

STATE ADMINISTRATION

Instant Runoff Voting:

Exhibit No. 1Date 3-11-2011Majority Rule, Maximum Choice Bill No. SB 325

The United States has one advantage in having its plurality voting system falter years after other democracies with plurality voting have had problems. These nations have had years of debate on what steps could be taken -- a debate we should catch up on quickly. The United States also has an advantage in that, unlike these countries, it has a federal system with fifty states that can enact changes on their own, even for presidential elections in their state.

We strongly recommend the instant runoff voting system for presidential elections. Used to elect Australia's parliament since the 1920s, used to elect the Irish presidency and advocated by many in the United Kingdom, instant runoff voting (also called "the alternative vote" and "majority preference voting") has the twin benefits of better assuring majority rule (at least within states) and promoting increased voter choice -- and thus participation -- in elections.

Designed to produce majority winners, instant runoff voting (IRV) allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference rather than simply "x" vote for one. This simple provision for "voter literacy" -- few voters would have difficulty marking a "1" next to a first choice, a "2" next to a second choice and so on -- allows a different method of tabulating results. Rather than the winner being whoever has the most first-place votes -- the current approach -- a candidate would need a majority of over 50% to win. If no candidate obtains a majority of first-place votes, then the last-place candidate is defeated, and, just as if there were a run-off election, the ballots for that candidate are transferred to the next candidate listed on these ballots. This transfer of ballots from last-place candidates continues until only one candidate remains or gains 50%.

If IRV had been used in 1992, Bill Clinton almost certainly still would have won the presidency, as exit polls showed that Ross Perot voters were evenly split between George Bush and Clinton. But Clinton would have had the increased legitimacy of being a majority president rather than a plurality winner with 43%, and Perot would have had a greater chance to win -- and perhaps faced a correspondingly increased level of scrutiny on his proposed policies.

Having IRV in 1996 would reverse much conventional political wisdom. Independent candidacies by Ross Perot, Colin Powell or Pat Buchanan would not fracture the opposition to Clinton -- there would be no more rumors of Clinton consultant Dick Morris helping Ross Perot's Independence Party gain ballot status. Instead, the vote in opposition to Clinton would coalesce behind the strongest of the opposition candidates. Similarly, a Jesse Jackson candidacy would help Clinton rather than hurt him. Jackson supporters on the left would be more inspired to vote, but likely would list Clinton as their second choice, where their vote would go if Jackson did not finish ahead of Clinton in a particular state.

Instant runoff voting as a result encourages candidacies for citizens who feel left out by the limitations of the current system. It provides them with a greater reason to vote and, if they choose to vote, an increased chance to have their vote count toward a winner. By opening the field to more choices -- an increase that polls show a majority of Americans would welcome -- IRV could

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lift our voter turnout, which now is among the lowest in the world. The 1992 elections provide good evidence of the positive impact more candidacies have on turnout. With Ross Perot on the ballot, voter participation rose in 49 out of 50 states. Furthermore, while the average increase in voter turnout was 5% around the nation, its average rise was 8% in the 10 states where Perot gained his highest percentages of the vote.

Although politicians may be resistant to pursue reform before absolutely necessary, they would be foolhardy to risk electoral disaster in 1996 without at least studying proposed changes. Fortunately, a mechanism may indeed exist to study IRV on a national level, as House Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole have begun steps toward formation of a powerful electoral reform commission. In addition, the Republican presidential primaries may provide a stark demonstration of the haphazard nature of plurality voting, as most states will allocate Republican convention delegates by "plurality takes all" primaries.

Regardless of action at the federal level, states can lead the way on presidential election reform. Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution explicitly gives states the power to determine the manner of choosing presidential electors. Thus, unlike abolition of the electoral college, which requires constitutional change, legislatures could institute the IRV for presidential elections (as well as for statewide offices) immediately. The only barrier is that some states might need to find new ways to tabulate ballots, but such one-time changes would be a small price to pay in exchange for providing for majority rule and for a more engaged electorate in what promises to be a watershed election in our nation's history.