

Point of View:

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Instant runoff voting poses problems

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WINSTON-SALEM - Today's runoff election for state labor commissioner will be a costly, low-turnout contest. One proposed remedy is "instant runoff voting" at the primary election, ending the need for separate runoffs. But that would be a drastic change in our way of voting and could prove worse than the problem it tries to solve.

Instant runoff voting means that in races with more than two candidates, voters mark a first, second and third choice for each office. It can be described as retallying without revoting, until a majority of votes are reshuffled into one pile.

In our state's May 6 primary, with its record turnout, ranking the choices on a long ballot with many races would have been extremely confusing to voters. It would likely have led to greater "fall-off" on down-ballot races, harming those candidates.

There are better alternatives -- using winner-take-all voting, using different thresholds or percentages needed to win or having a mail-in ballot for low-intensity runoffs. Conducting a runoff is made easier by provisions for early voting and mail-in balloting. The real problem is a lack of voter interest.

Here's the bottom line:

* North Carolina's voting machines cannot count IRV ballots. According to the State Board of Elections, "There are no provisions on ... equipment to tabulate IRV."

* IRV ballots are difficult to count. Officials had to manually tally the IRV results for an instant runoff election held in Cary as a pilot project last year. One small error cascaded into a miscount that had to be corrected at another date. One Knightdale resident, commenting on the Cary test at a follow-up meeting, said that "If the best board of elections in North Carolina had this much trouble counting 3,000 votes, this is too dangerous to try statewide."

* IRV creates new costs. The system requires specialized voting machines and software, increased ballot-printing expenditures and voter education, something North Carolina does poorly. Wake County spent \$9,000 on voter education for the Cary experiment, with advocacy organizations donating the rest.

* In Cary, the winner in the District B Town Council contest took office with less than 40 percent of the first-choice votes cast, and less than 50 percent of the votes of people who showed up on Election Day.

* Some voters in the Cary IRV experiment ranked the same candidate more than once. Some did not rank choices. Don Frantz, winner of the District B contest, said he heard from many confused voters on the campaign trail. Vickie Maxwell, another candidate, said that having to explain a novel voting process was a distraction from discussing the issues with voters. Another candidate instructed supporters to vote for him as their first, second and third choices, a confusing message that effectively caused voters to pick nobody else as a second choice.

* IRV places a cognitive burden on voters. Who should you rank second or third, or should you rank at all? Voters should not need calculators to figure out how to vote. According to Eugene Weeks, chairman of the Wake County Voter Education Coalition, "The ballot that is being used now is already confusing to some voters, yet you want to antagonize and confuse the voters more by asking them to not only vote for one candidate, but indicate a second and third choice before leaving the voting booth. Where is the voter's rights in this process?"

* No instant-runoff capable equipment meets North Carolina's tough election standards -- so will we gut those standards and risk harm caused by uncertified software or unscrupulous voting vendors?

* North Carolina still has trouble counting votes the plain old vanilla way. On May 6, 15,000 ballots in Wake County and 2,500 in Mecklenburg County were double counted, and 4,000 were omitted in Onslow County.

Instant runoff creates new opportunities for problems. If the objective of an election process is to discern the will of the voters, then our lawmakers should work to make our voting process the simplest, most transparent and most enfranchising method for all voters.

(Joyce McCloy is with the N.C. Coalition for Verified Voting.)

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