

Off the Record

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The odd IRV numbers

"I think we've seen the last of IRV voting in North Carolina," State Board of Elections Executive Director Gary Bartlett told me this week.

I hope so. And I'm going to beat the dying horse a little more just for good measure.

IRV — Instant Runoff Voting — was used in a special election for a Court of Appeals seat in November. You might remember there was a field of 13 candidates and you voted for your first, second and third choices.

Bartlett drew his opinion not because elections officials mishandled this special election and its complex, confusing procedures but because it was unpopular. Leading legislators and the governor didn't like it, and there's a good chance they'll drop the flirtation with this odd brand of voting.

The outcome sure was strange.

The result on election night was that Cressie Thigpen led with 395,220 first-choice votes, or 20 percent of the total.

Doug McCullough was second with 295,619 votes, or 15 percent.

Because Thigpen didn't win a majority, he and McCullough advanced to the "instant runoff." This was neither instant nor a runoff. Rather, it meant that second- and third-choice votes would be added to their totals to decide the ultimate winner.

About seven weeks later, that was determined to be McCullough with 543,980 votes, edging Thigpen, who had 537,325.

McCullough had turned a deficit of nearly 100,000 votes into a winning margin of 6,655 votes.

But here's a funny thing. Bartlett sent me raw vote totals last week: the numbers of 1, 2 and 3 votes for all 13 candidates in all 100 counties. When I got around to adding them up, I found that Thigpen *still* had the most votes by nearly 100,000:

718,042 for Thigpen

618,431 for McCullough.

How was that?

The raw vote totals include about a *quarter-million votes* that were tossed out in the second round of counting.

Some of those were multiple votes for one candidate. For example, if anyone used his first, second and third votes for Thigpen, all three votes are included in the raw total but only one would count in the official tally.

Also, voters whose first choice was Thigpen or McCullough had their ballots discarded at that point. For example, if someone voted for Thigpen as first choice and McCullough as second choice, the vote for McCullough was not counted in the second round of counting. The idea was that this voter should not have his second-choice vote cancel his first-choice vote.

So, for one reason or the other, Thigpen lost 180,717 votes; McCullough lost only 74,451 votes — a huge difference that statisticians might suggest was improbable.

Thigpen must have had more people who voted for him multiple times than did McCullough. And more of McCullough's first-choice voters must have given their second- or third-choice votes to Thigpen than the other way around. Either way, the math worked out very badly for Thigpen.

Analyzing exactly what happened — an exercise the legislature's program evaluation division should undertake — would require examining all ballots and finding out exactly how people voted.

My conclusion is it was convoluted, delivering a result that is hard to understand. It will be better to put this horse out to pasture.

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