

8 Ranked Choice Voting (Instant Runoff) [3 Dec 2019]

Multi-Party civility:--A one-party state tends toward oppression and a two-party state tends toward gridlock. These weaknesses detailed in the prior post can be addressed by *adding* parties so that achieving majority requires forming *coalitions* based on civility. People behave better when they hope that the opponent on the current issue will be an ally on the next issue.

Multi-Party balancing:--Furthermore, multi-party democracy allows even a small party to influence larger parties away from excesses. Gridlock between nearly equal political forces can be tipped one way or another by a less powerful party that shifts the balance. Finesse and agility lead to continuing cooperation.

Third-Party unpopularity:--Despite these multi-party advantages, there is simplistic appeal in having only two options, leaving supporters of less popular positions deprived of real choice. Minority voters who do choose *other* options are condemned by the larger parties for throwing their votes away. The argument is “you could have put us over the top.”

Fortunately, this deterrent to discourse can easily be removed.

Viable alternative:--There are systems with names like Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) or Instant Runoff. In those systems, every ballot has a means for *ranking all candidates in order of preference*. (It may or may not be required that *every* ballot must assign a ranking to *every* candidate.) When it is determined that one candidate has received the lowest count of first choice votes, the corresponding ballots are redistributed to the candidates ranked second choice on those ballots. The process is repeated until a winner is determined.

Three advantages are immediately apparent:

- (1) A blatantly unpopular first choice vote is not wasted because the same ballot will be counted in favor a more popular lower choice candidate on that ballot.
- (2) There is no repeat election because the reassignment of ballots accomplishes the runoff function within the first voting.

(3) An unsuccessful first choice is recorded like an *official* poll result. While opinion polls do not rise to the significance of binding elections, the first selections on “unsuccessful” ballots constitute valid and important expressions of voter choices submitted within binding elections. They will not be dismissed lightly.

The first two features are comforting reassurances by themselves. The primary advantage, though, is the *discourse* assured by the third item.

(3a) Voters are not motivated to ignore their true feelings in making their first choices. Public expression is not stifled by practical concerns over “thrown away” votes.

(3b) Political parties will take note of voter sentiment. The additional expressions, far from being discarded, influence office holders and future candidates who want to appeal to a broad base. In a sense the “opinion” votes are the *coalition mechanism* praised above: they deliver the message without requiring that there be an additional organized party.

Counting:--Rules, examples and concerns are plentiful on the internet, where readers are invited to do research on this worthwhile issue. Toward further discussion of the counting process in a future blog post, you may leave me a private message in the blog footer or share your insights in the public comments section below.

Recommendation:--I am urgently asking readers to engage with this topic for the benefit of our democracy. We need to open up elections to diverse viewpoints *without* throwing away votes, and we need to eliminate the fatigue, expense, and rehashing associated with runoff elections. Getting neighborhood discussions to agree on specific implementation is a small effort compared to the enormity of the benefit.