



Important Election Terminology

A very important aspect of discussing election and voting reform is understanding the concepts used.

Useful terms to understand:

- **Plurality:** Simply put, the most votes. Many officials are elected by receiving a plurality, as long as they have more votes than anyone else. These elections are also called **“winner-take-all.”**
- **Minority Rule:** In winner-take-all elections, candidates often have less than 50% support. Thus, a majority of voters would have actually preferred other candidates. In crowded elections winners may only represent a sliver of the electorate. Plurality elections allow a political minority to have a monopoly on power.
- **Runoff:** A round of elections, typically between two candidates that seeks to ensure majority support for one of the candidates. Usually the candidates are the two individuals who received the most votes during the first round of voting, but neither reached 50%.
- **The “Spoiler” Effect:** When two like-minded candidates split their base of support, allowing a less desired candidate to win the race. This can often take place in winner-take-all elections. A contemporary case would be the 2000 Florida race, when Ralph Nader drew enough votes from the political left to give Bush the margin of victory over Gore. IRV would use 2nd, 3rd and subsequent choices to alleviate the problems caused by “vote-splitting” and “spoilers.”
- **Ranked voting:** A system in which voters indicate their choices using ranks for candidates (i.e. first, second, third, etc.) There are a number of types of ranked voting, which includes IRV.
- **Instant Runoff Voting (IRV):** Refers specifically to the voting process for electing a single individual to a position, such as an executive office or single legislative seat. Voters rank their candidates and runoffs are simulated until one candidate has majority support.
- **Rounds:** Refers to the stages of vote-counting in IRV. When a last-place candidate is eliminated and these votes **redistributed** a majority is sought. If there is no majority, a new round occurs.
- **Exhausted ballot:** In some IRV elections voters only rank 1st, 2nd and 3rd, while there may be more than three candidates. A ballot is “exhausted” when all candidates on it have been eliminated.
- **IRV-ready:** Voting equipment that is capable of running an IRV election without needing retrofitting or reprogramming. Versatile equipment is the ideal for new voting equipment today.
- **Charter:** The primary document that outlines how cities and counties work. Importantly, they include the procedure for elections within that jurisdiction. In order to implement IRV there must be a **charter amendment** or **charter reform**. Some cities have charter review commissions or panels that investigate possible additions or changes.
- **Ballot initiative:** a legal amendment to a state or city’s law that is initiated by citizens’ signatures. Not all states or cities allow citizens sponsored amendments. Those that do also have varying numbers of signatures needed to qualify the initiative.
- **Single-member district:** An elected office that corresponds to a single person. Single-member districts are, for example, a mayor, governor or legislator who is the only person that represents their district. These are offices which would use IRV.
- **Multi-member district:** An elected office that has more than one person filling seats and representing constituents. Common examples would be school boards or city councils, where they do not have specific districts they represent. Multi-member districts often use plurality voting.
- **Open primary:** A primary election in which voters can choose which party’s primary they wish to vote in.
- **Closed primary:** A primary election in which voters may only vote in the primary that corresponds to their registered party. (Only registered Republicans vote in the Republican primary, etc.)