

Instant runoff voting runs into issues, too

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That was one ugly way to elect a judge.

More than a month after the Nov. 2 election, North Carolina finally has decided that Doug McCullough is its newest member of the N.C. Court of Appeals, thanks to a new procedure called “instant runoff voting.”

In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted that we used this space several times before Nov. 2 to applaud the innovation. We had high hopes that instant runoff voting would make low-turnout, costly runoff elections a thing of the past. It might still do that, but it’s not without issues.

McCullough won his seat on the court as a result of counting second and third choices cast by voters in November. That’s the way the process is supposed to work, but consider the fact that Cressie Thigpen actually had about 100,000 more votes than McCullough in the count taken on Election Day. His total wasn’t a majority, however, in a field of 13 candidates.

Eighty percent of the voters cast first-choice ballots for someone other than Thigpen. Eighty-five percent of the voters cast first-choice ballots for someone other than McCullough.

It isn’t reasonable to argue that McCullough is the candidate that North Carolina voters prefer, based on those numbers. But let’s not forget that a runoff election — even one that’s statewide — traditionally draws a miserable turnout, as well. In the Democratic primary runoff for U.S. Senate last summer, for example, winner Elaine Marshall received fewer votes than her opponent, Cal Cunningham, received in the first primary.

There’s no clear answer to the runoff dilemma. Hold a runoff on a separate date and watch turnout plummet. Try something like instant runoff voting, and the results are awkward, to say the least.

We appreciate the innovative thinking behind instant runoff voting, but officials need to keep looking.