

How the Majority Can Rule

By Ted Halstead and Michael Lind

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On March 5 voters in San Francisco helped change American democracy. They gave their approval to Proposition A, which calls for the adoption of new rules for electing the mayor, city attorney, district attorney, Board of Supervisors and other city officials.

The new system, Instant Runoff Voting, may not sound revolutionary. But its widespread adoption, not only at the city level but in state and federal elections, has the potential to change American democracy dramatically, and for the better.

Most elections in the United States use the old-fashioned "winner take all" system, which greatly inhibits voter choices. In winner-take-all elections, a vote for a third party or independent candidate is usually a wasted vote. Indeed, in most elections, by voting for a third-party candidate, you only hurt the major-party candidate you would favor and help the one you like least.

In recent years this problem has plagued American politics. In 1992 Ross Perot probably drained enough support from George H. W. Bush to permit Bill Clinton to win. In 2000 Ralph Nader probably siphoned off enough voters from Al Gore to put George W. Bush in the White House. The same thing has happened in many statewide elections. Another major problem with the winner-take-all system is that in a race with three or more candidates, a candidate opposed by most voters can nevertheless win with just over a third of the vote.

Instant runoff voting would not only remedy these problems by expressing voter preferences more closely; it would offer the American people what a majority say they want: more electoral choices. It operates on the same principle as a conventional runoff, except that no second election weeks or months later is required. In a race with three or more candidates, voters rank them in order of preference: 1, 2, 3, and so on. The weakest candidates are eliminated and the second-choice votes of those eliminated are redistributed to the remaining candidates, until one candidate achieves a clear majority of votes.

If such a system had been in place in recent presidential elections, the elder Bush would probably have beaten Clinton in 1992, but his son would likely have lost to Gore in 2000. Under this system, third-party candidates and independents would no longer be spoilers, and votes for them could no longer be considered wasted votes.

Studies show that the major reason voter turnout has declined is the lack of choices on the ballot. This is particularly the case now that more Americans identify themselves as "independents" than as either Democrats or Republicans. The experience of other countries suggests that voter turnout will rise as choices increase. And this, in turn, would lead to more serious and credible candidates running as independents.

Changing our electoral system to Instant Runoff Voting could also reduce the bitter polarization that tends to turn American elections into civil wars. Under winner-take-all, it's in the interest of a candidate to vilify all his or her opponents in the hope of eking out a bare plurality, if not a slight majority. By contrast, in an instant runoff system, candidates have a built-in incentive to appeal to supporters of rival candidates rather than alienate them. Their message must be: "I'd rather be your first choice, but if you prefer one of my rivals, please mark me as your second choice." Instant Runoff Voting thus has the potential to replace the politics of polarization with a new politics of centrism and civility.

Instant Runoff Voting can be adopted to elect candidates for everything from city council to Congress to the presidency. Already, several bills to encourage such a system have been introduced in Congress. As the voters of San Francisco have proved, the American people don't have to wait for lawmakers in Washington to modernize our electoral system. This is one revolution that can start at the state and local level.

Even before San Francisco voted, other cities in California and in Massachusetts had changed their city charters to permit instant runoff. And a number of states, including California, Alaska, Hawaii, Maine and Vermont, are now debating its use in state and federal elections.

For electoral reformers, campaign finance and modernizing archaic vote-counting machinery have been the major causes. But as important as these changes are, they fail to address the basic problem of American politics today: obsolete voting rules that frequently frustrate the intent of American voters and drive many away by artificially discouraging new parties and independent candidates.

The adoption of Instant Runoff Voting for almost all offices, from the presidency to county clerk, would be an important part of a peaceful revolution to modernize American democracy.

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