The 2000 presidential election spawned many changes in the voting process—most notably the demise of punch cards, the advent of statewide poll-closing times and the modernization of voter databases. In November, San Francisco will implement an indirect offshoot of that infamous election: instant runoff voting. Bringing the concept from the world of academics and political insiders to the masses will not be easy—it’s up to an embattled elections department to show that it can handle the unfamiliar voting system.

The concept behind instant runoff voting is simple. Instead of picking just one candidate for each office, voters will rank their top choices (in San Francisco, the top three). The choices go through an algorithm to ensure that one candidate finishes with a majority of the vote, unlike the current plurality system in which the candidate with the most votes wins, regardless of whether or not that candidate gets a majority. To proponents of instant runoff voting, the guarantee of a majority is the system’s strongest feature.

“Currently, a candidate that the majority thinks is the worst choice can be elected,” says Terry Bouricius, a former Vermont state legislator who favors instant runoff voting. “It’s such a fundamental flaw.”

In instant runoff voting, all of the top-choice votes are initially counted. If any one candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote, the election is over and that candidate is declared the winner. If no candidate has a majority, the candidate receiving the fewest first-choice votes is eliminated. In the instant runoff, voters who marked the losing candidate as their first choice have their votes counted for...
their second choice candidate. Candidates continue to be eliminated until one wins with a majority.

Many jurisdictions around the country already require a winning candidate to finish with a majority of the vote, but they do so through a separate runoff election. Supporters of instant runoff voting charge that these runoffs are both costly and undemocratic. The runoff elections can cost millions of dollars, particularly if they apply to statewide offices, and often have a far lower turnout than the original election.

The idea of IRV has resurfaced recently because of one very visible spoiler election: the 2000 presidential race. Instant runoff voting prevents spoilers by allowing citizens to vote for a minor-party candidate while also expressing a preference for a major-party candidate. Using the 2000 election as an example, many of the 100,000 Florida voters who chose Ralph Nader would have been able to indicate Al Gore as their second-choice candidate. "They really are freed up to vote for the candidate they like instead of picking the lesser of two evils," says Steven Hill, a senior analyst for the Center for Voting and Democracy. "They can do so without spoiling the election and helping to pick the candidate they prefer the least."

The impact of third-party candidates has resulted in support for instant runoff voting from both Democrats and Republicans but generally not at the same time in the same state. "It has taken on a partisan flavor," says Bouricius. "It just depends which side your bread is buttered." In Vermont, for example, independent candidates have historically played a spoiler role against Democrats. While former Democratic Governor Howard Dean was a proponent of instant runoff voting, current Republican Governor Jim Douglas has come out against it.

In Alaska, the situation is reversed. With Republican candidates vulnerable to libertarian spoilers, it's the Democrats who stand to benefit from the current political situation and the Republicans and minor parties who advocate instant runoff voting. In 2002, IRV was put to a statewide referendum but lost 32 percent to 64 percent.

THE GUINEA PIG

Although San Francisco will be the first major jurisdiction in the United States to use instant runoff voting in recent years, the system is used in other parts of the world. IRV has been used in legislative elections in Australia since the early 1900s and is currently used to elect the president of Ireland and the mayor of London. Instant runoff is only used as a substitute for primary elections or elections involving a third party; if an election has just two candidates, one is guaranteed a majority and instant runoff is unnecessary.

In the United States, IRV or similar systems were advocated by the progressive movement and adopted by several cities and states but were mainly phased out by the 1930s. The exception is Cambridge, Massachusetts, where a ranking system similar to IRV has been used for decades. The cities of Berkeley, California, and Vancouver, Washington, have authorized instant runoffs but haven't set voting. The new voting system was originally scheduled to be in place by the November 2003 elections, but state and local officials could not get a voting machine that could handle IRV approved in time. The delay angered local activists, who accused city and state officials of deliberately stalling implementation until after the 2003 mayoral race.

The outcry over the delay was the latest in a series of embarrassments for the election department. In the past decade, the city has accidentally sent out double ballots to some absentee voters, discovered 1,800 dead people on its voter rolls and miscounted votes on a public-power initiative. These errors led to a voter initiative in 2001 that outshined the structure of the department. That November, ballot box lids showed up floating in the San Francisco Bay, leading to the ouster of the elections director. Armitz took over the department in April 2002, just one month after the IRV ballot initiative was approved, and his time in office has been consumed with instant runoff voting.

NO INSTANT RESULTS

This November, instant runoff voting will apply only to seven Board of Supervisors seats. But Armitz's department still faces a tremendous job in preparing for the election. Programs must be developed to train poll workers in the new system. Procedures must be worked out for special cases, such as the event of a tie vote for a last-place candidate. The department is also sponsoring a massive public-education campaign on instant runoff voting, including advertising on buses, a new voter guide and biweekly meetings with community groups. "Every aspect of the election process is affected from an operational standpoint," says Armitz.

San Francisco also is educating the public about the fact that the results of instant runoff elections will not be "instant." The city plans to have all the first-choice votes counted by midnight on Election Day. But before election officials start to eliminate candidates and reallocate votes, they must wait for all the absentee ballots to be counted—a process that can take up to two weeks. For this reason, the city prefers to call the voting system "ranked choice voting" to dispel any notion of instant results.

According to Gordon Woomer, a city council member in Berkeley, delayed results are just one shortcoming that makes...
instant runoff voting less appealing than it may initially seem. Berkeley approved instant runoff voting earlier this year but will not implement it until certain cost and equipment conditions are met.

One aspect that worries Wozniak is “partial preference”—when voters are asked to rank some but not all of the candidates (such as San Francisco, which only ranks the top three). With a large number of candidates, it is possible for a voter to have no say in the final “runoff” election. For example, in a 10-person field, a voter could use her three rankings for the three last-place candidates. None of her votes would necessarily be “active” in the round that determines the majority winner. In the most recent London mayoral election, for example, the winner captured a majority of the final vote but only 45 percent of the total number of people who voted. “Is it democratic not to count everybody’s vote?” asks Wozniak. “That’s a fundamental issue of democracy.” In Australia, this situation is avoided because voters rank every candidate on the ballot.

Wozniak is also concerned about the transparency of the system, and the ability of the public to fully comprehend the various iterations of the counting process—especially considering that commotion that often occurs over disputed ballots even in an ordinary election. “It’s not what a few experts decide,” he says. “It’s got to be something that 100 percent of the population can use and understand the results in.”

Others around the country have had different objections. The Minnesota Senate passed a bill this year allowing the city of Roseville to use instant runoff voting, but the state House rejected it. Much of the lobbying against the bill came from the Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life, an anti-abortion group. The group was concerned not about abortion but about the idea that some people would get to vote for multiple candidates, while others would vote for only one. “It lets the minority rule the majority,” says Legislative Associate Jackie Moen. “The people that are voting for the least popular candidates get to cast the votes repeatedly.”

Minnesota Senator Dave Kleis, a vocal opponent of the bill, also saw the concept of multiple votes as a deal-breaker. “It totally goes against one person, one vote,” he says. “It just doesn’t make common sense to me for someone to go in with multiple choices.” Instant runoff advocates dismiss those criticisms, saying that in each round, each voter gets to choose exactly one candidate.

This November, advocates and opponents alike will have their eyes on San Francisco, to watch how city employees, poll workers and voters perform with such a large-scale voting change. And Arntz will be crossing his fingers that the department will pull off the biggest challenge of his career. “I am always nervous about Election Day,” he says. “We’re going to learn a lot, and what we learn this time we’ll use next time.”

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