

Instant Run-Off Voting Would Improve the Electoral Process

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In our current winner take all elections, a candidate can win an election with a plurality of support and leave an electorate in her wake where a majority of people actually preferred someone else.

It happened in Leominster last month in Democratic Party Primary in the 4th Worcester District. We know that Jennifer Flanagan won with 45 percent of the vote and that a MAJORITY of voters actually preferred someone other than Flanagan to be the Democratic nominee.

There's a remedy for this situation. It's called Instant-Run Off Voting or IRV. IRV is a simple process whereby voters rank all candidates on the ballot in order of preference. With IRV, not only does your vote count, it counts for MORE because your ballot measures your entire range of opinion. Thus in any election with three or more candidates in which no candidate gets a majority (50% plus one vote), an instant run-off election is held using the ranked ballots.

In a traditional run-off election, the top two vote getters continue the campaign, the voters return to the polls, and the city clerk's office, its staff and volunteers have to work another election day. And you, the taxpayer, have to foot the bill.

With its preferential ballots, the run-off election happens instantly with no further campaigning, no extra work, and no added costs, IRV ensures every election is a run-off election and produces a winner with a majority of support. Let's examine the Fourth Worcester District race as an example of how IRV might have worked.

Voters go to the polls in Leominster and are asked to rank the candidates in order of preference by putting a 1 next to their first choice, a 2 next to their second choice (this could also be done with ovals in columns – fill in the column 1 oval for your first choice, column 2 oval for your second choice, etc.). Let's assume that first choice votes were the same as they were last Tuesday (for reasons of simplicity let's scale down the election to 100 votes):

Flanagan 45% or 45 votes

Freda 31 % or 31 votes

Daigneault 14% or 14 votes

Perla 10 % or 10 votes

Under our current system Flanagan wins. But there's a problem. Flanagan only has 45% of the vote. A MAJORITY – 55% - wanted another candidate to be their rep. To ensure that Flanagan's plurality is a true measure of majority rule, IRV forces an instant run-off. The next step would be to eliminate the candidate with the least support, in this case, Perla.

Perla is eliminated and the votes are recounted. All ballots listing Perla number one are counted as first place votes for the second choice on those ballots. Let's assume in our hypothetical that the result for Perla's "ten" votes was one second place (now counted as a first) for Flanagan, eight seconds (now firsts) for Freda, and one second (now a first) for Daigneault. After the first run-off, the results are:

Flanagan 46% - 46 votes

Freda 39 % - 39 votes

Daigneault 15% - 15 votes

There's still no majority winner, so there's another run-off. All the votes are recounted. This time any ballot that lists Daigneault as first choice is counted as a vote for the highest ranked candidate remaining in the race, either Flanagan or Freda. For the sake of argument, let's say that recounting the Daigneault ballots serves up three more votes for Flanagan, but twelve more for Freda, thus yielding a final tally of:

Freda 51 % - 51 votes

Flanagan 49% - 49 votes

We have a winner - a *majority* winner. After taking the range of opinion of the voters, it turned out that even though 45% liked Flanagan best, almost no one liked her second or third best. Freda, however, seemed to have a lot of second and third place votes, so that even though she came in second on the first ballot, she got the majority of support in the run-offs.

This could just as easily have gone the other way. In the first run-off, all 10 of Perla's ballots could have listed Flanagan as their second choice and Flanagan would have had a majority after the first run-off at 56%. Either way, at least the Democrats of Leominster would know they had a nominee with a MAJORITY of support. All they know today is that a majority of them liked someone other than the person who is running against David Nault.

IRV has added benefits besides a guaranteed majority winner and a low cost run-off system. IRV eliminates the "spoiler" effect and allows citizens to always vote their conscience. If one's first choice candidate has no chance of winning, one's ballot counts as a vote for one's second choice – through a run-off system.

IRV will reduce negative campaigning because candidates will recruit second place votes. Thus, IRV facilitates coalition building and diminishes partisan bickering and mud-slinging.

There are currently three bills stalled in committee that would implement IRV in Massachusetts. When the next Fourth Worcester District Representative gets to Beacon Hill, he or she should go with a mandate from the City Council and people of Leominster to support them and vote for them.

Instant Run-Off Voting – it's what democracy looks like.