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'Instant runoff voting' would improve the electoral process

AS I SEE IT

By Tony Lorenzen

In our current winner-takes-all elections, a candidate can win an election with a plurality of support, creating a situation in which a majority of the electorate actually preferred someone else.

It happened in Leominster last month in the Democratic Party primary in the 4th Worcester District. We know that Jennifer L. Flanagan won with 45 percent of the vote and that a majority of voters actually preferred a candidate other than Ms. Flanagan to be the Democratic nominee.

There's a remedy for this situation. It's called "instant runoff voting." IRV is a simple process whereby voters rank all candidates on the ballot in order of preference.

With IRV, not only does your vote count, it counts for more because your ballot measures your entire range of opinion. Thus in any election with three or more candidates in which no candidate gets a majority (50 percent plus one vote), an instant runoff election is held using the ranked ballots.

In a traditional runoff election, the top two vote-getters continue the campaign, the voters return to the polls, and the city clerk's office, its staff and volunteers have to work another Election Day.

And you, the taxpayer, have to foot the bill.

With its preferential ballots, the runoff election happens instantly with no further campaigning, no extra work and no added costs. IRV ensures every election is a runoff election and produces a winner with a majority of support.

Let's examine the 4th Worcester District race as an example of how IRV might have worked.

Voters go to the polls in Leominster and are asked to rank the candidates in order of preference by putting a "1" next to their first choice, a "2" next to their second choice (this could also be done with ovals in columns — fill in the column 1 oval for your first choice, column 2 oval for your second choice, etc.). Let's assume that first-choice votes were the same as they were last month (for reasons of simplicity let's scale down the election to 100 votes): Ms. Flanagan, 45 percent or 45 votes; Claire M. Freda, 31 percent or 31 votes; Kathleen Reynolds Daigneault, 14 percent or 14 votes; Kathleen T. Perla, 10 percent or 10 votes.

Under our current system Flanagan wins. But there's a problem. Flanagan only has 45 percent of the vote. A majority — 55 percent — wanted another candidate to be their rep.

To ensure that Flanagan's plurality is a true measure of majority rule, IRV forces an instant runoff. The next step would be to eliminate the candidate with the least support, in this case, Perla.

Perla is eliminated and the votes are recounted. All ballots listing Perla No. 1 are counted as first-place votes for the second choice on those ballots. Let's assume in our hypothetical that the result for Perla's "10" votes was one second place (now counted as a first) for Flanagan, eight seconds (now firsts) for Freda and one second (now a first) for Daigneault.

After the first runoff, the results are: Flanagan, 46 percent or 46 votes; Freda, 39 percent or 39 votes; Daigneault 15 percent or 15 votes.

There's still no majority winner, so there's another runoff. All the votes are recounted. This time any ballot that lists Daigneault as first choice is counted as a vote for the highest-ranked candidate remaining in the race, either Flanagan or Freda. For the sake of argument, let's say that recounting the Daigneault ballots serves up three more votes for Flanagan, but 12 more for Freda, thus yielding a

final tally of: Freda, 51 percent or 51 votes; Flanagan, 49 percent or 49 votes.

We have a winner — a majority winner. After taking the range of opinion of the voters, it turned out that even though 45 percent liked Flanagan best, almost no one liked her second or third best. Freda, however, seemed to have a lot of second and third place votes, so that even though she came in second on the first ballot, she got the majority of support in the runoffs.

This could just as easily have gone the other way. In the first runoff, all 10 of Perla's ballots could have listed Flanagan as the second choice and Flanagan would have had a majority after the first runoff at 56 percent.

Either way, at least the Democrats of Leominster would know they had a nominee with a majority of support. All they know today is that a majority of them liked someone other than the person who is running against David G. Nault.

IRV has added benefits besides a guaranteed majority winner and a low-cost runoff system. IRV eliminates the "spoiler" effect and allows citizens to always vote their conscience.

If one's first-choice candidate has no chance of winning, one's ballot counts as a vote for one's second choice — through a runoff system.

IRV will reduce negative campaigning because candidates will recruit second-place votes. Thus, IRV facilitates coalition building and diminishes partisan bickering and mudslinging.

There are currently three bills stalled in committee that would implement IRV in Massachusetts. When the next 4th Worcester District representative gets to Beacon Hill, he or she should go with a mandate from the City Council and people of Leominster to support them and vote for them.

Instant runoff voting — it's what democracy looks like.

Tony Lorenzen is a resident of Leominster.