

Point of View:

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Instant runoff needs scrutiny

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RALEIGH - Supporters of instant runoff voting are touting Cary's recent experiment with this new method of casting, counting and valuing votes as a resounding success and a reason to expand its use to other cities and towns. A more thorough examination of what happened in Cary casts serious doubt on that conclusion.

As a test market, Cary is not a representative sample for most of North Carolina. Its income and education levels are far higher than the average North Carolina community. Atypically, 90 percent of its citizens have access to the Internet. It doesn't have representative minority populations.

In the at-large Town Council race, two candidates, Susan Lawson and Roger Hill, were concerned that their presence in the race might throw the election to another candidate, Tommy Byrd, so they dropped out and endorsed Erv Portman. Susan Lawson was quoted as saying, "I don't want to dilute his chances, even by one vote." On its own, this undermines the argument that instant runoff voting worked.

However, the primary reason to question the success of the new system in Cary is that it likely changed the outcome of an election, the one in District B.

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THERE IS AMPLE EVIDENCE TO CONCLUDE that Vickie Maxwell would have defeated Don Frantz in a November runoff election, which was not held because of the "instant runoff" that counted voters' second- and third-choice preferences. Instead, Frantz will take office receiving 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.

In a runoff, the third-place finisher, Nels Roseland, would have endorsed and actively worked for Vickie Maxwell. She was supported by the energized Davis-High House organization as well as by most of the activists from the successful Harold Weinbrecht mayoral campaign. After their stunning victory in the other three races, they would have been motivated to work hard to ensure Maxwell's success in a runoff.

Compare this with Frantz, who aligned himself with losing Mayor Ernie McAlister. McAlister supporters would not have been so enthusiastic in the second go-round.

Due to instant runoff voting, Frantz won with a lower percentage of first-choice votes than McAlister received in being soundly defeated (there was no instant runoff in the mayoral race). The result is that an ally of the incumbent Republican mayor in an election (officially nonpartisan) in which that incumbent was overwhelmingly rejected won in the most Democratic district in town, a district that strongly voted to throw that mayor out.

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IN DISTRICT B, IT WOULD HAVE MADE SENSE to have a runoff election, as the previous voting system allowed. The incumbent, Roseland, was defeated, and the two contenders were under 40 percent support and within 5 percentage points of each other.

Voters were denied that opportunity. Elections are about providing a clear expression of the public's will, and in this case it is questionable if that happened.

It is apparent that "instant runoff voting" is a misleading name, because it implies that it achieves the same result as a real runoff. "Ranked choice voting" would be a more appropriate label. The system used in Cary is not the same thing as a runoff "instantly," but a different way of counting and valuing votes.

Ranked choice voting violates a key principle in electoral confidence, and that is simplicity. Determining when to conduct a runoff could be made more complicated by adjusting thresholds, but voting itself should remain simple.

Increasing voter participation will depend more on local government's relevancy to citizen's lives than to any method of casting and counting votes. Clearly, Cary voters spoke loudly. They were not happy with special-interest influence on Town Hall and felt the system was gamed against their will. It is not clear that ranked choice voting reflected that unhappiness.

The new system becomes an even bigger concern when you have more than three viable candidates. Who to rank second or third, or should you rank at all? Voters should not need a calculator to figure out whether they are helping their cause or hurting it by ranking candidates or not, and how to do so in the most effective way.

Principally an academic model, ranked choice voting may yield unintended consequences. Before other communities embrace it, an open and thorough examination of all the data from the Cary experiment needs to occur. As well, other reforms should be explored. For municipalities, those could include changing thresholds for holding runoffs, or public financing of elections. A frank and transparent debate on these issues is healthy for our democracy.

(Perry Woods is a Raleigh-based political consultant. In the recent Cary election he worked for mayoral candidate Harold Weinbrecht and for Town Council candidates Erv Portman, Gale Adcock and Nels Roseland. He assisted council candidate Vickie Maxwell during the vote tabulation process.)

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