



- Janet Urquhart / The Aspen Times

Aspen's instant runoff voting quick but confusing

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ASPEN, CO COLORADO,

ASPEN — Aspen chose a mayor and two City Council members Tuesday in an election that left plenty of voters confused at the polls and equally mystified as the ballots were tallied in televised proceedings late into the evening.

The city's first use of instant runoff voting, which eliminated the need for a June runoff election, got mixed reviews at the polls. And the whirlwind runoffs after three hours of tallying votes left plenty of observers at a loss to explain exactly how the results were tabulated.

The election also produced at least one challenge, though it wasn't the runoff aspect that spurred the objection.

Before the polls closed Tuesday, local resident Jim Perry challenged 801 absentee ballots that were cast in the City Clerk's Office in advance of the election. He said the ballot box in the clerk's office was not sealed and claimed those who cast the ballots did not affirm themselves as qualified voters, as required by state law. Perry was a poll watcher, appointed by mayoral candidate Marilyn Marks.

City Attorney John Worcester said Perry was misinterpreting the state statute, which allows a challenge to an individual voter at the time a vote is cast.

"It's not the challenge he's intending — to a class of votes he believes were derived illegally.

"He can go to court if he wants," Worcester said.

Marks, who raised a number of concerns with instant runoff voting, and said the city's test of the system on Monday was inadequate, said early in the evening that she was unsure if she'd challenge the new system.

"Even if I win, I might still challenge it — it's so messed up," she said.

Voters apparently found the runoff ballots — which asked them to rank the four mayoral candidates and nine council candidates in order of preference — confusing. There were 168 spoiled ballots Tuesday; two is typical, said City Clerk Kathryn Koch.

Voters exiting Aspen's Precinct 1 polling place Tuesday afternoon voiced decidedly mixed views on their first experience with instant runoff voting, or IRV. Some called the method confusing and others objected to a process that encouraged them to vote for candidates they didn't actually want to win.

To ensure their ballot counted with each round of a runoff, voters were better off ranking all of the candidates rather than just those they hoped would prevail. Some mistakenly believed they were required to rank all of the candidates.

Election judge Cindy Christensen reported plenty of miscues, including voters who forgot to cast a vote on the Aspen Art Museum question, placed at the bottom of the one-page ballot, apparently because they got caught up in ranking up to nine City Council candidates. Others gave both of their top picks for the council a No. 1 ranking, which invalidated the ballot.

“We’ve had quite a few spoiled ballots,” she said. Voters had up to three tries to fill out a ballot the scanning machine would accept. No one had required all three attempts by late afternoon, though, getting it right on the second try – usually after the first ballot was rejected because a voter ranked both of their top council choices as No. 1 picks instead of ranking one first and one second.

“I hate it. It’s very confusing,” said one voter emerging from Precinct 1 who declined to cast runoff votes. Instead, she voted for one mayoral candidate and her two choices for the two open council seats.

Others did the same, squandering their say in the runoff, should their top picks fail to win a seat.

Mark Lee said he voted for just one mayoral candidate and two council candidates, though he prefers instant runoff voting to returning to the polls in June for a runoff election.

“I know who I want and I don’t like any of the others,” he said, explaining why he didn’t rank candidates beyond the minimum.

“I didn’t like it,” said another woman. “I just want to vote for who I think is it. I didn’t like voting this way.”

Lisa Yorker cast votes for two council candidates along with her top pick for mayor, plus a runner-up candidate in the mayoral race, but said she’d rather select from runoff candidates in a separate election.

“I just like that process. I don’t know why,” she said.

But Linda Girvin said she preferred IRV to a separate runoff election in June.

“I think it’s a good idea,” she said. “I hate that runoff stuff.”

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