

Berkshire Eagle

IRV can reform voting

By Peter Vickery

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AMHERST

GOV. SCHWARZENEGGER? With more than 100 candidates running in the California recall race, it's a real possibility. After all, Jesse Ventura became governor of Minnesota with just 37 percent of the votes. Just in case we needed reminding, the California recall shows how our voting system (called plurality voting) cannot cope with the stress of three or more candidates running for a single office. It can handle two candidates just fine, but any more than that and the rest become "spoilers," sometimes throwing the election to the candidate most voters like least.

Remember last year's race for governor here in Massachusetts? Shannon O'Brien became the Democratic Party's nominee even though she won just 33 percent of the votes in the primary. Most people who voted in the primary voted for somebody else. Not surprisingly, in the gubernatorial election turnout was low among registered Democrats, and Shannon O'Brien lost heavily to Mitt Romney.

Sending an unpopular candidate into a general election is unfair to the party's supporters and to the candidate. We voters have the right to expect our votes to count, and a party's standard-bearer deserve a mandate. So later this month, a committee of the Massachusetts Legislature will look at a reform called Instant Runoff Voting (IRV), a system that is already in use in some parts of the United States. On Sept. 18, the Joint Election Laws Committee will hear testimony regarding bills that would bring Instant Runoff Voting to Massachusetts.

IRV is a run-off election that happens without the cost of a second round of campaigning. It allows (but does not require) voters to rank candidates in order of preference, 1, 2, 3 and so on. Essentially, IRV is a way of telling the person who counts the ballots how you would vote if your favorite candidate came last and there had to be a runoff election.

If a candidate wins a majority of first-preferences, that candidate is the winner. But if nobody wins a majority, there is another count. If your first-choice candidate comes last, your vote goes to your second choice.

This process of eliminating candidates and transferring their supporters' votes continues until one candidate has a majority. Nobody gets two votes -- Instant Runoff Voting is constitutional, legal, and complies with the principle of one-person-one-vote.

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Requiring a majority of the votes, not just a plurality, is not a new idea. Until 1855, a candidate needed a majority to become governor of Massachusetts. If nobody got a majority, the Legislature picked the winner. That was how the original framers of our Constitution set up the system.

Nobody is suggesting that we go back to the days of letting the Legislature have the final say in who becomes governor, but we can still abide by the framers' principle of majority rule by switching to Instant Runoff Voting.

In addition to producing majority-winners, Instant Runoff Voting has another benefit. By making candidates appeal to their opponents' supporters for second-preferences votes, IRV encourages them to run more positive campaigns. You do not win somebody's second-choice by bad-mouthing their favorite candidate. Instead, you have to emphasize areas of common ground. This would be good news for those of us who are sick of the ads that try to demonize the competition.

Some may argue that Instant Runoff Voting is too complicated. The voters of San Francisco and Vermont do not feel that way. They endorsed IRV overwhelmingly last year. Nor do the Republicans of Utah who have also opted for IRV. The state of Louisiana, which for some offices uses a run-off to ensure that the winner is the choice of the majority, lets its overseas absentee voters employ IRV.

Like other Americans, Bay Staters can cope with standardized tests, the rules of baseball, and multiple choices for

breakfast cereals. To suggest that they will be baffled by the option of ranking candidates in order of preference, 1 through 3, is an insult to their intelligence. If you're tired of negative campaigns, if you think that somebody should have the support of the majority to win an election, and if you want to return to constitutional basics, then Instant Runoff Voting is for you.

Write today to the chairs of the Joint Election Laws Committee and tell them why you support Instant Runoff Voting.

Peter Vickery is an Amherst attorney and president of Fairvote Massachusetts.