are likely to be introduced in the coming years.

Nonetheless, pair-wise voting is more difficult to understand and explain to voters and election officials. (For an explanation of pair-wise voting, see

<http://www.electionmethods.org/Condorcet.htm> . To run your own hypothetical election using this method, go to:

<http://www.eskimo.com/~robla/politics/condorcet-front.html>)

In conclusion, IRV, despite its flaws, could be seen as an important step on the way to fully adequate electoral reform, which of course should include not only counting principles that insure majority support,* but also campaign finance reform and other measures to take the money and advertising out of politics and put the people and the arguments back in.

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*It should be acknowledged, as Kenneth Arrow demonstrated years ago, that there is no sure method of aggregating individual preferences unambiguously into a single majority preference.

See for example: <http://www2.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/arrow.htm>

But there are methods, such as the Condorcet method, and to a lesser extent instant runoff voting, that take into account more of our preferences than can be expressed in the current “first past the post” system.

Additional References

<http://www.fairvote.org>

<http://www.instantrunoff.com/> (This website has an excellent simulation of how instant runoff would have worked in Florida, and incidentally would have given the victory to Gore, in spite of all the uncertain ballots and obstructions.)

<http://janus.state.me.us/legis/LawMakerWeb/summary.asp?ID=280008194> A summary of the Maine law. Tom Bell, "Support grows for switch to run-off voting," Portland Press Herald, February 19, 2003

<http://www.electionmethods.org/IRVproblems.htm>

Appendix

I ran a hypothetical election at

<http://www.eskimo.com/~robla/politics/condorcet-front.html> .

I simulated the results of several races in which there are four candidates, Dem, Rep, Green, and Right. What matters for the final outcome is how each of these fares in a pairwise match with

each of the other candidates. You need to go to the eskimo.com website mentioned above to get this printed out in a visually friendly matrix. The bottom line in most of the rounds is that the Democrat wins in every case, *even when* the Green candidate wins a plurality of 35%, compared to 30 for the Rep and 25 for the Dem, in terms of first preferences. It is worth contemplating what sorts of assumptions one has to make about voter preferences to produce a win for the Green. In my example, a plurality of votes, and sizeable second preferences for the Green among not only Dems but also Reps and Rights. The moral of the story: if the left wants to win in pairwise voting, it will need to capture a genuine majority of voters. Why should third parties such as the Greens favor pairwise voting when they might under certain conditions win the presidency by plurality? Such a victory by plurality would be Pyrrhic, because with the support of only, say, 35% of the voters, such a president is likely to be up against a hostile Congress (not to mention the army), and could not carry through a radical agenda. (Remember Allende in Chile; here is one history of that ill-fated Socialist who won with a plurality of the votes: http://www.geocities.com/educhile_1970s/Allende.html)

With pairwise voting, nevertheless, voters can vote with their hearts, and not throw their votes away as they now must often do, and would still do with IRV at the point where their heart's candidate came within reach of victory. And in that context, now marginal candidates have a better chance of getting a hearing, reaching voters, having the opportunity to change minds. That is the true promise of pairwise voting, and ultimately the false promise of IRV.