

Ranked-choice adds a wild card to mayor's race

Complicated 'instant runoff' system faces 1st high-profile test

BY MARK HEDIN

ONCE you've decided which candidate to vote for, the most confusing aspect of the upcoming San Francisco mayoral election process is its ranked-choice voting system.

It's designed to provide an "instant runoff" to spare the city the cost of a runoff election between the top two candidates in the general election. This month's mayoral race promises to put this system, not quite a decade old, to its first high-profile test.

"There's a lot of misinformation out there," said Denise Van Alstine of the city Department of Elections' outreach division, who spent half an hour discussing the Nov. 8 election at the police captain's October meeting in Tenderloin Station's community room. "Every time there's a story in the paper I can see where it would be confusing."

Enter The Extra.

Some background: Steven Hill, of Fairvote.org, known in 2002 as the Center for Voting and Democracy, drafted that year's Proposition A, which voters approved by a 55%-to-45% margin, making San Francisco the first U.S. city to try ranked-choice voting. He describes ranked-choice voting as "really just a runoff system designed to do in one election what we used to do in two."

Hill said ranked-choice voting was initially proposed in 1999 by then-Supervisor Tom Ammiano, in response to criticism for the expense the city incurred when he forced incumbent Willie Brown into a runoff in the mayoral race that year.

John Arntz, Elections Department director since early 2002, said that because no voting equipment then available could accommodate ranked-choice voting, the system was not a factor when Gavin Newsom defeated Ammiano and Matt Gonzalez to become mayor the next year.

Ranked-choice voting also applies to this year's races for sheriff and district attorney — if no candidate wins an outright majority (50% plus at least one) of first-choice votes.

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS

The ballot has room for you to make three choices — a first, second and third. Each ballot includes space for voters to write in a candidate for any of the three choices. Anyone who gets more than 50% of first-choice votes wins, and that's that.

If no candidate gets a majority of the first-place votes, the candidate with the fewest first-place votes is eliminated, and his or her votes are redistributed to the second-choice candidates named by those voters. In a crowded election where there's no clear preference among voters, this process may have to be repeated many times before a winner is determined.

An example of how complicated it can get occurred last year in the District 10 race for supervisor. Twenty-one candidates split fewer than 18,000 votes, and Lynette Sweet, who got the most first-place votes — 2,150 — had only 12.07% of the total, far from a majority.

Candidate Ellsworth "Ell" Jennison got the fewest first-choice votes, 68, so those votes were reallocated to the candidates Jennison's supporters named as their second choice. Six went to Tony Kelly, six to Nyese Joshua, three to Sweet, and so on.

This process was repeated 17 more times, with candidates being eliminated in reverse order to the number of votes they'd accumulated. None attained a majority until, finally, the 3,330 votes belonging to Marlene Tran, now in third place with three candidates left standing, were re-examined.

Malia Cohen was listed on 201 of them as a second choice; 303 listed Tony Kelly. With those votes added, and the rest of Tran's discarded because they named only previously eliminated candidates, Cohen wound up with 4,321 votes, 52.7% of votes still in play, to Kelly's 3,879.

Until that point, no one had a majority, as Tran had 3,330, Kelly, 3,576 and Cohen 4,120 votes. But now there's a door with Malia Cohen's name on it on the second floor of City Hall, even though she only had 2,097 first-place votes, 53 less than Sweet, 5 less than Kelly and 48 more than Tran, when counting started.

Last year, some Alameda County cities joined San Francisco as ranked-choice pioneers in California. In Oakland, ranked-choice voting resulted in Jean Quan, one of nine Oakland mayoral candidates who last November got fewer first-place votes than Don Perata, ultimately winning the election. In Quan's case, she won only 29,266 (24.47%) first-choice votes to Perata's 40,342 (33.73%). But she had enough second- and third-choice votes among the 25,813 (21.58%) votes for Rebecca Kaplan — 18,864 to Perata's 6,407 — to become mayor-elect after 10 rounds of vote redistribution according to the ranked-choice instant runoff system.

Under the previous system, Perata and Quan, as the top two vote-getters, would have faced off in a December runoff election. Kaplan's supporters, if they showed up to vote, may well have put Quan over the top. Hill argued that the results arrived at under the ranked-choice system seem to follow patterns established under the runoff system.

Ranked-choice voting advocates argue that runoff elections are expensive and voter turnout is low. They also claim that the election generally goes to monied interests who can afford advertising blitzes and are typically supported by conservatives who vote in every election.

BUILDING ALLIANCES

Ranked-choice voting, the argument goes, favors candidates who can build alliances within their community, as Kaplan and Quan did.

Lawyer Jim Parrinello, representing Ron Dudum, who was defeated by Ed Jew in his 2006 bid to become supervisor in the Sunset's District 4, unsuccessfully challenged ranked-choice voting before a federal appeals court panel earlier this year.

Parrinello argues that ranked-choice disenfranchises many voters, because the so-called majority that enables a candidate to claim the office is only a majority of the votes still being counted. In the case of Cohen in District 10, her winning total of 4,321 was less than 25% of the votes originally cast, and Quan won with 53,897 votes, less than half the original total.

As for the cost of runoffs, Parrinello said that runoff elections cost much less than the public financing of all the candidates' campaigns. The Department of Elections estimates that runoff elections cost from \$2.5 million to \$3 million, depending on how many races are up for grabs. This year, as of Oct. 31, the city had disbursed \$4,389,306 to nine mayoral candidates.

Ranked-choice voting supporters had argued that the need for coalition-building would change the tenor of political discourse, but the way Parrinello sees it, "when you've got a front-runner, it encourages the other candidates to negatively campaign. That's what happened in Oakland — anyone but Don (Perata) — and it appears to be happening in San Francisco, too. So I don't really think it's eliminated negative

campaigning." Furthermore, he said, "because candidates don't want to alienate voters, it discourages meaningful debate."

With runoff elections, he said, "at least you wind up with two candidates that people can make a choice from, and everybody gets a chance to make a choice between the two."

At any rate, the voters spoke their mind in 2002, and the city's right to "experiment," as Parrinello put it, has twice been upheld in appeals court. So now it's up to the voters.

Van Alstine of the Department of Elections said that voters who decide that only one candidate deserves their vote can mark that candidate in all three choices. But it won't help that candidate, because the voter's second choice isn't considered until the voter's first choice has been eliminated.

ADVICE: USE ALL 3 CHOICES

"There's no reason not to use all three of your choices," Hill said, because your vote "stays with your first choice as long as that first choice is still in the race."

San Francisco's and Oakland's ranked-choice systems, Hill said, ask voters: "In case your first choice doesn't win, tell us who your second choice would be." Because the second or third choices don't come into play until a voter's first choice has been eliminated, Hill said, "Your lower choices can't help defeat your first choice."

The election will be Nov. 8. Polls will be open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. By the time you read this, it will be too late to register to vote or request a vote-by-mail ballot. But you can vote early at City Hall from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays through Nov. 7 and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on the weekend of Nov. 5 and 6. ■

NOTICE OF AVAILABILITY / NOTICE OF COMPLETION

Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Report (EIS/EIR) for the Van Ness Avenue Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Project

The Draft EIS/EIR describing the project and potential environmental impacts is available for public review and comment for 45 days, with all comments due by December 19, 2011.

The public hearing will be held on November 30, 2011 at the Holiday Inn Golden Gateway, 1500 Van Ness Ave.
An online webinar will be held on December 5, 2011.
For more information, see: www.vannessbrt.org

PROJECT LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION

The Van Ness Avenue BRT is proposed on Van Ness Avenue (and one block of South Van Ness Avenue), and extends approximately 2 miles from Mission Street to Lombard Street. Under each build alternative, two mixed-flow traffic lanes (one southbound and one northbound) would be converted into two dedicated transit lanes. The build alternatives would occur entirely within the existing street right-of-way, and would incorporate the following features: dedicated bus lanes, level boarding, consolidated transit stops, high quality stations, transit signal priority, pedestrian safety enhancements, and other features.

BRT build alternatives also include full replacement of the existing overhead contact system support pole/streetlight network between Mission and North Point streets.

WAYS TO READ AND COMMENT ON THE DRAFT EIS/EIR AND PROJECT ALTERNATIVES

The Draft EIS/EIR is available at www.vannessbrt.org or by calling 415-593-1655. CDs and hard copies are also available at the Authority's offices (address listed below); other locations with hard copies and CDs can be found at www.vannessbrt.org.

Agencies and members of the public may submit comments on the Draft EIS/EIR and project alternatives via letter or email. Mail to: Van Ness BRT EIS/EIR, Attn: Ms. Rachel Hiatt, San Francisco County Transportation Authority, 100 Van Ness Avenue, 26th floor, San Francisco, CA 94102. Email: vannessbrt@sfcta.org. Comments may also be given verbally to a court reporter at the public hearing or electronically during the webinar.

The building used for the public hearing is accessible to persons with disabilities. Any individual who requires special accommodations, such as a sign language interpreter, accessible seating, or documentation in alternative formats, is requested to email vannessbrt@sfcta.org or call 415-593-1655.

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