

INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING
AND THE RENEWAL OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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We citizens of the United States like to think our nation is a model of democracy for the rest of the world, but in the eyes of the rest of the world this is clearly not true. Democracy has to do with how citizens elect their government officials, and newly democratizing nations have been rejecting our electoral system for alternative systems which they regard as superior—and with good reason. These nations include Greece, Portugal and Spain in the 1970s, many of the nations of Central and Eastern Europe freed by the collapse of the Soviet Union since the late 1980s, and, most recently, even the nations of Afghanistan and Iraq after U.S.-led military action overthrew their previous governments. Not only have newly democratizing nations been rejecting our electoral system, nations that have long had electoral systems similar to ours, such as New Zealand and England, have reformed or have seriously considered reforming their electoral systems as well.¹

Why the disenchantment with our type of electoral system? The particular system that is used in the U.S. for most of our elections is called single-member plurality voting.² In plurality voting systems, whoever gets the most votes—which is not necessarily a majority of the votes—wins.³ Our plurality voting system generally uses single-member districts where each geographic district elects only one representative, thus the term, “single-member plurality voting.” (Alternatively a plurality system could use multi-member districts, each of which elects

¹ Farrell (2001), pp. 2, 19-20, 34-38. The Iraqis adopted a proportional representation system: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi_legislative_election%2C_December_2005; http://www.cfr.org/publication/9356/iraqs_parliamentary_elections.html#2; and the Afghans adopted the single non-transferable vote, which (according to Farrell, pp. 46-47) is a “semi-proportional” system: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghan_parliamentary_election_2005; <http://www.afghanistanwatch.org/newsletterarchive/listserv9-23-05.htm#electoral>. (All of the above websites were accessed in January 2007.)

² Alternative terms are “single-member simple plurality,” “winner take all,” and “first past the post.”

³ A majority is more than half of the vote.

several representatives.)⁴ Plurality systems were established in England at the dawn of the democratic era and spread from there to England's now-former colonies, including the United States. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century British reformers noticed defects in plurality systems and advocated alternative electoral systems such as proportional representation, which by the turn of the century was adopted by most of the nations of continental Europe.⁵ While under plurality systems whoever gets the most votes wins, under proportional representation offices are awarded to parties in rough correspondence to the proportion of the total vote each party wins. Plurality electoral systems typically result in two dominant political parties, while proportional representation systems produce a variety of parties able to gain elective office.

In the United States, critics have accused single-member plurality voting as being at the root of many of the problems that plague our political life,⁶ such as:

- Restricted choices for voters. Ours is a classic “two-party” system, which means that only candidates from two dominant political parties—the Democrats and the Republicans—have a realistic chance of winning the most votes in an election. If a voter wants to vote for someone from a less-established party or for an independent candidate, not only will her candidate be unlikely to win, the voter might end up helping the dominant party she dislikes more to win by giving up her chance to vote for the other dominant party. Called the “spoiler” effect of plurality systems, this artificially depresses the vote for candidates outside of the two dominant parties. In addition, in many voting districts only *one* of the two dominant parties has a realistic chance of winning, due to the way district boundaries are deliberately drawn to include or exclude particular geographically-located blocks of voters. This means that voting is a waste of time for almost all of the voters in the district, as that one party's candidate is all but assured of winning before voting even begins.

⁴ In single-member plurality systems, the candidate who gets the most votes in a district, no matter how low a percentage of the total vote that is, wins the seat for that district. In multi-member plurality systems each voter gets to vote for several candidates, and the seats in that district are parceled out to the top vote-getting candidates until all of the seats are filled.

⁵ Farrell (2001), pp. 32-34, 70.

⁶ For two well-written accounts of the how single-member plurality voting system creates these and other problems, see Amy (2002) and Hill (2002).

- Negative campaigns that obscure candidates' positions. Because there are only two viable parties and whoever gets the most votes wins, the best strategy for a candidate of a dominant party is to (1) attack the other dominant party's candidate so as to deter people from voting for that candidate, and (2) be as broad and vague as possible about his or her own positions so as to avoid alienating any voters. This results in campaigns that are negative in tone and empty of informative content. (Because they are so unlikely to win, the campaigns of independent candidates and candidates of other parties are mostly ignored by the dominant party candidates, the media, and the general public, and thus have little effect on the overall tone of election campaign activities.)
- Low voter participation. Very few of those who are eligible to vote in the U.S. actually bother to register and vote: only about half vote in Presidential elections, about a third in Congressional elections, and even fewer in state and local elections. Two reasons for this voter tune-out are the restricted voting choices and uninspiring election campaigns described above. Voters also tune-out because they feel their vote does not make a difference, which is explained further below.
- Diminished government responsiveness to voters. Because of the restricted voting choices, voters have less leverage to get politicians to respond to their concerns. If both the dominant parties ignore some issue, or if both the dominant parties take similar positions on an issue, dissatisfied voters have nowhere to turn. Similarly, if a voter disagrees with one of the dominant parties on one issue and with the other dominant party on another issue, the voter has nowhere else to turn. Elected officials thus feel free to ignore voters on many issues, and instead their actions are influenced by big money campaign contributors or lobbyists and political "insiders" with special access.

Such oft-decried problems as those described above are not due to massive numbers of unethical politicians and apathetic citizens, but are a by-product of our single-member plurality system. Although there have long been activists and intellectuals who have pointed this out and

called for replacing our system with proportional representation, these efforts have never gotten much traction. The problem is not only that the two dominant political parties wish to retain their dominance—although that is certainly an obstacle—but that proportional representation would be such a radical change in the U.S., for example, abolishing single-member districts and the kind of geographic representation that U.S. citizens have grown used to. But there is another type of electoral system that has a better chance of being instituted here, and in fact has been rapidly gaining attention in the last few years.

Instant Runoff Voting

In 1856 the British reformer Thomas Hare proposed that voters be given the opportunity to rank candidates in the order of each voter's preferences, and that this ranking be factored into the distribution of seats in England's multi-member districts. This procedure was rejected as too complicated, but the American professor W.R. Ware saw that Hare's ranked preference voting could be adapted to single-member districts as well. This idea received little attention in the United States or England at the time, but at the beginning of the twentieth century an Australian professor advocated it for elections to their House of Representatives and it was eventually adopted and has continued to be used for elections to that body since 1918.⁷ This voting system, usually referred to as the alternative vote, has also been used in Australian state house elections, the Irish presidential election, and a few other places.⁸

The distinctive characteristics of the alternative vote are that it requires a majority of votes rather than a plurality to elect someone, and it allows voters to rank candidates in the order of each voter's preferences. If a majority of votes is not obtained by any candidate when all the votes for first-ranked candidates are counted, the candidate with the fewest of these votes is eliminated and the votes are recounted using the highest-ranked still-eligible candidate on each voter's ballot. This process of elimination and recounting is repeated until a majority is

⁷ Reilly and Maley (2000), pp. 38-42; Farrell and McAllister (2005), pp. 82-83. Ranked preference voting in multi-member districts has been used in the Australian Senate since 1919 and in a few other nations such as Ireland and Malta; Reilly and Maley (2000), pp. 37-38, 42-43; Farrell (2001), pp. 121-123.

⁸ Farrell (2001), pg. 56; Norris (2004), pg. 49; Farrell and McAllister (2005), pg. 82. The system is also recommended for use by *Robert's Rules of Order*, and in the U.S. is used by various institutions such as the American Political Science Association, the Federal Reserve Board, and many colleges and universities; Richie, Kleppner and Bouricius (2000), pp. 6, 9; Hill (2006), pg. 58.

obtained. In the U.S., the term “instant runoff voting” caught on for this type of voting system, because it eliminates the need for a traditional runoff election. Traditional runoff elections are found in places that have a majority requirement for electing a candidate, as some U.S. electoral districts do, but in which voters cannot rank candidates. In these situations, if no candidate receives a majority of the votes then a second, runoff election must be held between the two top voting-getting candidates from the initial election.⁹ The ability to rank preferences for candidates on the instant runoff ballot makes the second election superfluous, and thus does away with the added effort and expense involved in holding it.¹⁰

Instant runoff voting (IRV) also frees voters to vote for less-established party or independent candidates without causing their less preferred dominant party candidate to win, thus eliminating the spoiler effect. Because only a candidate who obtains a majority of votes can win, a candidate cannot be elected simply because the voters who oppose him or her had split their votes between other candidates. Rectifying the spoiler effect has been one of the principal motivating factors in efforts to institute IRV in the United States. An early example is Ann Arbor, Michigan during the 1970s, where conservatives were winning the mayoral election because the larger liberal vote was split between the Democrats and the Human Rights Party. The liberals got IRV adopted and began winning, but the conservatives got it repealed in 1976.¹¹

With the number of non-majority winners in U.S. elections increasing,¹² a wider movement to institute IRV began gaining momentum in the late 1990s, with legislative efforts begun in Texas in 1997, New Mexico, California and Vermont in 1998, and North Carolina and

⁹ Farrell (2001), pp. 50-51.

¹⁰ In primary elections in eleven U.S. states during the early twentieth century voters were allowed to rank their preferences for candidates in order to eliminate the need for a second, runoff election. Four of the states used versions of instant runoff voting (Florida, Indiana, Maryland, and Minnesota), and seven used a different system known as the Bucklin system. Three of the four IRV states eliminated all but the top two vote-getters if there was no majority winner after the first count; only Maryland eliminated candidates one-by-one in a succession of recounts as in the alternative vote or the current proposals for IRV. Vermont Commission to Study Instant Runoff Voting (1999), “Appendix E: The History of Instant Runoff Voting;” Reilly and Maley (2000), pg. 40; Richie, Kleppner and Bouricius (2000), pg. 9.

¹¹ The repeal passed in a low-turnout election after a campaign that centered on the difficulty of hand-counting IRV second-round recounts; there were also racial undertones since the mayor elected in 1975 was black. Richie, Kleppner and Bouricius (2000), pg. 9; Vermont Commission to Study Instant Runoff Voting (1999), “Appendix E: The History of Instant Runoff Voting.”

¹² Primarily because voter loyalties to the two dominant parties are weakening, with more people willing to vote for independent and less-established party candidates despite the spoiler effect.

Alaska in 1999.¹³ The Presidential campaigns of Ralph Nader as a Green Party and an independent candidate during the very close Presidential elections of 2000 and 2004 brought renewed attention to the problem of the spoiler effect in the U.S. voting system, spurring the IRV movement to an increasing number of successes at the local government level.¹⁴ IRV measures were passed in Santa Clara County CA in 1998, Vancouver WA in 1999, San Leandro CA in 2000, Burlington VT and San Francisco CA in 2002, Ferndale MI and Berkeley CA in 2004, Tacoma Park MD in 2005, and Davis CA, Oakland CA, Minneapolis MN, and Pierce County WA in 2006.¹⁵ IRV has not yet been implemented in most of these localities due to factors such as not having IRV-compatible voting machines or apparent conflict with state election laws, but implementation took place in San Francisco beginning in 2004 and in Burlington beginning in 2006. In addition, the states of Arkansas and Louisiana now provide IRV for local and statewide elections on the absentee ballots for overseas military personnel from their states, bills have been introduced in a number of state legislatures to establish IRV for all state-wide and federal elections in those states, and IRV-related bills have been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives.¹⁶

How Would U.S. Politics Change Under IRV?

The existence of the traditional runoff election in some places in the U.S. should remind us that despite the current predominance of single-member plurality voting, there has been variation in our electoral system as well as significant change across time. The United States has been in a fairly continuous state of electoral evolution since its beginnings: for example, extending the vote to the unpropertied in the early nineteenth century and to women in the early twentieth; introducing the direct election of Senators, the initiative, the referendum and the recall

¹³ Richie, Kleppner and Bouricius (2000), pp. 13-15.

¹⁴ Of course the movement has also had its failures; for example, in Alaska a 2002 state-wide vote rejected IRV 64-36%; Langan (2005), pg. 1572.

¹⁵ Source: various news reports. In some cases the voting system established was a multi-member preference voting system similar but not identical to IRV as I have described it; in multi-member districts the threshold for winning is not a majority of the votes but is based on a formula involving the number of seats to be filled. A multi-member preference voting system has been used in Cambridge MA since the 1940s; Hill (2006), pg. 58.

¹⁶ Langan (2005), pp. 1571-1572. Also, in 2006 North Carolina passed an IRV measure for state-wide elections involving judicial vacancies, and in Colorado IRV was used to fill a vacancy for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives; news reports. (Recent IRV news reports may be found at www.fairvote.com).

during the Progressive era; insuring the voting rights of black Americans in the civil rights era; and opening the vote to 18-to-21 year olds at the time of the Vietnam War. As for variation, multi-member districts were once common in state legislative elections, multi-member Congressional districts could be found up until the 1960s, proportional representation and ranked preference voting have been used in dozens of localities at one time or another, and cumulative voting (a form of ranked preference voting) has recently been making inroads as a solution for cases where issues of race are implicated in the drawing of district boundaries.¹⁷ Clearly, change in the U.S. voting system is not unprecedented. If instant runoff voting was to be implemented as our next major electoral reform in the U.S., what would the effect be? Let us examine this question from the standpoint of the four major problems of our current electoral system described above.¹⁸

First of all, IRV frees voters to vote for less-established party or independent candidates if they would like to, due to the elimination of the spoiler effect; they can still show a preference for one of the two dominant parties by choosing it as a second choice in case there is no majority winner in the first round. The two-party system would be altered by giving voters this freedom, although it is not likely to be ended by it. Single-member districts, which we would still have, tend to produce two dominant parties, but single-member districts with ranked preference ballots generally have a larger number of active parties than single-member plurality systems.¹⁹ For example, the Australian House of Representatives tends toward a centrist, bipolar party system, composed of the Labor Party versus a coalition of the Liberal Party and the National Party (the latter two are urban conservative and rural conservative parties, respectively); other party

¹⁷ Amy (2002), pp. 20, 239, 256; Weaver (1986); Farrell and McAllister (2000), p. 20; Bowler, Donovan & Brockington (2003).

¹⁸ Bearing in mind, of course, that there is always an element of speculation in making predictions about human social behavior. My view as a trained political scientist is that even with the best social science research, one can make only an educated guess about the likely results of changes to laws or institutions, due to the complexity of the human capacity for choice in behaviors.

¹⁹ Lijphart (1994), pg. 119. The reason for the relation between single-member districts and two-party systems is that only one person can win in a single-member district, thus all the voters opposing an incumbent office-holder will have the incentive to combine in a single party to vote out the incumbent, and all the voters who support the incumbent will have the incentive to combine forces to defeat the challenger. This results in two pragmatic parties that aim at broad voter appeal, and a host of smaller parties more concerned with ideological or issue consistency than winning.

candidates are rarely elected.²⁰ But minor party candidates have, at times, wielded considerable influence on a major party's policy positions by bargaining with their voters' second-choice preference ranking,²¹ and in both Australia and Ireland minor parties often link up with one of the dominant parties by asking their voters to cast their second-choice vote for their partner party.²² Thus under IRV in the U.S. we would expect Democrats and Republicans to continue to dominate, but other parties to play a more substantive role in our electoral system. The Democratic and Republican parties would continue to play the role of "large-tent" parties aiming at broad voter appeal and winning most of the elective offices, while smaller parties would seek out ideological or issue niches with smaller sets of voters that they would use as bargaining chips in negotiations with a dominant party partner. This arrangement would give voters more electoral choices in which to express their political preferences (and their expression of preferences would be more clearly reflected in the initial election results), addressing the first of the four problems discussed above.²³

Second, the style of election campaigns should change for the better at least to some degree, although the evidence is sketchy and mixed at this point. IRV proponents contend that candidates in IRV elections will run more positive, issue-oriented campaigns, because they will not want to alienate potential second-choice votes from rival candidates' supporters. On the one hand, news reports indicate that some rival candidates in IRV elections in San Francisco have run unusually positive and cooperative campaigns, endorsing each other as second choices and even co-hosting campaign fund-raisers together.²⁴ On the other hand, polls of voters in the first San Francisco IRV election found that while 15% thought the campaign was less negative than

²⁰ This pattern has persisted across the twentieth century up to the present day. Reilly and Maley (2000), pg. 55; Farrell and McAllister (2005), pg. 81. The National Party's ability to win seats in the House is due to a high concentration of its voters in a few (rural) districts; Wright (1986), pg. 135.

²¹ Wright (1986), pg. 131.

²² Lijphart (1994), pg. 135.

²³ District boundaries could still be drawn to favor one dominant party over the other, but that favored party would have to compete with its minority party partner(s) to be the first-ranked choice of voters in that district, thus giving the voters more leverage to influence the favored party's positions through use of the ranking on their ballots.

²⁴ Dean E. Murphy, "New Runoff System in San Francisco Has the Rival Candidates Cooperating," *New York Times* (9/30/04); <<http://www.sfrcv.org/articles/nytimes093004.htm>> (accessed Feb. 22, 2007). For similar reports from other newspapers, such as the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Los Angeles Times*, see <<http://www.sfrcv.org/>>

usual, 14% thought it was more negative, with the majority seeing no difference.²⁵ In addition, election campaigns for seats in the Australian House have been characterized as displaying a “confrontational” style of politics, with the dominant liberal and conservative parties facing off against each other.²⁶ Putting these clues together, it is likely that there will be more positive and cooperative relations between the campaigns of candidates who are closer on the ideological spectrum (such as between Libertarians and Republicans, or between Greens and Democrats, or between rivals in the primary of a particular political party), due to the seeking of second-choice votes, but that campaigns will continue to be negative between the dominant party candidates (Democrats versus Republicans), because these candidates would be the most likely to reach the final round of vote-counting and at that point next-choice votes will be irrelevant. But it is also possible that the latter campaigns will become more positive as well, if the dominant parties find that this attracts second-choice votes from voters in the middle of the ideological spectrum (for example, supporters of “centrist” independent candidates).²⁷ In sum, there should be at least a little, and possibly a good amount, of improvement in the quality of election campaigns.

Third, voter participation will likely rise. This certainly will be true when turnout under IRV is compared to turnout for second elections in traditional runoffs, as the latter tend to have very low turnout rates. For example, a study of the 2005 San Francisco Assessor-Recorder election found a dramatic increase in turnout under IRV when compared to the traditional runoff (in some areas tripling it), especially in the poorest and most racially diverse neighborhoods.²⁸ Whether voter turnout under IRV will be higher than turnout in a non-IRV general election is less certain, but still likely, based on the fact that voters will have more real choices, independent and “minor” party candidates will be able to campaign more effectively once freed of the spoiler effect, and dominant party candidates will have to work harder for votes because of the increased

²⁵ Neely, Blash, and Cook (2005), pg. 36. On this subject I am more inclined to credit news reporters’ observations than survey polls of voters, because most voters pay very little attention to the campaigns for local government offices. (The election was in November 2004, a Presidential election year.)

²⁶ Wright (1986), pg. 135.

²⁷ Centrist independent candidates also would likely have the effect of pulling the dominant party candidates more toward the middle of the ideological spectrum in their search for second-choice votes.

²⁸ Jerdonek (2006).

competition. There is some evidence to support this expectation.²⁹ In the Ann Arbor IRV elections of 1973 and 1975, voter turnout was 28% higher than in the elections of 1971 and 1977 without IRV.³⁰ Other forms of ranked preference voting in the U.S. have been associated with higher voter participation as well. In Cambridge MA, which has a multi-member ranked preference electoral system, voting turnout rates have been in the 49-60% range, much higher than most municipalities.³¹ And a study of a switch to cumulative voting (another form of multi-member ranked preference voting) in several U.S. communities found turnout increased by about five percentage points and sustained this higher turnout over time.³²

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the government should become more accountable to voters. According to Farrell and McAllister, “studies based on surveys of politicians have demonstrated how electoral systems that are characterized by a candidate-orientation in politics [voting for a particular candidate rather than for a particular party] and high degrees of preferential voting tend to produce greater attention to personal vote chasing by politicians and the maintenance of close links with their electorates.”³³ In other words, where elections are candidate-oriented, as they are in the U.S., and voters can indicate relative preferences for candidates, as under IRV, candidates and elected officials pay more attention to the voters and what the voters’ concerns are. I regard this as the most important of the likely effects of instituting IRV in U.S. elections: tipping the balance of political influence away from big money campaign contributors and political insiders with special access, and back toward the common citizen. This should have collateral effects as the common citizen’s increased importance encourages more efforts at civic education and grassroots organizing, improving the functioning of our democracy overall. As noted by Farrell and McAllister in their analysis of data from a number of nations, ranked preference voting is associated with higher levels of voter satisfaction

²⁹ This is one topic for which the Australian experience is no guide, because it has compulsory voting laws.

³⁰ Vermont Commission to Study Instant Runoff Voting (1999), “5. IRV Could Increase Voter Participation.”

³¹ Amy (2002), pg. 189, citing Leon Weaver, “Two Cheers for Proportional Representation in Cambridge: A Preliminary Report on Research in Progress,” a paper presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, Denver CO, September 2-5 1982, pg. 5. The statistic is from elections held in the 1980s. By way of comparison, municipal elections generally have turnouts in the 10-20% range.

³² Bowler, Brockington, and Donovan (1997).

³³ Farrell and McAllister (2006), pg. 726.

with democracy.³⁴

Other Arguments

Many other arguments both pro and con have been raised regarding IRV, and I will address a few of the more prominent of them in this section.

Are office-holders who win with a majority of the votes, as under IRV, regarded as more legitimate than those who win without a majority, as can happen under a plurality voting system?

An argument frequently used in support of IRV is that by requiring a majority to elect a candidate, an elected official will have greater democratic legitimacy than if elected by less than a majority, an occurrence which has become more frequent in our plurality elections in recent decades.³⁵ As far as I can tell, the alleged illegitimacy of non-majority winners is not much of a problem, as U.S. citizens commonly accept the legitimacy of officials elected with less than a majority under current rules. For example, even after the extremely close Presidential election of 2000, with all of its contention over ballot-counting methods and court decisions, 83% of U.S. citizens said they would accept Bush as a legitimate President, including 70% of Gore supporters, even though more than 70% of Gore supporters said the Bush v. Gore Supreme Court decision was unfair.³⁶ But there is evidence that voters regard IRV elections as more fair than majorities obtained under traditional runoff elections. In San Francisco, 37% of the voters in the 2005 election found IRV to be more fair than the previous traditional runoff system, more than

³⁴ Farrell and McAllister (2006), pg. 742. Their study included many different types of electoral systems, most of them with multi-member districts (e.g., closed party list proportional representation systems in the category of non-preferential systems and the single transferable vote in the category of a preferential system), and so inferences comparing only systems with single-member districts such as the U.S. and Australia may not hold up.

³⁵ In one sense this is also a possibility under IRV. In the case where a large number of voters voted only for candidates who are all eliminated before the final round of counting—for example, if many voters chose only one candidate and their candidates end up being eliminated—the winning candidate may win with a less than a majority of the total number of votes that were originally cast. For example, imagine the total number of voters who cast votes is 50,000, there are several candidates, and none of the candidates get a majority on the first round of counting. In the subsequent rounds of counting some candidates are eliminated, and the ballots of those voters who chose to vote only for the eliminated candidates become “exhausted,” meaning they will play no part in subsequent rounds of vote-counting. In the final round of counting the total number of votes, without the exhausted votes, is 45,000, and the winning candidate received 23,000, or 51% of them. That candidate won with only 46% of the original number of votes.

³⁶ Thompson (2002), pp. 1-3, citing Gallup polls.

two times the 15% who said the previous system was more fair.³⁷ If this is true, they would probably see IRV as more fair than plurality elections as well.

Is IRV a violation of the “one person, one vote” rule?

No—the “one person, one vote” rule means that each voter should have an equal influence on the outcome of an election,³⁸ and in the final round of counting under IRV each voter cast only one of the votes. The confusion seems to come from misconceiving IRV as though it is like a plurality election in which someone “should have” won on the first count, but some voters get to cast new votes after the fact to change the results. IRV is more accurately conceptualized, as its name implies, like a traditional runoff election in which the runoff vote (if a runoff is necessary) is cast immediately rather than at a later date.³⁹

Is IRV too confusing for voters?

U.S. voters should have no problem understanding IRV. Polls of voters using the new system in San Francisco in 2004 found that 86% said they understood the new voting system “perfectly well” or “fairly well,” and 61% preferred the new system versus 13% who preferred the old.⁴⁰ In 2005, 87% said they understood the new system perfectly or fairly well, 46% said the system was “easy” or “fairly easy” to use compared to 16% who found it “difficult” or “fairly difficult,” and 55% preferred the new system versus 17% who preferred the old.⁴¹ The cumulative vote and the single-transferable vote are both preferential choice voting systems and at least as complex as IRV, yet studies of their use in the U.S. show that these systems have not seemed hard to understand for most voters, have not depressed turnout, and have not resulted in a higher than usual number of incorrectly completed ballots.⁴² Studies of significant electoral

³⁷ Neely, Cook, and Blash (2006), pg. 30. Forty-eight percent saw no difference in fairness.

³⁸ From the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Baker vs. Carr*, 369 U.S. 186 (1962).

³⁹ Critics sometimes say that IRV gives some voters “a second bite of the apple” if there is a second round of counting, when it would be more accurate to say that IRV gives ALL of the voters a second bite of the apple—it’s just that some get to keep the same bite they wanted the first time, while others have to take a different bite.

⁴⁰ Neely, Blash, and Cook (2005), pp. 15-16, 38.

⁴¹ Neely, Cook, and Blash (2006), pp. 10, 21-22, 25.

⁴² Amy (1993), pp. 188-190; Bowler, Donovan, and Brockington (2003), pp. 65-74.

changes in other nations have, in general, shown an “impressive” ability of voters to develop an understanding of new voting systems.⁴³

Is IRV constitutional?

I am not aware of any conflicts between IRV and the U.S. Constitution, but Langan makes the argument that IRV is in conflict with some states’ statutory or constitutional law.⁴⁴ In some of these states, the law mandates election by a plurality of votes. In others, the law requires a majority winner for certain elections but “majority” has been (or is likely to be) defined by the courts to preclude a “preferential majority” using second, third, and so forth, choices. (That is, a majority must occur in the first choice of voters in the initial election, or in a traditional runoff election.) This is certainly a problem for implementation of IRV in these states, but the solution, although it may be politically difficult, is obvious: a change in those states’ election statutes or constitutions. Langan’s case therefore is not really an argument against IRV, unless reasons can be given why the electoral law or relevant constitutional provisions in those states should not be changed. Without such reasons, this argument simply begs the question of whether IRV is a good idea.

Will IRV cost more, or less, than our current voting system?

The answer to this question depends upon a number of contingencies. First, if a district has a history of traditional runoffs, IRV will almost certainly save a great deal of money by eliminating the second election. Second, it depends on the way votes are tabulated. If a district hand-counts ballots and there is not a majority in the first round, IRV vote-counting will take longer and thus cost more; if a district has vote-counting machines that are compatible with IRV, the switch will cost very little if anything; if a district has voting-counting machines that are not compatible with IRV, it will cost money to reprogram or replace the machines.⁴⁵ Finally, there

⁴³ Farrell (2001), pg. 187.

⁴⁴ Langan (2005). This argument is the centerpiece of Langan’s article attacking the use of IRV.

⁴⁵ According to Langan (2005), pg. 1586, in the November 2000 election about 38% of the counties in the U.S. used voting machines that would be compatible with IRV, and 34% used non-IRV-compatible punchcard machines. His data on the types of voting machines used came from the National Commission on Federal Elections Reform, *To Assure Pride and Confidence in the Electoral Process* (2001), which is available online at <http://www.tcf.org/Publications/ElectionReform/99_full_report.pdf> (accessed Feb. 28, 2007).

are the start-up costs in switching to IRV of educating voters and retraining administrators and election workers for the new system. The cost, or savings, of switching to IRV thus will vary from one place to another.

Does IRV favor some political parties over others?

In general, no; in specific circumstances, it might. There is nothing in IRV as a voting system that gives an advantage to Democrats over Republicans, or Republicans over Democrats, but in a specific location, switching to IRV might advantage either the Democrats or the Republicans. For example, where Democrats have been winning with less than a majority because the conservative vote is split between Republicans and Libertarians (as in Alaska), the Republicans would benefit from switching to IRV. But where Republicans have been winning with less than a majority because the liberal vote is split between the Democrats and the Green Party (as in New Mexico), Democrats would benefit by the switch to IRV. Nor is there anything in IRV as a voting system that gives an advantage to less-established parties over more-established parties. Less-established parties would have a better chance at winning than they do under our current system, but IRV does not give them any special advantage. In fact, wherever there are single-member districts two dominant parties emerge and have the advantage, whether under IRV or under our current plurality system.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Several serious problems in the U.S. political process are related to our single-member plurality voting system. This review of the research and arguments related to Instant Runoff Voting supports the contention that IRV will eliminate or mitigate these problems, and that overall it would be worth switching from our current voting system to IRV.

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Alan F. Zundel holds two political science degrees, an M.A. from Wayne State University and a PhD from the University of Michigan, and taught political science at the college and university level for nineteen years. The author of three books and several articles, he is

⁴⁶ See note 19 above.

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