

FAQ: Minneapolis Instant Runoff Voting

Prepared by FairVote Minnesota • www.fairvotemn.org • info@fairvotemn.org • 763-807-2550

What is Instant Runoff Voting (IRV)?

Instant Runoff Voting or IRV (also known as “ranked choice voting”) allows voters to rank candidates according to their preference – 1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice, etc. This ranking of candidates allows for a runoff to be conducted in a single election if needed so that voters have to make only one trip to the polls.

Under IRV, the votes cast for a candidate who lacks the support to win can still count toward another candidate with a better chance of winning. Or, in multi-seat elections, if a candidate has more than enough votes to win, part of each vote will go to help elect additional candidates. **As a result, every vote counts and very few votes are “wasted.”**

When did Minneapolis switch to IRV?

Minneapolis voters approved, 65-35, a charter amendment in 2006 mandating the use of IRV for municipal elections. The first opportunity for Minneapolis voters to use IRV is in the November 2009 elections.

What are the benefits of IRV?

- Accomplishes in one election what traditional runoffs accomplish in two, making voting more convenient and less costly
- Ensures more diverse representation; all voters gain their fair share of representation
- Increases voter participation and choice
- Expands the political process for all candidates
- Promotes more civil elections

Will there be a primary in September?

No. Not under IRV. By capturing voters’ 2nd and 3rd choice preferences, IRV eliminates the need for primary elections in nonpartisan elections like those used in Minneapolis. This saves taxpayer money, makes voting easier and more convenient for voters and brings together the most voters with the most choice on one ballot in November.

What does an IRV ballot look like?

On an IRV ballot, voters rank candidates in order of preference - 1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice. Below is a sample ballot:

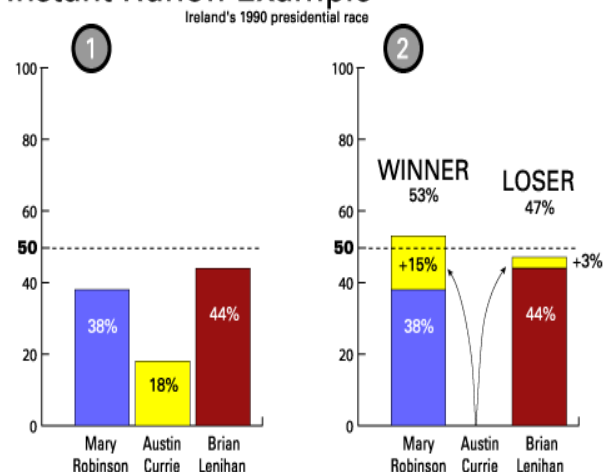
For TOWN of CARY MAYOR					
Fill in only one oval per choice	Your 2nd and 3rd choices will be considered if your 1st choice loses				
VOTE for your 1st choice here	1st ↓	Mark your 2nd choice here ↓	2nd ↓	Mark your 3rd choice here ↓	3rd ↓
Benjamin Franklin	<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>
Thomas Jefferson	<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>
Betsy Ross	<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>
George Washington	<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>
Write-in: _____	<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>

How are the votes counted?

The vote counting begins by tallying first choices. In **single-seat elections** (e.g., for mayor, city council and park board districts), if the leading candidate attains a majority of votes, he or she wins, just as would happen in a traditional two-step (primary-general) election.

If no candidate garners a majority of votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and the votes cast for this candidate are reallocated to the remaining candidates as indicated by the 2nd choice on each voter’s ballot and the ballots are counted again. This process is repeated until one candidate receives a majority.

Instant Runoff Example



In **multi-seat elections** (e.g. for the Board of Estimate and Taxation and the three at-large Park Board seats), the threshold for winning goes down as the number of seats to fill goes up (33% in a two-seat election, 25% in a three-seat election, etc.). This allows minority representation while preserving majority rule.

If no candidate reaches the applicable threshold after counting all first choices, then the candidate with the fewest votes is defeated and the votes cast for this candidate are redistributed to remaining candidates according to the second choice on each of those voters' ballots. This process is repeated until the necessary number of candidate reaches the required threshold.

If a candidate surpasses the applicable threshold (i.e. has 'more votes than he or she needs to win), then the "surplus" portion of each vote for that candidate is redistributed to the voters' next choices. These votes are reallocated proportionally to each ballot's next choice. For example, if the winning threshold is 1,000 votes and a candidate gets 2,000 votes, half a vote from every ballot for that candidate is redistributed to each voter's second choice. The process is repeated until all seats have been filled.

What happens if I rank only one candidate?

A voter can choose to rank only one candidate. However, if that candidate is less popular than the other candidates and eliminated in the first round, the voter will not have a back-up candidate to count in the runoff. This choice would be analogous to voting in a primary but not in the general election if your primary choice doesn't make it through the first election.

Indicating 2nd and 3rd choices will not count against 1st choices; they are only considered if no candidate achieves a winning threshold and a voter's 1st choice has been eliminated.

In traditional multi-seat elections, voters often "bullet vote" or select only one candidate even when having the option to select more in order to increase the chances that their favorite candidate will win. Under IRV, bullet voting is not effective. Additional ranked choices will not harm voters' 1st choices as they are only considered if an instant runoff occurs and a voter's 1st choice has more than enough votes to win or has been eliminated.

Will new voting equipment be needed?

No. The City has indicated that it plans to use a combination of existing machines to count 1st choice votes at the precincts (just as they are now) and a supplemental hand count to tally races that require a runoff. Results for elections that do not require a runoff can be reported on Election Night. Any hand counts will be done at a central counting location following the close of the polls and will be reported following the conclusion of that process.

Where else is IRV used?

IRV is used in seven U.S. jurisdictions – San Francisco (CA), Burlington (VT), Takoma Park (MD), Cary and Hendersonville (NC), Cambridge (MA) and Pierce County (WA). Strong voter education has resulted in high IRV approval ratings in most of these jurisdictions. IRV is also used in democracies such as Australia, Ireland, Scotland and London.

What is the status of the IRV lawsuit?

A lawsuit brought against IRV was resoundingly rejected in Hennepin County District Court in January 2009. In February, the Minneapolis City Council voted to move "full speed" ahead to implement IRV this year. The plaintiffs have appealed the case and are cooperating with the City and FairVote Minnesota in a request for expedited review from the Minnesota Supreme Court. The City is preparing a contingency plan for a traditional election in the unlikely event that the ruling is overturned.

How will voters become educated about IRV?

The City of Minneapolis is partnering with FairVote Minnesota and other community organizations to develop and implement a full-scale education program leading up to the November election.

For additional information:

- FairVote Minnesota: www.fairvotemn.org; info@fairvotemn.org; 763-807-2550
- City of Minneapolis Elections Department: <http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/elections/>
- Your council member: <http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/council/>