

District 5 – How Might Ranked Choice Voting Affect the Supervisor’s Race?

Let’s look at a real-world scenario from the upcoming November 2004 supervisorial races. Let’s imagine the District 5 race with 10 candidates, four of them strong progressive candidates. What this example shows is the importance of voters using all three of their rankings, with the first choice being their favorite candidate and the second and third rankings being their runoff choices in case their favorite candidate doesn’t win. Use of all the rankings is what facilitates coalition-building.

The most immediate difference between RCV and the previous December runoff is that with the old system progressive candidates likely would have had to battle it out among themselves to see which one made it to the runoff. If they split the progressive vote too badly, it’s possible that none of them would have made it to the runoff. And after attacking each other, they may have had difficulty uniting the progressive vote for the December runoff.

But with RCV, the incentives for winning are different. The way one of the progressive candidates will most likely win in District 5 is by using the rankings to build coalitions among all the progressive candidates. These coalitions can be conscious and public, or tacit and subtle. A public coalition will have candidates saying to their supporters: “Look, I think I’m the best candidate but in case I don’t win, Robert or Ross or Dan also is a great candidate.” The coalition-building might extend to organizations, or even the candidates themselves, publicizing a ranking of their preferred candidates, or perhaps just a slate of three candidates with no recommended ranking, allowing voters to decide the actual ranking for themselves. Or the coalition-building can be more subtle. What the coalition candidates want to avoid at all cost are bitter negative attacks or hit pieces against each other, because it will hurt their chances of picking up second and third place rankings from the supporters of the candidates they have attacked.

Note that “building coalitions” does not mean that the coalition candidates can not disagree with or criticize each other. It means you do it from a principled place and in a principled manner. In fact, a candidate might win the respect of voters for showcasing HOW to disagree with an opponent. RCV encourages this kind of healthy behavior on the part of candidates, and encourages debate of issues and ideas, and candidates finding common ground as much as possible.

Here’s an example for District 5, one of the most progressive districts in San Francisco. Imagine 100 voters and ten candidates: ProgA (Prog meaning progressive candidate), ProgB, ProgC, ProgD; ModA (for Moderate candidate), ModB, Conservative, MinorA, MinorB, and MinorC (Minor candidates with no chance of winning). Let’s say after the polls close and voters have ranked their ballots, these candidate have the following number of first-place rankings:

Candidates	1st round
ModA	21
ModB	10
ProgA	18
ProgB	16
ProgC	12
ProgD	10
Conserv.	8
MinorA	2
MinorB	2
MinorC	1
Total	100

With 100 voters, a majority is 51 votes, so no candidate has a majority of first-place rankings, not even close. It's a very split field. Not only that, but a moderate candidate is in first place, because the progressive vote has splintered among four candidates who, combined, have 56 votes, more than a majority. With the old December runoff system, candidates ModA and ProgA would have advanced to the December runoff, even though between them they only have 39 votes (39 percent of the total).

So now we begin the instant runoff. Candidate MinorC has the least number of first-place rankings and is eliminated from the runoff. In fact, Candidates MinorA, MinorB and MinorC together only have five votes, and because their votes do not equal the candidate vote total of the next-highest candidate (Conservative with 8 votes), they cannot mathematically win and so they can be eliminated at the same time from the runoff. Of the five voters who ranked them first, three gave their runoff/second ranking to ModA and two gave it to ProgB. Those votes are added to the pile of the "continuing candidates," and at the end of this round the vote totals are the following:

Candidates	1st round	2 nd
ModA	21	24 (+3)
ModB	10	10
ProgA	18	18
ProgB	16	18 (+2)
ProgC	12	12
ProgD	10	10
Conserv.	8	8
MinorA	2	0 (-2)
MinorB	2	0 (-2)
MinorC	1	0 (-1)
Total	100	100

Third round: No candidate has reached the majority threshold of 51 votes. So the candidate with the least number of total votes, Conservative, is eliminated from the runoff. Each ballot for the Conservative candidate now counts for the voter's next choice, which is their runoff choice. Of the eight voters who ranked Conservative first, six gave their runoff/second ranking to ModA and two gave it to ModB. Supporters of the conservative candidate likely would list one or both of the moderate candidates as a second choice, being the continuing candidate closest to their political views. Third round vote totals are now the following:

Candidates	1st round	2 nd	3rd
ModA	21	24 (+3)	30 (+6)
ModB	10	10	12 (+2)
ProgA	18	18	18
ProgB	16	18 (+2)	18
ProgC	12	12	12
ProgD	10	10	10
Conserv.	8	8	0 (-8)
MinorA	2	0 (-2)	--
MinorB	2	0 (-2)	--
MinorC	1	0 (-1)	--
Total	100	100	100

Fourth round: We still don't have a majority winner, so the candidate with the fewest votes, ProgD, is eliminated, and each of her ballots is distributed to the voter's next/runoff choice. These ballots

would likely go to other progressive candidates. Let's imagine that ProgB picks up 6 of the 10 votes and ProgC gets the other 4. We now have the following vote totals:

Candidates	1st round	2 nd	3 rd	4 th
ModA	21	24 (+3)	30 (+6)	30
ModB	10	10	12 (+2)	12
ProgA	18	18	18	18
ProgB	16	18 (+2)	18	24 (+6)
ProgC	12	12	12	16 (+4)
ProgD	10	10	10	0 (-10)
Conserv.	8	8	0 (-8)	--
MinorA	2	0 (-2)	--	--
MinorB	2	0 (-2)	--	--
MinorC	1	0 (-1)	--	--
Total	100	100	100	100

Fifth round: Now the candidate with the fewest votes is ModB. Let's imagine that ten of these ballots go to ModA, but a couple votes go to ProgA, who is acceptable to two moderate voters because he's good on neighborhood issues. Note that two of the votes going to ModA were from voters who originally had ranked Conservative as their first-place ranking, but then Conservative was eliminated and their vote went to their runoff/second ranking, ModB, who also now has been eliminated. So now the vote of those two voters goes to their next runoff choice, i.e. their third ranking, who is ModA. Here are the new vote totals:

Candidates	1st round	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th
ModA	21	24 (+3)	30 (+6)	30	40 (+10)
ModB	10	10	12 (+2)	12	0 (-12)
ProgA	18	18	18	18	20 (+2)
ProgB	16	18 (+2)	18	24 (+6)	24
ProgC	12	12	12	16 (+4)	16
ProgD	10	10	10	0 (-10)	--
Conserv.	8	8	0 (-8)	--	--
MinorA	2	0 (-2)	--	--	--
MinorB	2	0 (-2)	--	--	--
MinorC	1	0 (-1)	--	--	--
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Sixth round: Still no candidate has reached the majority threshold of 51 votes. Now ProgC gets eliminated, and not surprisingly those votes go to the other progressive candidates as voters' runoff choice. Twelve voters give their runoff/next-highest ranking to ProgA, and four give it to ProgB. Note that four of the votes going to ProgA were from voters who originally had ranked ProgD as their first-place ranking, but then ProgD was eliminated and their vote went to their runoff/second ranking, ProgC, who also has been eliminated, so now the vote of those four voters goes to their next runoff choice, i.e. their third ranking, who is ProgA. Those votes are added to the pile of the continuing candidates, and at the end of this round the vote totals are the following:

Candidates	1st round	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th
ModA	21	24 (+3)	30 (+6)	30	40 (+10)	40
ModB	10	10	12 (+2)	12	0 (-12)	--
ProgA	18	18	18	18	20 (+2)	32 (+12)
ProgB	16	18 (+2)	18	24 (+6)	24	28 (+4)
ProgC	12	12	12	16 (+4)	16	0 (-16)

ProgD	10	10	10	0 (-10)	--	--
Conserv.	8	8	0 (-8)	--	--	--
MinorA	2	0 (-2)	--	--	--	--
MinorB	2	0 (-2)	--	--	--	--
MinorC	1	0 (-1)	--	--	--	--
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Seventh round: Still no candidate has reached the majority threshold of 51 votes. Now the candidate with the fewest total votes is ProgB. Of the 28 voters who voted for ProgB, most of them (26) gave their runoff/next-highest ranking to ProgA, and two gave it to ModA. Note that four of the votes going to ProgA were from voters who originally had ranked ProgC as their first-place ranking, but then ProgC was eliminated and their vote went to their runoff/second ranking, ProgB, who also now has been eliminated, so the vote of those four voters goes to their next runoff choice, i.e. their third ranking, who is ProgA. In addition, six of the votes going to ProgA were from voters who originally had ranked ProgD as their first-place ranking, and two were from voters who originally had ranked MinorA as their first-placed ranking, but with Prog D and MinorA eliminated the vote of those voters goes to their next runoff choice, who is ProgA. Here are the vote totals:

Candidates	1st round	2nd	3rd	4 th	5th	6th	7 th
ModA	21	24 (+3)	30 (+6)	30	40 (+10)	40	42 (+2)
ModB	10	10	12 (+2)	12	0 (-12)	--	--
ProgA	18	18	18	18	20 (+2)	32 (+12)	58 (+26) WINNER!
ProgB	16	18 (+2)	18	24 (+6)	24	28 (+4)	0 (-28)
ProgC	12	12	12	16 (+4)	16	0 (-16)	--
ProgD	10	10	10	0 (-10)	--	--	--
Conserv.	8	8	0 (-8)	--	--	--	--
MinorA	2	0 (-2)	--	--	--	--	--
MinorB	2	0 (-2)	--	--	--	--	--
MinorC	1	0 (-1)	--	--	--	--	--
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

ProgA has passed the winning threshold of 51 votes and is declared the WINNER, with 58 votes. Note that those 58 votes came from: 18 first-place rankings, eight second-place rankings from ProgC voters, 14 second-place rankings from ProgB voters, two second-place rankings from ModB voters, 10 third-place rankings from ProgD voters (six of whom ranked ProgB as their second choice and four ranked ProgC as their second choice), four third-place rankings from ProgC voters, and two third-place rankings from MinorA voters.

Taken together, those votes and the voters who cast them formed the COALITION that overwhelmingly elected ProgA as the representative for this progressive district, with a landslide of 58 votes. Prog A won by having a strong enough core of first-place rankings, but ultimately in such a split field had to pick up many second- and third-rankings from the supporters of other candidates, especially other progressive candidates.

Notice that those voters who ranked either of the top two finishers, ProgA and ModA, as their first-place ranking did not use their second or third place rankings/runoff choices. That's because your vote does not go to a runoff choice/lower ranking unless your higher ranking has been eliminated from the runoff. Everyone has one vote in each round of counting, and you don't want to have your vote count for a lower choice if it can count for a higher choice who still has a chance to win. That's analogous to the December runoff -- those voters whose candidates made it to the runoff continue to

vote for that candidate. It's only those voters whose candidates have been eliminated from the runoff that pick among the remaining candidates as their runoff choices.

There is no advantage to "bullet voting" – ranking only one candidate – since a lower ranking cannot defeat a higher ranking. It's important to use all three of your rankings in order to participate fully in the runoff, and to allow coalition-building to occur.

You can view a flash animation of the mechanics of how RCV ballot counting will occur by visiting these links: www.fairvote.org/sf/vote/ and www.fairvote.org/irv/flow.pdf

The ballot reading and storing of all these rankings is done by the voting equipment in the precincts, the Optech Eagles, which is optical scan equipment (i.e. NOT touchscreens) with a fully voter-verified paper trail (your ballot) and by the central scanner, the Optech IV-C, that scans absentee ballots. After the polls are closed, a software program on a computer will take less than five minutes to count this race. However, if the race is close, final results will depend on absentee and provisional ballots, like they always do in a close race. And that may take up to a week to scan those ballots, at which point the final tally will be run on the computer and final results announced.

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