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Study Finds Hendersonville Voters Understand and Prefer Instant Run-Off Voting (IRV)

Hendersonville voters say instant run-off voting (IRV) is easy to understand and that they prefer ranking candidates to determine a winner on a single ballot rather than voting for two candidates where a second run-off election might be necessary.

Those are some of the key findings of an exit poll of voter preferences taken after the Nov. 6 city council elections in Hendersonville in which IRV was utilized. IRV allows voters to rank the candidates for an office in order of preference, eliminating the possibility of needing a run-off election if candidates failed to win enough support on the first round of voting.

North Carolina State University's Dr. Michael Cobb, assistant professor of political science, designed the exit poll to evaluate how voters felt about IRV. The exit poll, managed by Karen Brinson of the N.C. State Board of Elections, contained interviews with more than 800 voters from Hendersonville.

Hendersonville is the second city in North Carolina to pilot IRV. The town of Cary utilized instant run-off voting in its Oct. 9 town council elections. In Cary, instant run-off voting affected the election in Council District B by generating a winner, thereby avoiding the need to hold a run-off election between the top two vote getters.

In Hendersonville, voters first picked their top two choices for city council and then were offered the option of ranking one or all of the remaining candidates in order of preference.

Key findings of the exit poll include:

- Of those with a preference, 71 percent of voters said they preferred IRV, which is almost identical to the percentage of voters in last month's exit poll in Cary that said they preferred IRV.
- Most voters (86 percent) reported it was at least "somewhat easy to understand" the IRV ballot, with 60 percent agreeing that it was "very easy" to understand.
- On the other hand, among the minority of voters who did not rank more than one candidate and gave a reason why (276), a substantial number of them (118 or 43 percent) expressed misunderstandings about how IRV worked.

- Most voters (63 percent) actually utilized the option of ranking at least one of the candidates for city council after selecting as many of two candidates on the first part of the ballot.
- Of those voters who saw a difference, three out of four reported knowing more rather than less about the candidates' issue positions in this election compared to previous elections for city council, although 45 percent of all voters did not report knowing any more or any less.
- The study found no significant differences between different types of voters in their understanding or preference for IRV: whites and non-whites, males and females, and lower and higher income voters all evaluated IRV roughly equally.
- Outreach efforts to inform voters ahead of time about IRV were largely successful and affected how voters evaluated IRV. Sixty-five percent said they knew they would be asked to rank their preferences before coming to vote that day, and those who reported knowing about IRV in advance were more likely to rank at least one candidate as their third choice (68 percent to 53 percent) and to prefer ranking candidates over voting for only one candidate (70 percent to 64 percent).

More information and survey data related to instant run-off voting in Cary and Hendersonville can be found online at
http://www2.chass.ncsu.edu/cobb/IRV%20Results_Tables.pdf