



Instant Runoff Voting:

An Overview

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Instant Runoff Voting?

From Robert's Rules of Order:

“Any of a number of voting methods by which, on a single ballot when there are more than two possible choices, the second or less-preferred choices of voters can be taken into account if no candidate or proposition attains a majority...”

Instant-runoff voting, sometimes called IRV, is a voting system in which voters rank candidates in order of preference on an electoral ballot. If no candidate receives the majority of votes, the candidate with the lowest number of first preference votes is removed from the ballot, and his/her ballots are redistributed amongst the remaining candidates according to the next ranking on each ballot. This process continues until one candidate secures a majority of votes. Because the method is, quite literally, a simulated series of runoff elections.¹



sometimes called IRV, is a rank candidates in order of ballot. If no candidate receives candidate with the lowest rankings is removed from the redistributed amongst the according to the next ranking continues until one candidate "Instant runoff" is used literally, a simulated series of

Who Used it?

The first implementation of Instant Runoff Voting in the United States was in the year 1912. In that year, Florida, Indiana, Maryland, and Minnesota utilized IRV in deciding the winners in local primary races.² Though these were the first documented instances of IRV usage in the United States, they were certainly not the

¹ Solgard, Tony A., and Paul Landskroener. "Municipal Voting System Reform: Overcoming the Legal Obstacles." Bench and Bar of Minnesota (2002). Print.

² The History of IRV." FairVote Archives. Fairvote America. 27 Nov. 2009. <http://archive.fairvote.org/irv/vt_lite/history.htm>.

longest lasting; the IRV method was repealed in all three states, at least partially due to the fact that citizens did not seem to see a valuable outcome from the new process.³

In one article on the subject, the authors seem to suggest political calculations (as well as a nebulous counting system) also played a part in at least one repeal effort:

In 1912, the state of Minnesota adopted a modified form of Instant Runoff Voting for all primary elections, including those for city, county, district, and state offices. It was repealed in 1915. A brief news article from the time indicates political calculations entered into the decision as well as problems with election judges not knowing how to properly conduct the vote count.⁴

After the primary voting repeals, instant runoff voting all but disappeared from the American political discussion, only to reappear in Michigan in the 1970's. Ann Arbor was one of the first modern cities in the United States to use IRV, implementing it in a 1974 mayoral election.⁵ One article writes that though a local political action group was successful in lobbying for IRV's usage in Ann Arbor, it was later repealed in a citizen initiative.⁶ The same article, by the Michigan Green Party but written even-handedly, also states that objections (and the eventual vote to repeal) fell almost entirely along party lines.⁷ Republicans opposed the system and Democrats endorsed it, largely because the close nature of an Ann Arbor runoff election would almost certainly favor Democrats.⁸ Post election - and pre-repeal - opposition only intensified; it seemed that, on top of typical political positions, the system in use was "cumbersome" and election workers were "poorly trained."⁹ The public lost confidence in the system, partly due to a lack of comprehensive training for vote-counters, and partly due to a disconnect between the technology available and the technology necessary.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Op. Cit. Solgard, Tony.

⁵ Walter, Benjamin. "Instant Runoff Voting: History in Ann Arbor." History of Instant Runoff Voting. Green Party of Michigan, 1998. Web. 27 Nov. 2009. <<http://www.migreens.org/hvgreens/aa-irv01.htm>>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Who Uses It?

San Francisco, California

Nearly 30 years later, San Francisco would implement one of the most successful models of Instant Runoff Voting.¹⁰ What began as a method used to elect young people to the school committee quickly transformed into the status quo model for local elections in the city. As of December 2009, the city of San Francisco uses Instant Runoff Voting in nearly all of its yearly elections.¹¹ One of the least acrimonious examples of IRV implementation available, it is also the most popular; by significant margins, citizens of San Francisco preferred the model to traditional voting, and considered it to be more fair.¹²

Burlington, Vermont

In our own region, Burlington, Vermont approved the use of IRV in 2006 for its mayoral races. Since then, it has used the process twice.¹³ It was especially necessary in the 2009 race, when no one candidate (of the five) emerged with even close to a clear majority.¹⁴ The city went through several rounds of the instant runoff model before finally declaring that the incumbent had attained a majority.¹⁵ On the city's public website, the elections page seems to debunk several popular claims against IRV voting, in a way that other sites simply did not. The website states that with current technology, it was not necessary to purchase special voting machines; it also states that, beyond education and training, the process did not actually cost the municipality a great deal more money to implement.¹⁶

Minneapolis, Minnesota

One model from which we can draw a significant amount of informational and opinion material is that of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The "better half" of the Twin Cities passed IRV in a 2006 citizen referendum, for

¹⁰ Neely, Francis, and Corey Cook. "An Assessment of Ranked-Choice Voting in the San Francisco 2005 Election." Public Research Institute (2006). Print.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Burlington Votes." Election Questions. City of Burlington Vermont, 2010. Web. 27 Nov. 2009. <<http://www.burlingtonvotes.org/faq/>>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

usage in mayoral, city council, and local office elections.¹⁷ Its implementation, however, was held up by an injunction filed by a local citizen group charging that the system was unconstitutional.¹⁸ In the unanimous decision upholding IRV, the Minnesota Supreme Court addressed a concern that has continued to trouble groups on both sides of the runoff voting model; the question of whether it goes against the Constitutional precedent popularly referred to as “one man, one vote:”

Although the Court’s one-person, one-vote cases do address the general issue of unequal weighting of votes, they are inapposite here. The one-person, one-vote cases had their origin in the malapportionment of legislatures. That is, the number of voters in some districts electing one legislator was several multiples higher than in other districts, meaning that a vote in the smaller population district had more impact in terms of electing a legislator than a vote in the more populous district. No such vote inequality is created by IRV.¹⁹

After the decision was handed down in June of 2009, Minnesota used IRV in November 2009 elections to elect the mayor, 13 city councilors, and seven other local offices.²⁰ The City of Minnesota estimated the cost of its implementation of IRV to be 1.8 million dollars.²¹

Pierce County, Washington

The most recent successful repeal effort of an Instant Runoff Voting system was in Pierce County Washington, which implemented IRV in 2006 and repealed it in 2009.²² The IRV method passed in Pierce county with 53% of the vote in 2006, and was upheld in 2008 with 67% of the vote.²³ One can draw the conclusion from several individual news articles that IRV in Pierce County was simply a victim of being in the

¹⁷ Collins, Terry. "Measure to Overhaul Municipal Races Passes." Minneapolis Star Tribune 8 Nov. 2006. Print.

¹⁸ Fryer, Joe. "Lawsuit Challenges Minneapolis Instant Runoff Voting System." Local News. NBC. KARE 11, Minneapolis - St-Paul, Minnesota, 2006. KARE 11 Onlines. National Broadcasting Corporation. Web. 27 Nov. 2009.

<http://www.kare11.com/news/news_article.aspx?storyid=490380>.

¹⁹ Hennepin County Minnesota Voter Alliance v. City of Minneapolis. Minnesota State Supreme Court. 11 June 2009. Print.

²⁰ Brandt, Steve. "Minneapolis will use Ranked-Choice Voting Method." Minneapolis Star Tribune 12 June 2009. Web. 27 Nov. 2009. <http://www.startribune.com/politics/local/47774887.html?elr=KArksi8cyaiUjc7YUjD3aPc:_Yyc:aUU>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Wickert, David W. "Voters Changing their Minds on Ranked-Choice." Seattles News Tribune 4 Nov. 2009. Web. 27 Nov. 2009. <<http://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/story/940959.html>>.

²³ "November 7, 2006 General Election - Final Election Results." Pierce County Internet. 7 Nov. 2006. Web. 27 Nov. 2009. <<http://www.co.pierce.wa.us/pc/abtus/ourorg/aud/Elections/archives/gen06/results.htm>>.

wrong place at the wrong time. It was implemented amidst larger statewide discussion and debate around Washington’s “top two” system, which places the top two candidates in each primary in the general election pool, regardless of affiliation.²⁴ The state’s Supreme Court later struck down that model, which may have tainted opinions on IRV.²⁵ An arguable more significant issue was cost; according to a newspaper article published after the vote to repeal, Pierce County had spent slightly more than 2 million dollars implementing the system in area elections.²⁶ What was already unacceptable to opponents of the system quickly became unacceptable to the majority of voters too.

Table of Usages

To illustrate the spectrum of IRV usages across the country, below is a table of some of the more notable models in use.²⁷

State of Arkansas	Aspen, CO	Burlington, VT	State of Louisiana	San Francisco, CA	Minneapolis, MN
Adopted in 2005, first used in 2006. Implemented for overseas absentee ballots.	Adopted in 2007, first used in 2009. Implemented for Mayoral and City Council races.	Adopted in 2005, first used in 2006. Implemented in Mayoral races	Adopted and first used in the 1990’s . Implemented for overseas/military voters in federal and state runoffs.	Adopted in 2002, first used in 2004. Implemented for most city offices, including Mayor and Board of Supervisors.	Adopted in 2006, first used in November 2009. Implemented for Mayor and City Council races.

The Controversies

The Bucklin Method

In 1912, the City of Deluth attempted a method somewhat similar to IRV, called the Bucklin Method.²⁸ IRV opponents often cite the Bucklin Method - and the subsequent Supreme Court that struck it down - to be evidence against the modern implementation of the instant runoff model. According to lawyers Tony Solgard

²⁴ Wickert, David W. "Voters Changing their Minds on Ranked-Choice." Seattles News Tribune 4 Nov. 2009. Web. 27 Nov. 2009. <<http://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/story/940959.html>>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "IRV Implementations in the United States." Wikipedia. 2009. Web. 27 Nov. 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IRV_implementations_in_United_States>.

²⁸ Op. Cit. Solgard, Tony.

and Paul Landskroener, authors of an article outlining the legal obstacles to IRV, the Bucklin model worked as follows:

In the Bucklin vote-counting system, if no candidate received the majority of first choices, all second choices were added to the first choices already tallied, and vote totals were checked to see if any candidate reached the new majority threshold. Thus, in contrast to Single Transferable Vote [or IRV], under Bucklin some voters' votes were counted more than once, and a second-choice vote for a candidate could work as a vote against one's first choice.

To see how this is true under the Bucklin system, consider a voter who casts a first vote for candidate A, a second choice vote for candidate B, and one "additional choice" vote for candidate C. If candidate A had a plurality, but not a majority, of first choice votes, then the voter's second choice would be added to the number of first choice votes B received, along with the second choices of other voters. Thus, the voter's second choice for B has the effect of undermining his first choice, A by giving B more total votes (first- plus second-choice votes) than A. This is why, while 12,313 voters cast ballots in the 1915 Duluth election, the total number of "votes" counted (including first, second, and additional choices) was 18,860.²⁹

Quite simply, a voter could undermine his or her own vote, or have his or her vote counted multiple times. The instant runoff model does not follow that same pattern. In the runoff model, the only time a second choice on a ballot is used is when a the first choice is declared defeated.

Cost and Implementation

Another major controversy - or stumbling point - for IRV is that many civic leaders seem to find it too nebulous for implementation; colloquially, there are simply too many potential questions and "what-if's," largely focused around the cost - and education - needed to implement the system equitably and correctly. Those questions, beyond ones of equity that have been settled under the law, are not entirely resolvable here. There is simply not one definitive source available to provide unimpeachable, exceedingly neutral guidance on the subject. In terms of cost, estimates seem to range from zero to several million dollars; in terms of training and education needed, estimated also seem to range from zero to several dozen hours. In the cities where the model has been successful, such as San Francisco and Minneapolis, voters and policymakers alike have had to weigh these questions and ambiguities against the larger facts of what IRV seeks to achieve. Coming out of those discussions and conversations, IRV has been both approved and rejected.

²⁹ Op. Cit. Solgard, Tony.

Appendix: Annotated Bibliography

Fact-Neutral

Minnesota House of Representatives Informational Brief: Instant Runoff Voting

One of the higher quality articles around is an article prepared by a legislative staffer for Minnesota's state legislature about the pro's, con's, and questions surrounding IRV. The result is a short and sweet article that addresses the central tenets for and against. A very good starting point. Available at:

www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/pubs/irvoting.pdf

Minnesota Voter's Alliance v. City of Minneapolis

The Minnesota Supreme Court ruled in favor of IRV for Minneapolis, but its findings of fact, contained largely in the first 15 pages, provide a neutral analysis of the system, the way it operates, in the arguments for and against. Especially beneficial is the Court's actual explanation of the process. One of the more understandable and straightforward explanations available. Available at: www.rangevoting.org/OPA090182-0611.pdf

"Municipal Voting System Reform: Overcoming the Legal Obstacles." Bench and Bar of Minnesota (2002).

Though the authors certainly come to a specific conclusion in terms of the legal arguments challenging the IRV model, they fairly and equitably outline the arguments on both sides. Available in print.

"An Assessment of Ranked-Choice Voting in the San Francisco 2005 Election." Public Research Institute (2006).

A great guide to the nuts and bolts of the San Francisco model, the Public Research Institute offers a quality survey of IRV implementation. Available in print.

In Favor Of

FairVote America

One of the most comprehensive sites, on both ends of the spectrum, available. FairVote is cited by nearly every other online publication about IRV, and for good reason. It is one of the most well-organized and accessible. It also offers, to great intellectual benefit, several high-quality animations of how the process actually functions on election day. Available at: <http://www.fairvote.org/?page=19>

Against

Minnesota Voters Alliance

It is, for reasons unclear, much more difficult to find websites and sources of substance that argue against IRV. One of the few websites that outlines a number of contentions and points against the instant runoff model is that of the Minnesota Voter's Alliance, the organization that was the appellant in the states decisive court case. Though the website does not exude a great deal of professionalism, the content provides a good opposing viewpoint. Available at: <http://mnvoters.org/IRV.htm>