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Instant Runoff Voting

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Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) or rank order voting suffers from three fundamental problems: 1) it discriminates against classes of voters by adding complexity to the ballot; 2) it has a very real potential to produce perverse outcomes or voting paradoxes that are not majoritarian; and, 3) it fails to address the real problem that arises when multiple parties compete in a two-party system.

Increasing the Complexity of an Already Complicated Ballot

One of the ways that the US elections are unique when compared to other democratic systems is the length and complexity of US ballots. The US asks voters to make decisions on a multitude of offices from Presidency down to Justice of the Peace and to answer a multitude of ballot questions. Another way US elections are unique is their low level of voter turnout. The two are related. The complexity of US elections increases the costs of participating (having to gather more information to make more decisions) while making it more difficult for voters to discern the connection between any one vote they cast and what government does, which ultimately results in fewer people voting (particularly those at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale).¹

If anyone has any doubt that the complexity of an election ballot can disenfranchise voters, particularly more vulnerable classes of voters, one need only to remember Florida in 2000. Complex ballot designs—including butterfly ballots and ballots that listed candidates on more than one page—confused tens of thousands of voters, who spoiled their ballots by voting for more than one candidate. Spoiled ballots included a disproportionate number on which Al

¹ See Richard W. Boyd, "Election Calendars and Voter Turnout," *American Politics Quarterly* 14 (January-April 1986), pp. 89-104; Richard W. Boyd, "The Effects of Primaries and Statewide Races on Voter Turnout," *Journal of Politics* 51 (August 1989), pp. 730-739; Shaun Bowler, Todd Donovan, and Trudi Happ, "Ballot Propositions and Information Costs: Direct Democracy and the Fatigued Voter," *The Western Political Quarterly* 45 (June 1992), pp. 559-568; Pippa Norris, *Count Every Voice: Democratic Participation Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Pippa Norris, "Do Institutions Matter? The Consequence of Electoral Reform for Political Participation," in *Rethinking the Vote: The Politics and Prospects of American Election Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 133-148; and, Arend Lijphart, "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma: Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 1996, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 91, no. 1, March 1997, pp. 1-14.

Gore was selected, costing him the election. Spoiled ballots were more likely to occur with the more complex ballots. And, those disenfranchised by these complex ballots tended to poorer, less educated, minority, and elderly voters.²

The US has the longest and most complex ballots in the democratic world, a fact that has negative consequences for voter participation and political equality. If states in the US were to adopt IRV for all (or even some) of their elections, the situation would only be made worse. Instead of simply choosing the preferred candidate for president, senator, representative, governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, treasurer, and so on, the public would be asked to rank each candidate. Ranking each candidate in all these races means that the cognitive costs of voting would double, triple or even quadruple. And, the effect of adding such complexity to the ballot is not neutral or random; it is more likely to confuse those same groups of disadvantaged voters confused by the Florida ballots. This fact was demonstrated by exit polls of both Burlington voters and San Francisco voters who have also used IRV.³ Even when used in a single contest, IRV caused greater confusion among those on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. In other words, IRV discriminates against certain classes of voters, violating the principle of political equality.

Note: IRV proponents counter these exit poll results with data from wards or precincts, arguing poorer wards/precincts performed well in IRV contests. The problem with that claim is that it is not possible to infer facts about individual behavior (whether individuals had problems with the ballots) from aggregate data (totals for each voting location). This is known in the trade as an ecological fallacy. The exit poll data which measures the relationship at the individual level are the more reliable data.

Proponents of IRV like to frame this argument about the complexity IRV would add by countering that what critics of IRV are saying is that voters are stupid. Not so. These analyses are not impugning the intelligence of the American voter, just recognizing the limits to what a political system can ask of its citizens and recognizing that adding complexity to an already complex ballot will disproportionately harm some groups of people more than others. In a democracy that values political participation and political equality such side-effects should not be dismissed lightly.

² See Jonathan N. Wand, Kenneth W. Shotts, Jasjeet S. Sekhon, Walter R. Mebane, Jr., Michael C. Herron and Henry E. Brady, "The Butterfly Did It: The Aberrant Vote for Buchanan in Palm Beach County, Florida," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 4. (Dec., 2001), pp. 793-810. Also see *New York Times* web site <http://www.nytimes.com/images/2001/11/12/politics/recount/>.

³ Neely, Francis, Lisel Blash, and Corey Cook, "An Assessment of Ranked-Choice Voting in the San Francisco 2004 Election," (Public Research Institute, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA. May 2005; and, Anthony Gierzynski, "Testing Grounds: How Well Does Instant Runoff Voting Work?" *Campaigns & Elections: Special Case Study Edition* (May 2007), pp. 52-56, <http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/intellisphere/ce0507-special/>, accessed June 13, 2007.

Voting Paradoxes or perverse outcomes

There exists a number of voting paradoxes or perverse outcomes that can occur with IRV, which are not associated with the typical single vote system. Such outcomes contradict the claim of IRV proponents that IRV creates majority winners. Perverse outcomes include the possibility that one candidate could increase their vote only to lose the election. Another possibility is one in which every candidate can beat another candidate in a head-to-head matchup (such as candidate A beats B, B beats C, and C beats A...a paper-scissors-rock scenario) so that the election results fail to produce a true majority preference for *any* candidate. Yet another is one in which a candidate can beat any other candidate by a majority in a head-to-head matchup and yet lose the election. The probability of these perverse outcomes happening is not small.⁴

Indeed, the 2009 mayoral election in Burlington witnessed several of these perverse outcomes in what was only the second election Burlington ran using IRV. One candidate who lost the election, Andy Montroll, was preferred over all other candidates in a head-to-head matchup. That is *a majority of voters ranked Montroll ahead of the winner Bob Kiss and ahead of the second place finisher, Kurt Wright*, yet Montroll lost the election (see Table below).

No. of Voters who ranked	Kiss (Prog)	Montroll (D)	Wright (R)
Kiss (Prog) ahead of...		3,477	4,314
Montroll (D) ahead of...	4,067		4,597
Wright (R) ahead of...	4,064	3,668	

Democrat Andy Montroll was favored over Republican Kurt Wright 56% to 44% (930-vote margin) and over Progressive Bob Kiss 54% to 46% (590-vote margin) majorities. The above table provides the total number of voters choosing one candidate over another in one-on-one match-ups (shaded cells represent winner of match-up between row and column).

The 2009 election also suffered from the “no-show paradox” that means Wright voters who preferred Montroll over Kiss (that is, ranked Montroll 2nd) would have been better staying home and not voting at all. And, the election also evinced the property of nonmonotonicity—additional votes for Kiss could have made Kiss lose (if more Wright voters voted for Kiss, Montroll would have come in 2nd place in the first round and then defeated Kiss in the runoff). In sum, *it is unequivocally clear that IRV did NOT result in a majority winner in 2009.*

⁴ See Anthony Quas, “Anomalous Outcomes in Preferential Voting,” *Stochastics and Dynamics* Vol. 4, No. 1 (2004), pp. 95-105; William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook, *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973); and Peter Fishburn and Steven Brams, “Paradoxes of Preferential Voting: What Can Go Wrong with Sophisticated Voting Systems Designed to Remedy Problems of Simpler Systems,” *Mathematics Magazine* vol. 56, no. 4, September 1983: pp. 207-214

Failing to Address the Real Problem

In essence what IRV is, is an attempt to use a technological fix to solve a political problem. Single seat contests (such as mayor, or US Senator, or governor, or president) provide an incentive for those of similar political mind (that is ideology) to coalesce behind a single candidate in order to win a majority of votes and capture the seat—those that work together to build a majority before elections win, those that don't lose. This structural incentive is the main reason the US has a two party system. Forcing people of like mind to work together to win elections then creates the governing majorities that have been approved by the people and that can then go about the work of implementing the will of the people.

When a group with a (mostly) shared ideology—such as the case the Progressive Party and the Democratic Party in Vermont—becomes fragmented in this type of system, with each putting forward their own candidates, the problem that arises is a *political* problem (politics defined here simply as the means by which conflicts are resolved in order to determine who controls the government). In such cases, what IRV does is it allows the factions to ignore the political problem by using a technological fix while failing to resolve their political differences through the necessary negotiations that characterize politics. In other words, IRV allows such factions to avoid working together (as they should if they want mostly the same thing). When such factions fail to work together, they ultimately fail to accomplish the *raison d'être* of such organizations, which is not just to continue existing, but is to win control of government in order to use it to make people's lives better in a manner consistent with their political values.

Conclusion

The problems with rank order voting documented here are well known among political science scholars (PhDs) who have recognized expertise in electoral systems; indeed, it would be about as easy to find one such expert in support of rank order voting as it would be to find a qualified climate scientist who thinks global warming isn't taking place. In the end, Instant Runoff Voting is simply not the panacea that its proponents claim.

IRV proponents claim that despite these problems IRV works better than the standard plurality system with a runoff. Analyses of the startup and administrative costs of IRV conducted by the states of Maryland, Vermont, Maine and a number of local communities suggest that the claim that IRV would save money compared with traditional runoff systems is questionable.⁵ Additionally, it is not clear whether IRV elections would produce better outcomes than the standard plurality with runoff system, as IRV supporters claim. We know that IRV elections do not assure majority support for the winner (see discussion above). We also know that the strategic decisions of candidates and voters differ under different electoral systems, but the

⁵ See Department of Legislative Services, Maryland General Assembly, 2006 Session, "Fiscal and Policy Note, Senate Bill 292," http://mlis.state.md.us/2006rs/fnotes/bil_0002/sb0292.pdf, accessed October 23, 2009; Vermont Office of Secretary of State, "Instant Runoff Voting (IRV): Administrative Implementation Options and Costs," Report to the Vermont General Assembly, March 7, 2007, <http://vermont-elections.org/elections1/2007IRVReport3.8.07.doc>, accessed October 23, 2009.

specific nature of those differences when it comes to IRV versus plurality voting systems is not known at this point in time. So, it is difficult to know how any race would play out under different rules or whether the strategic calculations of voters in an IRV system would be “purer” than their strategic calculus in the current plurality system. Finally, it is not known how often runoff elections would actually be necessary under the current system versus how often runoffs occur when using IRV. That is, IRV may actually end up encouraging the very problem it is designed to fix. While we don’t have the evidence to answer this question at this time, we can note how rare runoffs are under the current system—for example, there had not been a runoff election in Burlington for at least 25 years before it adopted IRV (I am unable to find data that go back any further), after it adopted IRV runoffs occurred in both of the first two elections.

UVM Professor Anthony Gierzynski, PhD, is author of two books, over a dozen peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on elections, co-recipient of an NSF grant to study state elections and two Joyce Foundation grants to study city elections, an expert witness for *Landell v Sorrell* (548 U.S. ___ [2006]) and *Homans v. City of Albuquerque* 264 F.3d 1240, 1243-44 (10th Cir. 2001), and is currently completing work on a book on electoral reform with the working title, *Prescriptions for a Healthier Democracy: Our Dying Elections and what We Can Do to Save Them*. He conducted an exit poll study of IRV in the 2006 Burlington Mayoral race with his Vermont Legislative Research Shop students.

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