

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5556

As of February 24, 2003

Title: An act relating to the process for election to local nonpartisan offices.

Brief Description: Authorizing instant runoff voting.

Sponsors: Senators Swecker, Kohl-Welles, Carlson, Kline, Finkbeiner, Brown and Keiser.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Government Operations & Elections: 2/25/03.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS & ELECTIONS

Staff: Mac Nicholson (786-7445)

Background: Cities and towns in Washington are classified according to population at the time of organization. A first class city is a city with a population of at least 10,000 inhabitants at the time of organization that has adopted a charter. The 10 first class cities in the state are Aberdeen, Bellingham, Bremerton, Everett, Seattle, Richland, Spokane, Tacoma, Vancouver, and Yakima.

Present statute provides that city and town primary elections are nonpartisan and are held when more than two candidates file for the same position. Generally, if a primary was held for a nonpartisan office, the general election ballot must contain the names of the two candidates receiving the highest vote totals, listed in that order. A candidate must receive at least 1 percent of the votes cast for the office being sought in the primary in order to advance to the general election ballot. If no primary was held, the order of the candidate names for the general election ballot is determined by a lot drawing by the county filing officer. The candidate receiving the highest vote total in the general election is elected to the office.

Summary of Bill: The instant runoff voting system (IRV) is adopted in Washington for all applicable elections. A first class city may use IRV for its elections if adopted by appropriate action of its governing body. Primaries for all nonpartisan offices in first class cities choosing to use IRV are replaced with general elections conducted according to specified IRV procedures.

"Instant runoff voting" is defined as a system of voting whereby voters may rank three or more candidates for the same office in order of preference, for as many of the candidates for the office as they wish, up to the maximum number of choices allowed.

The IRV counting procedures specify that a candidate is elected upon receiving a majority of the votes cast for a race. If no candidate receives a majority of votes after the initial counting stage, the last place candidate is eliminated. The second highest ranked choices on the ballots for an eliminated candidate become votes for the candidates so designated in those choices.

This process continues through each preferential ranking until a candidate receives a majority of the votes or until all but one candidate remains.

Provisions for ballot specifications and directions are included. Election officials may provide for electronic sorting and tabulating ballots, and modifications to voting devices and counting methods if the changes are consistent with the provisions and purposes of the bill. IRV election results are applied to a specific contested election statute.

The statute providing for the qualifying of nonpartisan candidates for general elections, including provisions for candidate listing order, and the 1 percent primary election vote requirement, is repealed.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available on companion bill, HB 1390.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.