

Point of View: Jan 14, 2008

Worrisome realities mar instant runoff

Joyce McCloy

WINSTON-SALEM - The State Board of Elections will soon be reporting to lawmakers on the success of recent experiments with instant runoff voting in two North Carolina municipal elections. With the instant runoff voting system, voters casting a ballot in races with more than two candidates mark a first and (if desired) second and third choice for each office. If no candidate receives a majority during the first round, the second choices of losing candidates are reallocated to the top two contenders.

A news release citing exit polls proclaimed the experiment a success, but failed to consider some complexities and unintended consequences.

"Instant runoff voting" is actually a misleading name, because it implies that the method achieves the same result as a real runoff. The system used in Cary is really a tally and elimination scheme, retallying without revoting (reallocating), and repeating until a majority of votes are reshuffled into one pile.

Instant runoff voting can provide a different outcome than traditional runoffs, and, compared to a system with a different-day runoff in close races, deprives voters of the time and opportunity to learn more about the top two contenders.

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WE SHOULD CONSIDER HOW THE SYSTEM AFFECTS VOTERS and the integrity of our elections.

In October, town-election voters in Cary faced an unfamiliar voting method and had additional choices to make. But not surprisingly, Cary's performance was above average, just as Cary is above average in income and educational levels and Internet connections.

Hendersonville, however, had poorer results -- over one third of voters polled were not prepared to rank their choices. Instant runoff voting relies on voter education, something North Carolina does poorly. Our state has the highest "undervote" rate for president in the country, because voters can't even vote a straight ticket correctly.

Consider the experience of two different municipalities, one using instant runoff voting and one not.

In the Cary experiment, the winner of an "instant runoff" in the District B Town Council contest took office with less than 40 percent of the first-choice votes cast, and less than 50 percent of the votes of people who showed up on Election Day. It is possible that in a one-on-one contest the outcome would have been different.

In Rocky Mount, where there was a traditional runoff on a separate day, more voters had a say than would be possible with instant runoff voting.

In Rocky Mount's October election, City Council member Lois Watkins trailed a better-funded challenger, Tom Looney, by 12 votes. In a November runoff between the two, 448 more voters came to the polls than had in the October election. Watkins won the election with the votes of 60 percent of all those who showed up. This would not have been possible with instant runoff voting.

Instant runoff voting's implementation may also threaten North Carolina's highly praised and hard-won verified voting law.

Since North Carolina voting machines lack instant runoff voting capability, the Wake Board of Elections had to manually sort and count the "instant runoff" votes on Cary's optically scanned ballots. One small error cascaded into a miscount that had to be corrected at another date. To automate the process, Cary would have to purchase new machines.

For Hendersonville, a touch-screen voting machine county, the State Board of Elections put together uncertified "work-arounds," circumventing the legal method of manually sorting and counting "paper trails." Without this workaround, it is doubtful Hendersonville would have volunteered for the pilot program.

No instant-runoff capable equipment meets North Carolina's standards -- so will we gut those standards?

Lawmakers and citizens understand that we need our verified voting law, and we need to implement it correctly. Our standards for voting systems, software and vendors are key to protecting North Carolina voters from harm caused by uncertified software or unscrupulous vendors. We ignore those at our peril.

If the objective of an election process is to discern the will of the voters, then that process must be the simplest, most transparent and most enfranchising method for all voters.

(Joyce McCloy is founder of the N.C. Coalition for Verified Voting.)

**WHAT YOU CAN DO:**

The Wake County Board of Elections is holding a public forum on instant runoff voting in Cary on Thursday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Cary Town Hall, 316 N. Academy St.

<http://www.newsobserver.com/print/monday/opinion/story/878423.html>