

Instant Runoff Voting Election Reform

by League of Women Voters of Vermont President Kate Rader and Terry Bouricius

An important pro-democracy election reform is gaining momentum across the country, and Vermont should join in. That reform is called instant runoff voting (IRV). In a nutshell, IRV can eliminate the "spoiler" problem in elections where three or more candidates are running for one office, and assure that a candidate loathed by the majority will not win. Amazing as it may seem, typical "plurality" voting rules allow a candidate to win, even if a majority of voters prefer the other candidates.

To appreciate the flaw in the simplistic "top vote-getter" plurality rule used in most U.S. elections, it is necessary to address a common confusion. Many people assume the two phrases "the candidate preferred by the **majority** of voters should win," on the one hand and "the candidate with the **most** votes should win," on the other hand, amount to the same thing. If there are only two candidates, they do mean the same thing, but can sharply conflict when there are more than two choices.

For example, what if we were voting on a flavor of ice cream to have at a celebration. Let's say 40% want pistachio and 60% want chocolate. The winner is obvious --chocolate. But what if there is a third option on the ballot -- fudge swirl. The 60% majority who want chocolate might split, so that 35% vote for chocolate, 25% vote for fudge swirl, and the same 40% vote for pistachio. Is it democratic to let the choice with "the most votes" (pistachio) win, even though 60% are opposed and might prefer either chocolate OR fudge swirl to that choice? Should our voting system allow the majority will to be defeated, simply because there are more than two choices on the ballot, or should we fix our method of voting to assure that the majority rules?

IRV bills are being introduced in both the Vermont House and Senate. They would assure that the candidate with the most votes at the end of the count will also have a majority of the vote -- thus satisfying the "majority" rules in Vermont's Constitution that apply to the offices of governor, Lt. governor and treasurer. With the current "plurality" voting method, there frequently is no majority winner, which under the constitution means that for these three offices the legislature gets to select a winner instead of the voters. IRV keeps the decision in the voters' hands and assures majority rule.

With instant runoff voting, voters have the option of ranking candidates in order of choice, which essentially combines a regular election and a runoff election into one. If no candidate is the first choice of a majority of voters (over 50%), a runoff count can be conducted to determine which candidate is actually preferred by a majority of all voters. This avoids the need to have the legislature elect our governor for us, or allowing a candidate with less than 50% support be declared the winner. If your favorite choice makes it to the runoff, none of your alternate choices need to be considered, and your ballot counts again for your favorite. If your favorite gets eliminated your ballot counts for whichever finalist you prefer, just like in a two-election runoff, but without the second trip to the polls. This avoids the need for separate runoff elections, which would cost taxpayers and candidates a lot of money, extend the

campaign season into December, and typically result in lower voter turnout. Burlington used IRV in its last mayoral election, which went off without a hitch and was hailed as a huge success.

IRV has been supported by many state leaders over the years, including Democrats such as Howard Dean and Secretary of State Deborah Markowitz, and Republicans such as Ruth Dwyer and Barbara Snelling, and Independents like Bernie Sanders. The League of Women Voters along with many other organizations including the Grange, Common Cause, VPIRG, and the AFL-CIO support adopting instant runoff voting. A few years ago, over 50 towns voted at town meeting on whether the legislature should adopt instant runoff voting to allow the majority of voters to elect statewide offices. The advisory referendum passed in 95% of the towns with overwhelming margins. The time for legislative action is now.