

Frequently Asked Questions about Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) (also known as Instant Runoff Voting or IRV)

What is ranked choice voting?

Ranked choice voting (RCV) is a way to determine a majority winner in a single election, eliminating the need for a December runoff election. Voters indicate their runoff choices in advance by ranking candidates in order of choice (1, 2, 3) so that no runoff election is necessary if no candidate receives an outright majority.

How does RCV work?

RCV, which is also known as instant runoff voting, acts like a series of runoff elections. If anyone receives a majority of the first choice rankings, that candidate is elected. If not, the last place candidate is defeated, just as in a runoff election, and all ballots are counted again, but this time each ballot cast for the defeated candidate counts for the next-choice candidate listed on each ballot. The process of eliminating the last place candidate and recounting the ballots continues until one candidate receives a majority of the vote. You can see a short interactive mini-movie of how RCV will work in San Francisco, including what the voter must do and how ballots are counted, on the web at www.fairvote.org/sfvotes/vote/index.html

Who will be elected using ranked choice voting?

On November 2, 2004, San Francisco voters will use ranked choice voting to elect Supervisors for districts 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11. Ranked choice voting does not apply to elections for School Board or Community College Board, or to candidates for State or federal office.

In the future, San Francisco voters will use ranked choice voting to elect Members of the Board of Supervisors for districts 4, 6, 8, and 10 as well as the Mayor, Sheriff, District Attorney, City Attorney, Treasurer, Assessor-Recorder, and Public Defender.

What kind of voting equipment will be used to count the ballots?

San Francisco will use the same voting equipment that it has used since 2000, an "optical scan" system (i.e. NOT touchscreens) with a fully voter-verified paper trail (your paper ballot). The ballot scanning in the precincts will be done by the Optech Eagles, and absentee ballots by the central scanner, the Optech IV-C, both of which are manufactured and designed by Election Systems and Software (ES&S). The RCV-ready equipment has been put through rigorous federal and state testing of hardware, software, firmware, and procedures. The equipment has been certified by the Secretary of State.

Does the Department of Elections still have to decide what happens to a particular ballot if a voter skips a ranking, or ranks the same candidate twice?

No. All the parameters of how to count the ballots already have been programmed into the software and tested by state and federal authorities during mock elections called "functional testing" or "end-to-end testing." Parameters such as: what happens to a ballot if a voter ranks a first choice, accidentally skips a second choice, and ranks a third choice; or if a voter accidentally does not rank a first choice but ranks a second and third choice; or ranks the same candidate twice, and many other such possibilities, all of these have been programmed into the software according to rules specified in the charter and will be dealt with in such a way as to count as many ballots as possible.

Also, the optical scan voting equipment comes with what is known as "error notification." If a voter makes a mistake on her or his ballot (such as skipping a ranking), the equipment immediately will notify the voter of their mistake and the voter will have an opportunity to correct it before casting their final ballot. That feature will help to decrease the number of errors and spoiled ballots.

What kind of RCV procedures will be followed on election night?

After the polls are closed, a memory pack containing vote totals, a PCM card storing all voters' rankings as ballot images, a printout of vote totals, and the actual ballots themselves are all delivered to the Department of Elections. All the rankings of each individual voter are stored as anonymous records that, when compiled together, form an aggregate dataset about voters' preferences. Once that data set is complete (including all absentee and provisional ballots, which can take several days after the election to process), that data set is loaded into a computer, and when the Director of Elections gives the word, the tech person presses the "Tally RCV results" button. The ballots will be quickly sorted and counted. A complete election report containing round-by-round vote totals will be produced. The actual counting of the aggregate data set (which is comprised of tens of thousands of stored ballot images of every individual's ballot) happens extremely quickly -- for a citywide race, perhaps five minutes, for a district race only a minute or two. Both before and after the election, tests known as "logic and accuracy" tests that conduct a mini-election are conducted to check the accuracy and security of the equipment and the counting procedures. In addition, after the election a manual tally is conducted in 1% of precincts and compared to the machine count in those precincts to further ensure accuracy and security. Because we can hand-tally the paper ballots (the voter verified paper trail) and create a one-to-one correspondence between each physical paper ballot and an electronic record of each ranking, the RCV election will have an unprecedented level of transparency, security and auditability.

Won't the counting of absentee ballots and provisional ballots slow down determination of winners?

The Department of Elections plans to release all first rankings on election night. If a race is not close, then we will know on election night who is going to win, even if the results are not officially final. If a race is close, then determination of the winner will depend on the counting of absentee and provisional ballots. But this is no different than our previous elections. How many times on election night have we gone to bed thinking a particular candidate or ballot measure was winning in a close race, only to find that after absentee and provisional ballots were counted the results had changed? RCV is no different. If the race is close, final determination will depend on the counting of absentee and provisional ballots. If the race is not close, we will know who won on election night.

With ranked choice voting, I have three rankings. Does that mean I have three votes?

No. Every voter has one vote. But in case your favorite candidate doesn't win, you have the option of ranking TWO runoff choices (this is an advantage over the previous runoff system -- with RCV, you are allowed TWO runoff choices instead of one). So you mark your favorite candidate as your first choice, and your two runoff choices as your second and third rankings. It is important to understand that your vote does not count for any of your runoff choices until your favorite candidate has lost. That means your lower-ranked choices can never defeat your higher-ranked choices. So there is no advantage to ranking only one candidate (sometimes known as "bullet voting"). It is best to use all three of your rankings.

If I really want my first-choice candidate to win, should I rank the candidate as my first, second and third choice?

Ranking a candidate more than once does not benefit the candidate. There is no advantage to bullet voting (see the previous question). If a voter ranks one candidate as the voter's first, second and third choice, it is the same as if the voter leaves the second or third choice blank. If the candidate is eliminated, it is not possible to cast your vote for a runoff choice, which is your next-ranked candidate, because no next-ranking is indicated.

If I can't decide between two candidates, can I give them the same ranking?

If a voter gives more than one candidate the same ranking (what is known as a duplicate ranking), that's an overvote and those votes cannot be counted. However, the optical scan voting equipment has "error notification" built in, so a voter making this mistake in the precinct will be immediately notified and have a chance to correct their ballot.

Can I write-in candidates and rank them as my first, second or third choice?

Yes. Make sure that you both write-in the candidate's name and connect the arrow, state law says you must do BOTH.

Does ranked choice voting give extra votes to supporters of defeated candidates?

No. With ranked choice voting, every voter has one vote. If your favorite candidate can't win, your vote goes to your runoff candidate, as indicated by your rankings. Remember, ranked choice voting is a RUNOFF system, also known as ranked choice voting. In many ways, it's not that different from the previous December runoff system. It just finishes the election in one cycle by having voters indicate their runoff choices at the same time as their first choice. In the previous December runoff system, the top two finishers in the November election continued to the December runoff. They were what we call "continuing candidates." All those voters who voted for one of the top two candidates in November continued to vote for them in the December runoff (in theory, a voter could change their vote, but that was unlikely since usually the other candidate came from the political opposition). And all those voters whose candidates were eliminated in November, if they chose to participate in the December runoff (many didn't, voter turnout often dropped in December) they voted for one of the two continuing candidates.

RCV works pretty much the same way. If any candidate wins a majority of first-rankings they win the election, just as with the previous system. If no candidate has a majority, the "instant" or "same-day" runoff begins. The candidates with the fewest votes are eliminated, just as with the December runoff. If your favorite candidate advances to the instant runoff, you continue to vote for your favorite, your vote stays with your candidate as long as she or he is still in the race. But if your favorite is eliminated, you get to support your runoff choice (one of the continuing candidates), as indicated by your second ranking. At each step of the ballot counting, every voter has exactly one vote for either their first choice (if that candidate is still in the race) or their runoff choice -- just like they had with the December runoff. Note that, just like with a December runoff, it's only those voters whose candidate has been eliminated whose vote counts for one of the continuing candidates as their runoff choice. Voters whose favorite candidate is still in the race continue to vote for that first-ranked candidate.

What happens if I don't rank all three of my rankings?

Not using all of three of your rankings may result in you not participating in the final runoff. If all of your candidates are eliminated, your ballot becomes what is known as "exhausted" and no longer counts towards the final runoff. So it is best to use all your rankings.

However, if you rank only one candidate and that candidate is one of the top two finishers, it really won't have mattered if you ranked a second or third choice. Your vote will stay with your number one-ranked candidate until the end. Still, it's best to use all your rankings, just in case.

Won't RCV elect candidates who are ranked second or third on the most ballots?

Some people have speculated that a candidate who is ranked number two or even three on everyone's ballots, but does not have many first-place rankings, will be the one who wins. This is incorrect. In order to remain in the runoff, a candidate must have enough first-place rankings to not get eliminated in the early rounds.

RCV rewards two qualities: having a strong core of support (as evidenced by a sufficient number of first-place rankings) but also a broad base of support (as evidenced by a fair number of second and third place rankings). If a candidate has just one of these, she or he will probably lose. If a candidate has many first-place rankings (but less than a majority), but is not ranked second and third place on enough ballots, that candidate will lose. If a candidate is ranked second and third place on many ballots, but does not have a sufficient number of first-place rankings, that candidate will be eliminated in the early rounds.

Other places using ranked ballot elections like London, Ireland and Cambridge, MA allow their voters unlimited rankings. Why do we only have three rankings in San Francisco?

The San Francisco charter requires unlimited rankings, with one important exception: if there are technical limitations as a result of the specific voting equipment being used. Due to technical limitations, San Francisco's voting equipment, the Optech Eagle, only allows three rankings. If San Francisco ever acquires voting equipment that has the technical capacity to allow more than three rankings, or San Francisco ever elects to do a hand count, by law the Department of Elections must increase the number of rankings.

Does RCV save money?

Yes. RCV eliminates the cost of runoff elections since it determines a majority winner in a single election. In San Francisco, a citywide runoff election costs taxpayers \$3 million.

I have heard that with Ranked Choice Voting it is possible for a winning candidate to win with fewer than a majority of votes. Is this true?

According to the San Francisco charter, the “winner” in ranked choice voting is defined as the one who wins a majority of what is called "continuing ballots." Continuing ballots are those where all the rankings have not exhausted, where the voter is still participating in the runoff. If a voter uses all of his or her three rankings on candidates who don't have a chance of winning, that ballot will ‘exhaust’ and not be a 'continuing' ballot. So it's possible that the winner may end up with a majority that is less than the majority of all voters who initially voted, but it is still a majority of continuing ballots.

This is analogous to a situation where some voters don't return to vote for the December runoff. But considering the fact that voter turnout usually decreased between the November election and the December runoff -- often by anywhere from 30 to 50% -- more voters likely will participate in the final decisive runoff under ranked choice voting than under the previous December runoff system.

Here's a mock election that will illustrate "continuing ballots" and "exhausted ballots."

Candidates	1st round
A	32
B	24
C	20
D	15
E	9
Total	100

Candidate E is in last place and does not make the initial runoff. Let's say of E's nine votes, 5 go to C and 4 go to A. Now the vote totals stand:

Candidates	1st round	2 nd
A	32	(+4)=36
B	24	24

C	20	(+5)=25
D	15	15
E	9	(-9) out
Total	100	100

Now D is in last place and is eliminated from the runoff. Let's say of 15 D voters, 5 ranked A as their next choice, 5 ranked B, and 5 ranked E. But E has been eliminated, so of these 5 voters, let's say their next (third)-ranked candidate is: 3 rank B and 2 rank A. Now the vote totals stand:

Candidates	1st round	2 nd	3 rd
A	32	(+4)=36	(+5+2)=43
B	24	24	(+5+3)=32
C	20	(+5)=25	25
D	15	15	(-15) out
E	9	(-9) out	Out
Total	100	100	100

We're down to three candidates, so one of the candidates is about to win, when the current last place candidate, Candidate C, is eliminated. But here's where the 'continuing candidate' factor comes in.

Candidate C is in last place and is eliminated from the runoff. Of the 25 voters who were voting for C, let's say 5 rank A as their next choice, 10 rank B, and 10 rank Candidate D as their next choice. But Candidate D has been eliminated from the runoff, so for those ballots it goes to each voter's next ranked candidate. Let's say of these 10, 7 ranked Candidate E as their next (third) choice, and three ranked Candidate B. But Candidate E also has been eliminated from the runoff. Since that is those voters third ranking, they have no more runoff choices to give their vote to and so those seven votes go into what is called an "exhausted pile." They are ballots that do not 'continue,' and the voters of these ballots do not participate in the final runoff.

That means that the winner is candidate A with 48 votes -- slightly less than a majority of the original 100 ballots, but 51.6% of the 93 continuing ballots, with 7 ballots exhausted.

This is analogous to those 7 voters not returning for the December runoff, which of course in most December runoffs happened in large numbers. But with RCV, the drop-off -- as indicated by the number of 'continuing ballots' -- will be much less than with December runoffs.

Here are the final vote totals:

Candidates	1st round	2 nd	3rd	4 th
A	32	(+4)=36	(+5+2)=43	(+5)=48
B	24	24	(+5+3)=32	(+10+3)=45
C	20	(+5)=25	25	(-25) out
D	15	15	(-15) out	out
E	9	(-9) out	out	out
Total	100	100	100	93+7 exhausted=100