

Should Broomfield Adopt Instant-Runoff (Ranked) Voting?

Frequently Asked Questions

In November 2021, Broomfield voters will consider council-initiated **Ballot Question 2A** (bold for emphasis):
 Shall Chapter 4-06 of the Municipal Code of the City and County of Broomfield be amended to add the following section:

4-06-020 - Voting Method.

The mayor and all councilmembers will be elected using a ranked voting method, as defined in Title 31 of the Colorado Revised Statutes, beginning with the November 7, 2023 municipal election and for all elections moving forward.

What is “a ranked voting method”?

In Broomfield’s case, it is a form of ranked choice voting (RCV) – specifically, instant-runoff voting (IRV).

How would voting change under instant-runoff voting (IRV)?

Broomfielders currently elect the mayor and councilmembers in single-winner plurality elections. Instead of just selecting one candidate, voters will rank the candidates by indicating 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc. See the Center for Civic Design sample ballot below from a Broomfield study session. However, if only one or two candidates are vying for a seat, then the current “choose-one” plurality voting will be used.

Mayor										
Rank up to 10 candidates. Mark no more than 1 oval in each column.	First choice	Second choice	Third choice	Fourth choice	Fifth choice	Sixth choice	Seventh choice	Eighth choice	Ninth choice	Tenth choice
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th
Frederick Sharp Orange Party	<input type="radio"/>									
Luis Garcia Orange Party	<input type="radio"/>									
Charles Layne Yellow Party	<input type="radio"/>									
Andrew Kowalski Yellow Party	<input type="radio"/>									
Alex Wallace Purple Party	<input type="radio"/>									
Eric Savoy Purple Party	<input type="radio"/>									
Barbara Williams Tan Party	<input type="radio"/>									
Lillian Cohen Lime Party	<input type="radio"/>									
Ann Windsock Independent	<input type="radio"/>									
Markos Miller Silver Party	<input type="radio"/>									

How is IRV tabulated?

IRV considers voter rankings to try to identify the candidate with the most overall support. The 1st-choice rankings are tallied. If a candidate gets a majority, then, just like plurality, that candidate wins. If no candidate gets a majority, then the instant runoff is triggered. The lowest vote-getter is eliminated, and the ballots for the eliminated candidate count toward the next-highest choice on the ballot. The elimination-and-transfer process continues until a winner emerges.

Does IRV guarantee a majority winner?

No voting method guarantees a majority winner when there are more than 2 candidates. The winner of New York City’s 2021 Democratic IRV mayoral primary got 43% support of the ballots cast. IRV winners are often portrayed as winning with a majority, but, to be clear, it’s a majority of the non-exhausted ballots.

An “exhausted ballot” occurs when the candidates ranked on a ballot have all been eliminated so that the ballot no longer contributes a vote in the election. About 15% of ballots in the NYC primary contest were exhausted and did not show a preference between the final top two candidates. By contrast, 48% of NYC voters had not voted for either of the top two mayoral candidates in the first round, so nearly half of all votes would have been “wasted” if the election had used plurality.

What are the advantages of IRV?

- **More voters help to elect the winner** because a popular back-up choice is counted when a voter’s 1st-choice candidate is eliminated.
- **A reduced spoiler effect** in which a non-viable or “spoiler” candidate attracts enough votes away from a similar, but viable, candidate causing a third, less-popular candidate to win.
- **More choices on the ballot** because candidates are no longer actively discouraged from entering a race to avoid being a spoiler. A 2016 FairVote study of San Francisco Bay Area cities found that more women and people of color run and win under IRV than under plurality.

What else is important to know about implementing instant-runoff voting (IRV) in Broomfield?

- **Results of elimination-and-transfer rounds could be delayed**, even though preliminary results may be reported on election night. Eliminating a candidate can have a big impact on later rounds, so jurisdictions typically wait for all the ballots if the 1st round has no clear winner.
- **Increased costs** for the IRV tabulation software license (to be shared with other counties conducting IRV elections), administration (ballot, postage, personnel) and voter education – altogether estimated between \$58,000 and \$114,000 for the first Broomfield election.

How does IRV affect voter expressiveness?

While IRV provides greater expressiveness than plurality voting, there are some limitations.

- A voter may rank several candidates, but the ballot only counts toward one candidate at a time. **A voter's 1st choice is the most important** and the only choice guaranteed to be counted or revealed during the tallying, no matter how many lower rankings the voter marked.
- The ballot might limit the number of rankings when a large number of candidates are running.
- IRV has no way to express whether a candidate is a close 2nd choice or a distant 2nd choice.

What is the most effective way to vote using IRV?

Voting according to your actual candidate preferences is usually best: rank your favorite candidate first, your 2nd-favorite candidate second, etc. However, there are two possible exceptions:

- If you want your vote to count in the final round, consider ranking one of the frontrunners even if that means you can't rank one of your longshot favorite candidates.
- If you think your 1st choice can make it to the final round but can't win and you think your 2nd choice can win in the final round but might be eliminated beforehand due to vote splitting, consider ranking your 2nd choice higher than your 1st choice. Sample 1st-round results are below:

Finn - Favorite Non-Viable	– small faction:	33%
Silvia - Centrist Viable	– dominant faction:	30% so eliminated in round 1
Ophelia - Opposite Popular	– dominant faction:	37%

In this example, Silvia and Ophelia split the dominant-faction vote, causing Silvia to be eliminated. Silvia's supporters will probably rank Ophelia #2 or leave the #2 ranking blank. Finn's supporters will probably regret not ranking Silvia #1 to prevent Ophelia with opposite views from winning.

What other US cities have used IRV?

IRV has been used in the San Francisco Bay Area since 2004. Other cities subsequently using IRV include Minneapolis, St. Paul, Santa Fe and, most recently, New York City. Two municipalities which tried IRV for only one election are Ann Arbor in 1975 and Aspen in 2008. The reasons for IRV adoption and then for a later repeal or for continued use are myriad and debatable. The Colorado towns of Telluride and Basalt have held IRV elections, but only once was the elimination-and-transfer process needed. Telluride's 3-election IRV pilot has now expired. Past efforts to adopt IRV in Fort Collins, Pueblo and Denver have not been successful, but activists have renewed hope with the **recent passage of Colorado House Bill 21-1071**, which allows municipalities to refer IRV elections to be conducted as part of a county's coordinated election and requires the Secretary of State to set up procedures for risk-limiting audits of IRV elections.

Does IRV eliminate negative campaigning?

No. Candidates may hesitate to go negative because they want a voter's #2 or #3 ranking if they can't be the 1st choice, but IRV does not remove negative campaigning entirely, as we saw in the NYC primary.

Does IRV ensure proportional representation?

No. Cambridge, MA, uses a form of ranked choice voting called single transferable vote which does yield proportional representation, but it requires a multi-winner ballot contest and is different from IRV.

Is adopting a better voting method a partisan issue?

No, but sometimes changing a voting method becomes partisan when the dominant party likes the status quo that puts them in power and therefore resists giving voters more voice on the ballot.

Does the League of Women Voters support IRV?

The LWV of Colorado supports "alternatives to plurality voting that allow people to express their preferences more effectively." IRV is a better voting method that LWV supports.



The League of Women Voters of Boulder County (LWVBC) Voting Methods Team provides accurate, non-partisan information, analysis and expertise on alternative voting methods at the local, state and national levels. LWVBC members include Broomfield residents.