

Ranked choice voting (RCV) comes to San Francisco

In November 2004, San Francisco voters will elect seven seats on the Board of Supervisors using ranked choice voting (RCV, also known as ranked choice voting). Proposition A, passed by San Francisco voters in March 2002, enacted ranked choice voting for all local offices, including mayor, district attorney, city attorney, treasurer, sheriff, public defender, and assessor (but not including school board and college board elections, which are governed by state law).

With a change to the electoral process like this, prospective candidates, political activists and insiders all want to know “how does RCV work?” And more specifically, “what’s in it for me and my constituency?” There has been much speculation about who gets hurt and who gets helped by this change.

First, let’s review some of the basics about RCV.

HOW RCV WORKS: RCV allows voters to rank their candidates, 1, 2, 3, and uses the rankings to run a series of runoffs to determine the candidate who is supported by a majority of voters. A majority is defined as 50% of the vote, plus 1 more vote; so in an election with 100 voters, a majority would be 51 voters. Every voter has one vote, which they always give to their highest ranked candidate who is still in the race.

When a voter walks into a polling site or opens her absentee ballot, she’ll look at a ballot that looks very much like the current Optech Eagle ballot, except it will say, “Ranked Choice Voting: Vote for a different candidate for each choice, or your second or third choices may not count.” Then the voter will see three columns labeled “First Choice,” “Second Choice,” and “Third Choice.” In each column, you will fill in the arrow next to the candidate you have selected for each choice. If you make a mistake on your ballot -- i.e. skip a ranking, vote for the same candidate twice, overvote, undervote, etc. -- the Optech Eagle is designed to alert you to the mistake, and give you a chance to fix it. To see an approximate version of what the ballot will look like, visit www.fairvote.org/sf/ballots.htm (you can also give us feedback on the ballot design, to make sure we have one that is as user-friendly as possible).

How the Ballots Are Counted: Following is a written explanation, but at the end of the explanation are links to a Flash animation and a flow chart SHOWING how the ballots are counted. Usually seeing it is better than reading about it, so we encourage you to check out those links.

To start, only the first-place rankings are counted. If a candidate has a majority of these first-place rankings, she or he is elected (just like San Francisco always has done, when one candidate has a majority of votes in the November election). But if no candidate has a majority of first-place rankings, then the “instant runoff” begins.

The candidate with the LEAST number of first-place rankings is eliminated from the runoff. Voters whose candidate has just been eliminated, instead of wasting their vote on a candidate who could not win, now can give their vote to their runoff choice -- their second choice, as indicated by their ranked ballot. These ballots are added to the totals of continuing candidates. Now if one candidate has a majority of votes (which in this case would be their original first-place rankings added to the runoff rankings from those voters of the eliminated candidate) that candidate is elected. If still no candidate has a majority at this point, another last-place candidate is eliminated, and voters supporting that candidate give their ballot to their next-ranked candidate. The vote counting proceeds in rounds, in essence a SERIES of runoffs, until a candidate has a majority of the vote.

You can view a flash animation of how the RCV ballot counting will occur by visiting this link: www.fairvote.org/sf/vote/. You can also view a flow chart showing this at www.fairvote.org/irv/flow.pdf

THE VOTING EQUIPMENT: 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. 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.

The optical scan equipment takes all the rankings of each individual voter and stores them as anonymous records that, when compiled together, form an aggregate dataset about voters' preferences. After the polls close, that data set is loaded into a computer, and when the Director of Elections gives the word, the tech person presses the “Tally IRV results” button, and 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.

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.

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