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To the Editor:

As president of the League of Women Voters of Vermont, I'd like to respond to your recent editorial on Anthony Pollina's decision not to drop out of the gubernatorial race. I agree with your sentiment that "a broad spectrum of candidates with divergent views on the issues and interesting answers to the problems we face is the best thing that can happen in our society." Unfortunately, there is a flaw in our election method that can take a good thing, such as broad voter choices, and turn it into a serious problem. Many people refer to this as the "spoiler issue."

In most U.S. elections, whoever gets the most votes wins. That is fine when there are just two choices, as the winner will be the majority choice. But when there are three or more choices, vote-splitting can mean the winner is not the candidate preferred by the majority; in fact the "winner" could be the candidate that 35% of the voters like, but that the majority believe is the worst choice.

This is why the League in Vermont has been working so hard to get instant runoff voting (IRV) enacted. IRV allows the majority choice to be discovered by combining a first-round election and a runoff election into one. This is accomplished by allowing voters to rank their runoff choices as well as their favorite on the November ballot. This pro-democracy reform passed the Vermont House and Senate, but was vetoed by Governor Douglas this year.

That IRV bill was limited and only applied to federal races in Vermont, but we clearly need IRV for the governor's race as well. The election of Vermont's governor, Lt. governor and treasurer have the added complexity that if no candidate receives a majority, under the Vermont constitution the decision is taken away from the voters and given to the legislature. Although the Attorney General has argued that the constitution should be amended to use IRV for these offices, election experts believe IRV fits neatly with the existing Vermont constitution since it can find a majority winner, and avoid the need to refer the decision to the legislature.

On March 11, 2002, after 53 towns passed town meeting referenda urging the legislature to adopt IRV, the Caledonian Record published an editorial supporting IRV as well. Vermonters who believe in both majority rule and broad voter choice should work to get IRV adopted for all statewide elections in Vermont.

Catherine Rader
President, LWVVT