



July 2006



Volume 6, Number 3

Instant Runoff Voting – A Step Towards A Healthier Democracy

By John Russo

In last month's primary election, California suffered its lowest voter turnout in twenty-five years. Less than 30% of the eligible voting population made decisions for all of California. California voters are tired of going to the polls and they are tired of negative campaigns. In just four years Californians have cast ballots in seven elections – most of which were gross with mudslinging from candidates hoping to tarnish the reputations of their opponents and gain votes. Interest groups with partisan axes to grind in both parties also spent wildly and shamelessly to distort the records and to slander the character of those candidates they opposed. These supposedly "independent" expenditures have further coarsened our political discourse and made moot any attempt at campaign spending limits. What can be done to redeem our system?

For over ten years, a coalition in Oakland has worked to introduce a simple, yet revolutionary voting practice that would help remedy the ills of voter disgust and apathy— Instant Runoff Voting (IRV). IRV is a voting method used to select a single winner from a list of two or more candidates. IRV would let voters register their first choice and then rank the other candidates. Voters could, in effect, hedge their bets and maintain influence even when their first choice doesn't win. By collecting more meaningful information from voters, it gives them a greater power of choice and measures their will more accurately. This process was invented in the United States and has been used effectively in Australia and Ireland for many decades.

In many ways, IRV is an antidote to the disease of negative campaigning. Under the IRV system, candidates would be less likely to engage in malicious campaigning because such tactics would risk alienating the voters who support "attacked" candidates. Candidates would have incentives to focus on the substantive issues in a race and gain higher rankings from those voters who might also be choosing another candidate. Voters would hear more

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about a candidate's positions and get less junk mail assassinating the opposing candidates' character. Ultimately, successful politicians would win by building coalitions and finding common ground, not tearing their opponents down. The same skills leaders must use to govern wisely and get things done.

Opponents argue that IRV is confusing and would disenfranchise minority populations. This is blatant elitism. IRV is as easy as 1-2-3. Literally, the voter chooses her first, second and third choice. Some argue that the ranking system is difficult for voters to determine how their ranked votes are to be counted. Those folks have obviously never been in a neighborhood bar during Week 15 of the NFL season when patrons of seemingly average intelligence are discussing possible playoff scenarios. Most assuredly anyone who can understand the complexities of potential "wild card" match-ups will find IRV calculations a snap.

IRV would also stimulate more participation for candidates outside the pre-dominate two-party system. Third-party candidates could run without being labeled spoilers. Competition, economists say, eventually brings the greatest benefits to consumers. Yet, Republican and Democratic functionaries don't want free-market rivalries extended to politics. Apologists for the status quo believe that offering the 'lesser of two evils' is the best we can do in our democratic process. IRV would allow voters a greater range of choices and representation.

How can it be that a society that worships the concept of choice; that can build endless permutations of choice into the purchase of consumer goods; that can record those purchase choices so minutely that decisions made by shoppers in Wichita will, within minutes, impact inventory and shipping manifests in Asia; how can it be that such a society finds it unfathomable that people ought to be able to nuance their vote with a simple preference for first, second or third?

Let's be blunt: we say voting is sacred to our democratic process but we treat it as a boring and outdated irrelevance unworthy of real resources or innovation. It's no accident that two out of three eligible voters refused to participate in last month's primary. Limited choices and negative campaigning is killing democracy. IRV is an essential first step on the road back to a healthy democracy.