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Majority rules, except in elections

By [Nikki Love](#)

All of us who watched the recent special election for Congress saw how the vote can split in a hotly contested three-way race. Isn't there a better way?

We currently have a plurality system for our elections, meaning that whoever gets the largest percentage of votes wins, even if a majority of voters cast their ballots for other people. With two candidates in a race, the system usually works and the candidate who receives more than 50 percent of the vote wins.

But when there are more than two strong candidates, this system breaks down, and the candidate that may be less preferred among the majority of voters could actually win.

In this recent election, Republican Charles Djou won with 39 percent, Democrat Colleen Hanabusa came in second with 31 percent and Democrat Ed Case came in third with 28 percent. Observers have commented that if one of the leading Democrats had dropped out of the race, the other Democrat would have won with a clear majority. Instead, with our existing plurality system, the winner was chosen by fewer than 40 percent of the voters.

This scenario is not at all uncommon, and can affect candidates of both major parties. Recall the 2000 presidential election in which Ralph Nader was considered the "spoiler." Those who voted for Nader probably preferred Al Gore over George W. Bush, but because of the existing system, Gore lost out on those potential supporters. Similarly, the spoiler effect may have affected the outcome in the 1992 race between George Bush, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot.

Whatever your partisan leanings, most of us can agree that it doesn't feel right sending someone to represent us in Washington (or in the State Capitol, or at Honolulu Hale) if most people didn't vote for them. At the same time, we don't necessarily want political party insiders to determine which candidates should be allowed to run and who should be forced to drop out. We'd rather have a wide spectrum of candidates to choose from.

What we need now is a better system that encourages many good candidates to run and provides a mechanism to ensure that the winner represents a clear majority of those who cast ballots.

The solution is easy: instant runoff voting. Known as IRV and sometimes called ranked choice voting, this system allows voters to rank their preferences of candidates on the ballot. For example, in this recent special election, Case supporters would have ranked Case as their first choice, then possibly Hanabusa as their second choice. After all the first-choice rankings are counted, it would become clear that no candidate received 50 percent of the vote.

At this point, an instant runoff would determine the majority choice between the top two candidates, Hanabusa and Djou. Since Case came in last place, those ballots would be revisited and those voters' second-choice rankings would be added to the totals. If Hanabusa had been the second choice of most Case supporters, she would have won with IRV. On the other hand, if Djou was the second choice of most Case supporters, then Djou would have won with IRV.

Either way, the winner would be selected with more than 50 percent of the final vote count, reflecting the true majority choice.

This example is simplified here to the top three candidates, but this system also works when including all 14 candidates in the special election. (Learn more at www.fairvote.org/how-instant-runoff-voting-works.) IRV is especially useful for supporters of lesser-known candidates, because it eliminates the fear of "throwing away your vote" for a candidate you may strongly support but who may not be a front-runner.

IRV may sound like a big change, but at the county level we already do something very similar. For Honolulu mayor and City Council, we have a traditional runoff system. In the September primary, if no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote, the top two candidates move on to a runoff

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in the November general election. IRV is the same idea, but simply does it all on a single election day — and saves the expense of holding a second election. In fact, IRV is already used in many cities, including San Francisco, Oakland, Memphis, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Santa Fe.

It's time we take a serious look at implementing IRV in Hawai'i. The benefits are obvious. There would be no "spoilers," and many strong candidates can run without fear of distorting the outcome. Voters would have real choices and the opportunity to express their ranking of preferences.

IRV might even help bridge the partisan divide and reduce negative campaigning, because a candidate hoping to be your second choice would hold back from ugly mudslinging against your first choice. And most important, we would be able to say without a doubt that the winner was elected by a clear majority of us.

Nikki Love is executive director of Common Cause Hawai'i. She wrote this commentary for The Advertiser.