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Instant runoff voting loses by razor-thin margin

Writer:

Curtis Wackerle

Byline:

Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

In an election decided by six votes, Aspen citizens told their elected leaders they do not wish to retain instant runoff voting as their election method.

Tuesday's vote, which split 805 votes against keeping IRV and 799 votes for keeping it, a breakdown of 50.2 percent to 49.8 percent, was advisory. The city must have another election to amend the charter to officially dump IRV. The details on how and when this charter election will be conducted must be worked out by City Council.

Voters' rejection of IRV is a political victory for former mayoral candidate and City Hall critic Marilyn Marks, an opponent of IRV. While she said she didn't campaign hard for Tuesday's advisory question, she said she believed her work raising questions about certain aspects of last May's election, where IRV was used in Aspen for the first time, made a difference. Marks is suing the city to compel it to release images of the actual ballots cast in the election.

"I think this says there are plenty of questions about IRV," Marks said. "It's not nearly as simple as it was billed to be."

Marks said she would be more active in campaigning against IRV when the actual charter amendment question is proposed.

In November 2007, Aspen voters by a 76 percent margin approved a charter amendment instructing the city to implement IRV as the voting method in council and mayoral races. In May, Aspen used the system for the first time. IRV allows voters to rank their choices of candidates. If no majority is gained through first-choice votes, lower-ranking candidates are eliminated with those candidates' votes going to the voter's next preference.

Councilman Steve Skadron said the razor thin margin of the IRV defeat prevented him from drawing any strong conclusions about the mood of the electorate.

"I don't think this tells us anything other than that the voters are split," said Skadron, who questioned whether IRV was right for the city following the last election, although he supported it initially.

"I don't know if people are voting based on the merits of IRV or based on some bad publicity surrounding (the last election)," Skadron said.

Aspen Mayor Mick Ireland, noting that the council will have to propose some other system to replace IRV, said it could be difficult to get consensus on what that system should be. Support exists in the

community for going back to the runoff system that IRV replaced, going back to the system before runoffs where whoever had the most votes won, as well as keeping IRV. There could also be other alternative methods proposed. Ireland proposed putting all these on the ballot as yes or no questions. If any one was to get majority support, it would become Aspen's voting method; if more than one gets a majority, than whatever received the most support would be selected, Ireland proposed.

Ireland notes there is a possibility that nothing would get majority support.

"It could be like the entrance to Aspen," Ireland said.

In any case, the city is preparing for the possibility that it will have to use IRV for the next city election in the spring of 2011, since if the charter is not successfully amended, IRV remains the default voting method. City of Aspen attorneys John Worcester and Jim True said they are prepared to propose ways to make IRV run smoother next time.

"We know what worked in the election and what didn't," Worcester said.

Skadron said he believed IRV got off on the wrong foot to begin with. Prior to the May election, there was months of debate about which method the city should use to tabulate people's vote ranking. The debate was confusing and poorly understood, Skadron said.

"There's been a huge amount of negative publicity," Skadron said. "The city and council are partly to blame."

curtis@aspendedailynews.com

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