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## May 17, 2009

### [Cary NC tries IRV, then says 'no more'](#)

Posted in [Elections](#), [IRV](#), [IRV in Cary NC](#) tagged [Elections](#), [IRV](#), [IRV in Cary NC](#) at 2:09 pm by bluebanshee

Cary NC is one of a handful of jurisdictions across the US that have experimented with Instant Runoff Voting (IRV). It has often been touted by IRV proponents as a huge success story.

But Cary NC is no longer an IRV jurisdiction and IRV supporters just don't talk about it any more — because the Cary City Council voted recently against continuing with the pilot program that had seen put in place for the 2007 election cycle.

So just what is IRV? How does it differ from 50%+1 elections used in the majority of jurisdictions in the US? Wikipedia describes IRV as

a [voting system](#) used for [single-winner elections](#), in which [voters](#) rank candidates in an order of preference. If no candidate is the first preference of a [majority](#) of voters, the candidate with the fewest number of first preference rankings is eliminated and that candidate's ballots are redistributed at full value to the remaining candidates according to the next ranking on each ballot. This process is repeated until one candidate obtains a majority of votes among candidates not eliminated.

If it sounds complicated it is because IRV adds complexity to the voting process and non-transparency to the counting process. Many voters come into the voting booth with only one strong preference and don't want any of the other candidates to have a chance. IRV forces these voters to vote for their preferred candidate only and eliminate participation in later counting rounds — or try to vote strategically for the other candidates in such a way as to ensure their preferred candidate's victory. Not necessarily intuitive or easy since the way the second and third round votes count is dependent on the elimination of some candidates in the first round, which will not be apparent at the time the voter is marking his ballot. Voting then becomes a guessing game. In a traditional runoff election the voter at least knows which candidates are still in the mix and can cast a ballot accordingly.

The counting of IRV is complex — the elimination of some candidates at the end of the first round means that second choice votes are transferred to other candidates. If a third round is required the elimination and transfer process continues. The average voter has to place great trust in the reliability of the counting algorithm in a way far beyond what is necessary in plurality voting. So the counting is opaque and non-transparent — a kind of voting voodoo with election officials in the role of witch doctor producing the magical results. If one believes strongly that the average voter should be able to understand and observe the counting of votes in a democracy, then IRV fails to meet this standard.

So what actually happened in Cary during the 2007 pilot program that led the City Council to vote against continuing with the pilot IRV program sponsored by the State Board of Elections? Some local observers provide this synopsis of the problems in a recent Op-Ed. <http://www.carynews.com/113/story/12323.html>

The 2007 Cary IRV pilot program was largely managed by IRV advocacy groups, with no advance guidelines. Some voter education volunteers admit deviating from Election Board instructions to create a more positive outcome on the exit poll surveys — also conducted by IRV advocates.

The Wake Board of Elections couldn't follow simple IRV hand tabulation procedures. Ballots were mis-sorted, simple calculator mistakes were made and a non-public recount turned up missing votes. The winner did not receive the 50 percent plus one vote majority advocates claimed IRV would ensure in a single election.

With this track record it is no wonder that the Cary City Council voted not to continue the pilot program but

let's see what Cary Council members had to say about their recent 4/30/2009 vote.  
<http://irvbad4nc.blogspot.com/2009/05/instant-runoff-voting-retreats-in-north.html>

The meeting can be viewed and listened to at the Cary Town Government website. The discussion and vote regarding adopting the plurality election method began around 1:20. Here are some excerpts from comments made by Council Members Don Frantz and Jack Smith:

#### 1:26 Don Frantz

*"One of the reasons I called for change to plurality is because we'd have a public hearing and hear what citizens had to say about it. ... **Most people said they preferred that we stick with what we've got. ... Stick with our traditional non partisan...** I highly agree that if we pursue change in our election, that we do it in a non election year. Number one, just to avoid any perception issues...*

***When our town agreed to IRV in 2007, it was kind of rush job..There was a lot of pushback, the public wasn't involved ...***

*We're on a deadline now, I think this is something we've got to study*

***When we look at doing something differently, there has to be a reason... whats Cary going to get...how is this going to make things better, Regarding plurality, IRV... I can't see how it makes our elections better other than saving money***

*I hope all of us don't mind paying more to get a little better product..*

*I like the fact that that traditional elections, no matter how many candidates you have in the race, the top two have a month to go at it. You might have your favorite, it doesn't make the instant runoff... you didn't know who to rank... but once you know who the top two candidates are... **I don't think it's that broke...** I don't think we really need to focus on fixing it..."*

#### 1:35 Jack Smith:

*"..I thought that the feedback was pretty balanced ..I didn't see it overwhelming one way or the other... when you considered Cary citizens.. The important point is that.. we have two years to do some real in-depth studying...get some legitimate polling that's not biased by out of city groups...get some feedback on our surveys, and do this in a calm reasonable manner, **Yes there may be cost issues but is a practice that we've been doing this for many years, it does determine a clear winner, a 50%+1 winner....and I think it's the right thing to do at this time...**"*

One final thought: Let's remember that Cary is the city with the most Ph.D.s per capita in the U.S. for towns larger than 75,000 people. If IRV is not easily understood and embraced by such a highly educated electorate it is hard to see how it will be widely adopted across the U.S.

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