

Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) and Its Impact on Minorities

Executive Summary

The Los Angeles City Council is studying Instant Runoff Voting (IRV), because it promises to save the city millions of dollars and raise voter turnout in local elections. In response to a request from city leaders, New America Foundation has provided the following information on how IRV will impact ethnic and minority communities.

IRV has a strong track record in the City and County of San Francisco, which has used IRV since 2004. IRV has also been used for local elections in other American cities, including Cary, NC, Hendersonville, NC, Takoma Park, MD, and Burlington, VT. It has also been used for state elections to allow overseas voters to participate in runoff elections in the states of Louisiana, South Carolina, and Arkansas. It has been passed by voters in a number of other American cities. Of particular note for the City of Los Angeles, IRV also has been used for the last three elections to elect the Mayor of London. With 8 million residents, over 5000 precincts and numerous ethnic and language minority groups, the UK's capital rivals Los Angeles for its diversity and complexity.

The City and County of San Francisco has used IRV since 2004 in four elections, and there have been four exit poll surveys conducted by the Public Research Institute at San Francisco State University, Asian Law Caucus and other groups, for the 2004, 2005 and 2006 elections. In addition, there have been two studies based on precinct analysis of ballots for the 2004 and 2005 elections. The information below is a summary of some of the findings of these various surveys and studies.

An analysis of the polls of San Francisco voters' opinion, as well as precinct analysis of turnout and use of rankings in San Francisco shows that:

1. An overwhelming majority of voters, including minority voters, reported understanding IRV (see details below).
2. Voters greatly prefer IRV over a two-round runoff system.
3. Voters, including minority voters, find that the system of ranking is easy to use.¹
4. Furthermore, IRV increased turnout in the city's six most socio-economically diverse neighborhoods by over 300% in the 2005 election.

In addition, a study of San Francisco's voter education and outreach campaign, which was conducted before its first IRV election (in 2004), analyzed which methods were most effective. A summary of that information is presented in this memo.

A. Voter Understanding

San Francisco's exit poll results show that the vast majority of voters smoothly transitioned to IRV. The Public Research Institute at San Francisco State University

¹ SFSU IRV Survey, July 2006: <http://www.fairvote.org/media/irv/SFSU-PRIRCVFinalReport.pdf>, p. 33

conducted exit polls during the November 2005 election. According to that SFSU survey, voters preferred IRV to the previous runoff system by a margin of over three to one.² Overall, 55% of voters stated a preference for IRV, 28% stated no preference, and only 17% missed having the two-round runoff.³

Equally important, 87% of San Franciscans polled said they understood the voting system “perfectly well” or “fairly well”.⁴ Specifically, ethnic and minority voters reported a high level of understanding of IRV:⁵

	Understand “Perfectly well” or “Fairly well”
Hispanic/Latino	89.8%
Asian/Pacific Islander	85.7%
African American/Black	84.8%
White	87.8%
Other	85.3%

Exit polls in other American cities using IRV in their local elections also showed that voters reported high levels of understanding: 88% in Takoma Park, MD,⁶ 95% in Cary, NC⁷, 86% in Hendersonville, NC⁸ and 86% in Burlington, VT.⁹

B. Voter Turnout

A precinct analysis of the 2005 IRV election in San Francisco conducted by FairVote showed that using IRV rather than a two-round runoff election significantly increased voter turnout, especially among ethnic and minority groups. The FairVote precinct analysis compared the 2001 election for City Attorney with a comparable 2005 IRV election for Assessor-Recorder. Both elections took place in odd years and both offices held a similar public profile. The runoff in the December 2001 election for City Attorney had a voter turnout of just 17% (74,698 out of 453,961 registered voters). But during the November 2005 IRV election, turnout increased to 54% (229,714 out of 428,481 registered voters).¹⁰ Based on this analysis, IRV boosted overall voter turnout by 168% between the 2001 December runoff and the November 2005 IRV election.¹¹

Significantly, majority-minority neighborhoods saw an even more dramatic rise in voter turnout.¹² Before IRV was introduced, San Francisco’s most diverse neighborhoods

² SFSU IRV Survey, July 2006: <http://www.fairvote.org/media/irv/SFSU-PRIRCVFinalReport.pdf> , p. 25

³ SFSU IRV Survey, July 2006: <http://www.fairvote.org/media/irv/SFSU-PRIRCVFinalReport.pdf> , p. 25

⁴ SFSU IRV Survey, July 2006: <http://www.fairvote.org/media/irv/SFSU-PRIRCVFinalReport.pdf> , p. 10

⁵ SFSU IRV Survey, July 2006: <http://www.fairvote.org/media/irv/SFSU-PRIRCVFinalReport.pdf> , p. 33

⁶ Fairvote.org, <http://www.fairvote.org/blog/index.php/2007/01/31/first-takoma-park-irv-election-exit-poll/>

⁷ http://www2.chass.ncsu.edu/cobb/IRV%20Results_Tables.pdf

⁸ http://www2.chass.ncsu.edu/cobb/IRV%20Results_Tables.pdf

⁹ Minimum share of votes, among all educational levels, that did not find the ballot confusing: http://www.fairvotemn.org/sites/fairvotemn.org/files/burlington_exit_poll_results.pdf

¹⁰ Christopher Jerdonek, [Ranked Choice Voting and Voter Turnout in San Francisco Elections](#), p. 2

¹¹ Christopher Jerdonek, [Ranked Choice Voting and Voter Turnout in San Francisco Elections](#), p. 5

¹² Christopher Jerdonek, [Ranked Choice Voting and Voter Turnout in San Francisco Elections](#), p. 5

had the lowest turnout rates. After IRV was introduced, voter turnout in the city’s six most socio-economically diverse neighborhoods skyrocketed by over 300%: Western Addition (309.4%), Bayview / Hunter’s Point (351.6%), Mission (351.6%), Ingleside (324.6%), Excelsior (310.4%) and Visitation Valley (407.3%).¹³

Two key factors account for this dramatic rise in voter turnout: (1) consolidating from two elections to one relieves voter fatigue, and enables voters, campaigns and mobilizing organizations to focus on a single, decisive election, and (2) holding the election in November rather than December takes advantage of typically higher turnout in November elections.

C. Use of Rankings

In San Francisco’s IRV system, voters have the options of ranking up to three candidates. That is, they can rank three candidates, rank two candidates, or simply mark a single candidate (as their first and only choice). According to the San Francisco State University studies, San Francisco’s ethnic and minority voters ranked the most candidates under IRV. In the 2005 election, over half of voters (56.5%) chose to rank three candidates, while another 10.4% ranked two candidates and a third of voters (33.1%) chose one candidate.¹⁴ Nearly half (46%) of voters said ranking candidates was “easy” or “very easy”, and only 16% said it was either difficult or very difficult.¹⁵ Ethnic and minority voters overwhelmingly chose to rank their candidates, more so than white voters:

	Ranked Three
Hispanic/Latino	67.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	64.7%
African American/Black	72.1%
White	51.4%
Other	56.4%

Furthermore, a FairVote analysis of San Francisco’s 2004 District 1 Supervisor race showed that, on average, supporters of the two Asian American candidates (Lillian Sing and Rose Tsai) made more use of the rankings (2.56 and 2.58 respectively) than the supporters of the eventual winner, Jake McGoldrick (2.41).¹⁶ This high use of rankings continued into 2006. According to an Asian Law Caucus exit poll from the 2006 District 4 Supervisor race, 82% of Asian Americans ranked two or three candidates on their ballot, compared to 84% of non-Asian Americans.¹⁷

D. Valid-Ballot Rate

¹³ Christopher Jerdonek, [Ranked Choice Voting and Voter Turnout in San Francisco Elections](#), p. 9

¹⁴ SFSU IRV Survey, July 2006: <http://www.fairvote.org/media/irv/SFSU-PRIRCVFinalReport.pdf>, p. 17

¹⁵ SFSU IRV Survey, July 2006: <http://www.fairvote.org/media/irv/SFSU-PRIRCVFinalReport.pdf>, p. 21

¹⁶ SFSU IRV Survey, May 2005: [SFSU IRV Survey 2004 Election.pdf](#), p. 5

¹⁷ Nov. 2006 Asian Law Caucus exit poll: <http://www.altrue.net/site/alc/content.php?type=1&id=13223>.

Finally, the valid-ballot rate showed that San Francisco voters understood the IRV ballot equally well as the non-IRV ballot. If voters erroneously mark more than one first-choice candidate, it is called an “overvote”. If voters do not vote for a candidate in a given race, it is called an “undervote”. Adding the two together gives you the “invalid-ballot rate”; subtracting this percentage from 100% gives you the “valid-ballot rate”. In the November 2004 election, San Francisco held IRV elections for its Board of Supervisors, along with non-IRV state and federal elections. This election provided valuable data for a precinct analysis by FairVote that compared IRV races with non-IRV races.

For the non-IRV presidential, federal, and state races, fewer than 1% of voters overvoted and 8% of voters undervoted, for a valid-ballot rate of 91.75%. In all the non-presidential races, the valid-ballot rate declined to 89.7%.¹⁸

In contrast, in the 2004 IRV elections which included seven races for the Board of Supervisors, less than 1% of voters overvoted and 8% of voters undervoted, for a valid-ballot rate of 91.12% -- virtually identical to the non-IRV rate, and higher than the non-Presidential valid-ballot rate. Similarly, IRV elections have shown a very low overvote rate across the nation. In Burlington, VT, fewer than 1% of voters overvoted in its 2006 IRV election. In Takoma Park, MD, there was only one overvote in its 2007 IRV election.

E. Education Campaign

The successful transition to IRV in San Francisco, as well as its successful use in other cities like London, indicates that the City of Los Angeles can have a similar smooth transition. In San Francisco, a well regarded education campaign to voters and various communities helped make this smooth transition possible, and can serve as a model for the City of Los Angeles.

Before IRV was first used in 2004, the San Francisco Department of Elections launched a multi-pronged campaign that relied primarily on good ballot design, print and electronic media, mass mailings, information in the Voter Information Pamphlet, and targeted outreach to specific communities. In addition, much thought went into how to construct the precinct itself and train poll workers. This way, even a voter who had never heard of IRV would have a successful experience on Election Day.

A public relations firm was hired to create a clear and effective message to reach the voters. Posters, brochures, and public service announcements (PSAs) were used to explain IRV in several languages, including Spanish and Mandarin. To ensure that the voting precincts ran smoothly, the Department of Elections carefully trained its poll workers and ensured that voting instruction materials were easy to follow.¹⁹ The initial

¹⁸ SFSU IRV Survey, May 2005: [SFSU IRV Survey 2004 Election.pdf](#), p. 4

¹⁹ [New America Foundation: Description and Analysis of San Francisco's Voter Education and Outreach.](#)

education campaign cost \$1.70 per voter.²⁰ In subsequent elections, the cost of the education campaign became much cheaper, and now costs approximately \$0.50 per voter.

A study of educational campaigns in San Francisco and other cities demonstrates several steps that are essential to a successful and cost-effective voter outreach:

1. Use a clear ballot design
2. Set up a helpful, multilingual website with sample ballots to educate voters
3. Allocate extra IRV training for poll workers
4. Design the polling station with a goal toward educating voters
5. Use media sources, including the ethnic media, effectively through PSAs, press releases and advertisements
6. The Voter Information Pamphlet should include a special section on IRV
7. One or more separate citywide mailings to all registered voters
8. Distribute helpful, multilingual brochures in public places like libraries and coffee shops
9. Encourage candidates to educate their supporters about IRV; it will benefit them as well.
10. Concentrate education and outreach in the final month before voting takes place, as that is when the most voters are paying attention.
11. Provide information in advance to reporters and editors so their stores have an educational component.

A fuller evaluation of the San Francisco Education and Outreach plan from the 2004 election may be found on the Web at

http://www.newamerica.net/files/Voter%20Education%20and%20Outreach%20in%20SF_A%20Description%20and%20Evaluation_Final.pdf.

²⁰ [City Clerk's 2007 Municipal Elections After Action Report](#).