

# Frequently Asked Questions about Instant Runoff Voting for St. Paul

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## 1. What is Instant Runoff Voting?

Instant Runoff Voting (also called Ranked Choice Voting, or Single Transferable Vote) is a ranked ballot method of voting in which voters can rank candidates according to their preference – 1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice, etc. This ranking of candidates allows us to combine our municipal primary and general elections in a single election so that voters have to make only one trip to the polls.

Under Instant Runoff Voting (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. As a result, every vote counts and very few votes are “wasted.”

## 2. Is IRV on the ballot in Saint Paul this year?

Yes. On the November 3<sup>rd</sup> ballot, St. Paul voters will be asked if IRV should be used as the method of voting for municipal elections.

## 3. How did IRV get on the ballot?

In 2008, more than 7,000 petition signatures were collected and certified to put IRV on the ballot. The St. Paul City Council delayed the ballot question until a lawsuit brought against the City of Minneapolis that challenged the constitutionality of IRV was resolved. In June this year, the Minnesota Supreme Court ruled unanimously that IRV is constitutional and the St. Paul Council voted unanimously to put IRV on the ballot. The date of the elections is November 3<sup>rd</sup>.

## 4. Why make this change? What is wrong with the current method?

Under our current system for city elections voters are asked to make two trips to the polls – once in September and again in November. The problem is that very few voters turn out to vote in the September primary– often fewer than half the number of voters who turn out for the November election. Under IRV, we accomplish in one election what is now accomplished in two, with a single election in November, when turnout is highest and most diverse.

IRV accomplishes the purpose of a two-round system, but without the flaws. Tax payers and candidates only have to pay for one election, qualified candidates can't get weeded out by a small share of voters, voters will have more choice on the ballot and benefit from the enriched public debate and the ultimate decision will be made with the greatest level of citizen participation.

IRV also reduces negative campaigning by providing more choice on the ballot and a built in incentive for candidates to reach beyond their base to appeal to voters for second choice votes. Candidates are more likely to identify what they have in common with other candidates and not alienate voters with attack campaigns against their opponents.

## 5. What races would this change affect?

IRV would be used for all municipal elections, which are held biennially in odd-numbered years every two years. Municipal elections include the Office of Mayor and 7 City Council seats.

Voting for school board in odd years and for state legislators and state and federal elected offices in even years would not be affected by this charter amendment. The primary and general election will be the same for these elections, which are governed by state election law.

## 6. So there would be no primary in September for city races, but we would still need a primary for school board races because those elections aren't controlled by the city. So would there really be cost savings?

There would be some, but not full savings from the elimination of a city primary. This is because while primaries are still required for school board races, they are only held as needed, meaning for those races when there is more than double the number of candidates running than there are seats to fill (3 or 4 seats are filled in each election year). In the past four election cycles (2001 – 2007), school board primaries were required in only two, or half, of the races.

Ultimately we hope all elections in Minnesota are enabled to use IRV. A number of St Paul school board candidates have endorsed IRV and hope to see it used in school board elections in the future.

## 7. Will IRV be confusing to St. Paul voters?

No, not if St. Paul voters are like voters in all the other cities that use IRV. The notion that St. Paul voters may not be smart enough to know how to rank candidates on the ballot is being promoted by opponents who do not want to see a change the way St. Paul votes. All exit polls conducted in the US jurisdictions using IRV for the first time show that with good voter education prior to the election voters overwhelmingly understood IRV:

87% in San Francisco (CA)

89% in Burlington (VT)

88% in Takoma Park (MD)

95% in Cary (NC)

86% in Hendersonville (NC)

From the recount in the Coleman-Franken race, we saw that some voters do not properly follow ballot instructions, but this number of voters is very small - fewer than one one-hundredth of a percent of ballots were marked in error. The rate of spoiled ballots in an IRV election is no greater than in a traditional election. In fact in the recent 2009 Burlington IRV election, 99.95% of the ballots were valid. So concerns that IRV is "too hard" for voters, or that voter education has to be expensive, are simply wrong according to the evidence. It is important in any election to create a ballot that is easy for voters to understand and properly complete.

## 8. How does IRV benefit communities of color?

In a [2008 op-ed](#), state Senator Mee Moua and Minneapolis Council member Ralph Remington wrote:

*“The effects of IRV are huge, and we believe it is one of the best modifications in our voting system — for communities of color — since the Voting Rights Act of 1964.*

*For starters, all candidates get to go to the general election because the primary is eliminated. No longer will folks be excluded from running simply because they didn’t have enough funds or didn’t mobilize their base in a low-turnout primary.*

*This extra step in the voting process — which gets very little attention from the media and “get-out-the-vote” organizers — is a real barrier to voter participation.*

*Primary turnout is lowest in communities of color, meaning we have very little voice in this weeding process. Our candidates have a hard time getting through in any district that isn’t predominantly comprised of people of color. In contrast, we turn out in proportionally higher numbers in general elections. With IRV, our effective participation and, therefore, voting power is greater, expanding opportunities for candidates of color to represent us.”*

The data back up this experience. In San Francisco, the most ethnically diverse city using IRV in the U.S., voter participation in the outcome of the election more than doubled citywide in the 2005 election, and in the city’s six most racially and socio-economically diverse neighborhoods turnout quadrupled, according to a June 2008 report by FairVote and the New America Foundation.

And exit polls consistently show that the vast majority of voters, from all ethnic groups, understand how to use IRV and prefer it over traditional two-round or plurality elections.

## 9. How do I mark my IRV ballot?

You simply fill in the 1st choice oval next to your favorite candidate, the 2nd choice oval next to your 2nd favorite, and so on. You can rank as many or as few candidates as you like, but the more candidates you rank, the greater the chance that your vote will help to elect someone you like and prevent the election of a candidate you dislike.

## 10. How many rankings will there be on the ballot?

Typically a ranked ballot offers as many rankings as there are candidates and you can rank as many candidates as you wish. The Minneapolis IRV ballot is limited to three rankings in the 2009 election year because the City will use existing machines, which can only read three rankings. While this is not a problem as voters typically do not rank more than three candidates, machines may be available to provide for more rankings in the next scheduled election in 2011 in St. Paul. The City Council will ultimately decide how many candidates a voter may be allowed to rank.

## 11. How are the votes counted?

The vote counting begins by tallying first choices. If the leading candidate has a majority of votes (50% + 1 vote), 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.

## **12. Will new voting equipment be needed?**

New equipment is preferred. Current equipment cannot read and tally ranked ballots and new equipment will be needed to tally the ballots. IRV-capable equipment exists and is in use across the country. While there is not equipment yet certified for use in Ramsey County, it is anticipated that there will be by the 2011 election. According to Ramsey County Elections Director Joe Mansky, Ramsey County is scheduled to replace voting equipment in 2011, the next scheduled municipal election year. This means that equipment would be replaced on the normal replacement schedule, significantly reducing the additional costs being incurred by changing to IRV.

If new equipment is not purchased for the 2011 election, current equipment is capable of counting the first round of voting at the precincts and preliminary results for elections with an immediate majority winner can be reported on Election Night. Those races that require a second round of counting can be hand counted as Minneapolis is doing this year. Only about 70,000 votes are typically cast in a city election so this should not be onerous or time consuming. A recent hand-counted IRV election in Northern Ireland with over 500,000 ballots was completed in a day.

## **13. Will IRV make elections less transparent and more difficult to audit?**

No. In fact, IRV can improve the transparency of the vote counting process. "Dumb" scanners, like the ones we have now, just click up the totals for each candidate as the paper ballot goes through the scanner. "Smart" scanners, like those used for RCV, record the ballot image of each ballot, which provides an electronic backup of every ballot, and a way to compare the paper ballots with the electronic copies. The software reports each stage of the count and can even tell you how each ballot was counted in each round. As an election integrity matter, we should upgrade our scanners even if we don't switch to IRV.

Citizens for Election Integrity-Minnesota, the organization responsible for advocating for open, transparent and auditable elections in Minnesota, endorses IRV and works with legislators and jurisdictions to develop auditing procedures for IRV elections.

For additional information about how IRV improves the integrity of elections, see analyses by FairVote: <http://www.fairvote.org/?page=2180>; <http://www.fairvote.org/?page=777>

## **14. How does IRV impact major and minor parties?**

IRV helps both third parties and the two major parties. It helps third parties by removing the "wasted vote syndrome": that is, their supporters being afraid to vote for them for fear that if they do, they are throwing their vote away and/or helping elect the candidate they like the least. This allows third-party candidates to campaign on their issues rather than answering to the "horse race" odds, and to receive an accurate tally of their support.

IRV helps the two major parties by enabling them to get votes back from third party voters in the form of second choices that would count for major party candidates in the event that a major party candidate was not elected in the first round of counting. This means the major parties won't have their elections "spoiled" by dividing the vote with a third party.

## 15. What happens if I rank only one candidate?

You are free to vote for only one candidate. However, if that candidate is less popular than the other candidates and is eliminated in the first round, you will not have a back-up candidate to count in the next round. This choice would be analogous to voting in a primary but not in the general election if your favorite candidate doesn't make it through the first election. That's why it's in your best interest to rank as many candidates as you have a favorable opinion about, rather than "bullet" voting for just your favorite candidate.

Indicating 2nd and 3rd choices will not count against your 1st choice; they are only considered if no candidate achieves a majority of votes and your 1st choice has been eliminated.

## 16. What happens if I vote for the same candidate twice?

Marking the same candidate twice doesn't help this candidate. Your ballot will count for your 1st choice as long as that candidate remains in the race. When and if that candidate doesn't continue in the next round because he or she has been eliminated, your ballot will be eliminated because your second choice candidate has been eliminated

## 17. Can I give the same ranking to several candidates if I like them equally well?

No. If you mark an oval for more than one candidate in the 1st choice column or subsequent columns, your ballot will be invalid when that ranking is reached.

## 18. Does IRV give some voters more votes than others? Does it violate the "one person – one vote" principle?

No. Every voter gets an equal vote. In every round of counting, every ballot counts as one vote for the highest-ranked candidate still in the running. If your candidate is still viable, your vote will count for your favorite candidate in the runoff round. If your candidate has been eliminated, just as in a traditional runoff election, you need to settle for one of the remaining candidates. Your vote automatically counts for whichever continuing candidate you prefer. The mistaken impression that some voters get more votes than others was the basis for a legal challenge to IRV in Minneapolis. The Minnesota Supreme Court has ruled that IRV fully complies with the principle of "one person, one vote" giving equal weight to each voter.

## 19. I've heard that a candidate who comes in second can win. Is this true?

No. Just like a regular runoff election, the winner of an IRV election is the candidate preferred by a majority (more than half) of the voters who express their preference. In a traditional two-round election (and under IRV) it is certainly possible that a candidate who was not ahead in the first round, might turn out to be the most popular choice after the field of candidates is reduced to two. A candidate who was in first place in the first round of a traditional runoff (let's say with 35% of the vote), might not be the majority choice. In fact, that candidate could be the least preferred choice by 65% of the voters. What matters with IRV (and traditional primary-general elections), is which candidate is preferred **most** among **all** voters once the field is reduced to two finalists, and the candidate with the majority of votes in the end is always the winner.

## **20. If candidates with the fewest votes are dropped first, does that mean the supporters of the weakest candidates get extra clout?**

No. The supporters of the most popular candidates determine which candidates advance and which candidates are eliminated. Once the weakest candidates are eliminated, every voter has a single equal vote that can count for the final contenders. . . meaning everyone has an equal voice in deciding the election.

## **21. Where else is IRV used?**

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

## **22. Who supports IRV?**

IRV and the St. Paul Better Ballot Campaign are supported by a long and growing list of cross-partisan elected and community leaders, including City Councilors Melvin Carter and Russ Stark, nearly the entire St. Paul legislative delegation, former mayors George Latimer and Jim Scheibel, Lilydale mayor Tom Swain, former City Councilor Jay Benanav, former U.S. Senator David Durenberger, former Minnesota Senators Matt Entenza and John Hottinger, Hamline Professor David Schultz, Wellstone Action director Jeff Blodgett and many other community and business leaders. Nationally, it has cross-partisan support among party leaders, including President Obama, Senator John McCain, Democratic Party leader Howard Dean and Independent Party leader John Anderson. It has growing support among members of Congress, including Representatives Keith Ellison and Jesse Jackson Jr., among several others.

IRV has been endorsed by the Minnesota state Democratic-Farmer-Labor, Independence and Green Parties and is a recommended voting method by American Association of Scientists, Robert's Rules of Order and the Minnesota and Saint Paul League of Woman Voters. A host of other state and local organizations have endorsed IRV, including:

- Minnesota Council of Nonprofits
- Sierra Club - North Star Chapter
- Take Action Minnesota
- Minnesota Public Interest Research Group (MPIRG)
- Citizens for Election Integrity-Minnesota
- United Steel Workers of America, District 11
- Unite HERE, Local 17
- Lex-Ham Community Council
- St. Anthony Park Community Council
- Mac-Groveland Community Council

For a full list of supporters see: <http://stpaul.betterballotcampaign.org/>

## **23. Who opposes IRV and why?**

The only known organizational opposition to IRV is exerted on a state level. Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life (MCCL), a lobby group that views their interests better met under the current plurality system and helped defeat the Roseville effort to adopt IRV, A conservative group called the Minnesota Voters Alliance

filed the lawsuit against IRV in Minneapolis. They advocate for partisan primaries in local elections and view IRV contrary to their mission. Some individuals oppose IRV because they prefer the traditional voting system and/or support a two-party system.

#### **24. Can a 501c3 nonprofit organization get involved in the Better Ballot Campaign?**

Short answer: Yes! IRS regulations prohibit 501c3 organizations from electioneering or advocating for or against particular political candidates or political parties. However, ballot measures are not considered elections by the IRS. A ballot measure is a piece of legislation and the voters are the legislative body. Activity on a ballot measure is the equivalent of lobbying on a bill at the Capitol. Within limits, 501c3 organizations are allowed to lobby on legislation. That's why 501c3 organizations may endorse the Better Ballot Campaign proposal and support the campaign in other ways.

**For additional information:** Saint Paul Better Ballot Campaign, FairVote Minnesota:  
[www.stpaulbetterballotcampaign.org](http://www.stpaulbetterballotcampaign.org)