



## Instant Runoff Voting

By Blair Bobier, New America Foundation  
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Now that our country has elected a 21st century president, we should reconsider our 18th century electoral system.

Two examples from the seemingly never-ending 2008 election showcase the system's flaws. More than a month after election day, we still don't know who won Minnesota's Senate race. In Georgia's U.S. Senate contest, it took two elections and tens of millions of dollars to produce a winner. Both races could have been resolved quickly and with less expense using instant runoff voting. Because the Constitution leaves it up to the states to decide how to elect their senators and presidential electors, instant runoff voting could be used at all levels of government.

Instant runoff voting is worth learning about -- not just because it saves time and money and is more democratic than our current methods, but because you may find yourself using it before too long. The Los Angeles City Council has created a task force to determine the feasibility of using it for local elections. It already has been used for several election cycles in San Francisco and has been approved for use in a number of Bay Area municipalities.

With instant runoff voting, voters indicate their first, second and third choices among candidates on the ballot. If a candidate wins a majority of first-choice rankings, that candidate is elected. If no candidate receives an initial majority of first-choice rankings, the candidate with the fewest first-choice rankings is eliminated and that candidate's supporters have their votes count for their second choice. The process repeats until a candidate emerges with majority support.

The Georgia runoff was triggered because a Libertarian candidate won 3% of the vote and the Republican finished the first round a handful of votes shy of a majority. In Minnesota, 16% of the votes went to a third-party candidate. In both cases, had voters been able to indicate their second choice on the ballot, we would have known the outcomes of the races on election night, saving a second election, a recount and lots of time and money.

Instant runoff voting is also an important innovation because it produces a winner who has demonstrated support from a majority of voters. When a candidate wins election with less than majority support, it means that a majority of voters have actually rejected that candidate. That's not fair to the voters, and it undercuts the legitimacy of the electoral process. It is also, unfortunately, a common occurrence in California and national politics. Three of the last five presidential elections, and three of the last four gubernatorial elections in California, were won by a candidate who failed to win the support of a majority of voters.

A similar dynamic played out in recent U.S. Senate races in Alaska and Oregon. In those cases, a Democrat won election with a minority of votes cast when the Republican and a third-party candidate split the conservative vote. The problem isn't that we have too many candidates; the problem is an electoral system that doesn't always allow voters to state their true preferences. The solution is instant runoff voting.

Instant runoff voting is politically neutral. It might have resulted in the election of two GOP senators in 2008 or a

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Democratic president in 2000. Who would have won the Minnesota Senate race using it is anybody's guess, but a winner -- regardless of party affiliation -- already would have emerged, the preference of the voters would be clear, and the winner would have a legitimate mandate to govern.

Instant runoff voting is used by cities in Maryland, Vermont and North Carolina and approved for use in Tennessee and Minnesota, and it has been used for years in Ireland and Australia. With momentum growing for a national popular vote to replace the electoral college, the day may come when it is used to elect the president. We, the people, deserve no less: a simple and civilized way to ensure that the outcomes of our elections reflect the intentions of our citizens.

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