

Results Reporting on Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) Elections

Position Statement of Californians for Electoral Reform Spring 2010

Since San Francisco began implementing ranked voting (a.k.a. "Instant Runoff Voting" or IRV) in 2004, a misapprehension has been growing regarding the requirements for reporting results on IRV elections. Californians for Electoral Reform (CfER) has considered the claims made on this topic and is issuing this statement to clarify its analysis and recommendations.

A technical problem with San Francisco's data conversion (an issue with the initial implementation that is no longer an issue at all) caused a delay in reporting the ranked results in 2004 from election night Tuesday to the following Friday. This unnecessarily became precedent for subsequent San Francisco elections, and of greater concern, started being promoted as good public policy. Increasingly the idea is promoted that ranked results from IRV elections can not be reported as early as results from other elections due to something intrinsic to IRV. This is simply false.

Currently, in all elections, preliminary results are reported before final results are available, starting early on election night. In California, counties have a 28-day canvass period to count ballots. Some counties, like Los Angeles, need every one of those 28 days in order to count their ballots, whereas most take a couple weeks to finish counting absentee and provisional ballots. The policy of releasing preliminary results originates from the public desire to witness the "horse race" and the consequent pressure of the press to find out those results as early as possible. While some people object to releasing results before the counts are finished, this is an entirely separate issue from whether ranked results should be treated any differently.

There is no basis for treating ranked results any differently than other election results. If published results are preliminary, they can change, regardless of the type of election. If the public is entitled to preliminary election results, it is just as entitled to the ranked data that provides more information on who is really "ahead" or "behind" in an IRV race. The California Secretary of State's website has a page for races with margins of less than 2%, precisely because preliminary results can change. This is no more or less likely with an IRV election, nor does the likelihood have anything to do with whether the ranked results are reported.

CfER recommends, as a best practice, that preliminary results (i.e., tabulated round by round counts) from IRV elections be reported as often as other preliminary results. If frequently running the report on ranked data on election night is too burdensome a task for Election Department staff, we consider it reasonable to report the ranked results once at the end of election night. At the very least, jurisdictions using IRV should report the results at least as often as San Francisco does now (starting the Friday after election day).

CfER strongly opposes the claim currently being made that all ballots must be counted before any results can be reported. This is unfair to both the candidates and the voters, who would not be able to know anything at all about the election results for as long as 28 days. It is deliberately and unnecessarily unfair to IRV as a voting system, since no similar requirement is placed on the

reporting of the results of plurality elections. If the inaccurate claim that IRV elections require delayed reporting continues to be spread, it could easily become a false argument against using IRV at all. The claim must be confronted and shown to be false.