



# Ranked-Choice Voting

## A Guide for Candidates

This guide provides answers to the most frequently asked questions about ranked-choice voting. For more information, contact the Department of Elections at 554-4375.

### **What is Ranked-Choice Voting?**

Ranked-choice voting allows San Francisco voters to rank a first, second, and third choice candidate for certain local offices.

Traditionally, San Francisco elected most local officials by majority vote. If no candidate received a majority of the votes in the general election, the two candidates who received the highest number of votes would participate in a separate run-off election.

Ranked-choice voting, which was approved by the voters in 2002 and which will be used for the first time in the upcoming November 2, 2004 election, eliminates the need for a separate run-off election, but preserves the majority-vote requirement.

### **How Does Ranked-Choice Voting Work?**

All first-choice votes are counted first, and if a candidate receives a majority ( $50\%+1$ ) of the first-choice votes that candidate is declared the winner.

If no candidate receives a majority of the first-choice votes, a process of eliminating candidates and transferring votes begins. The candidate who received the fewest first-choice votes is eliminated, and votes cast for the eliminated candidate are transferred to the voter's next-choice candidate. The votes are then recounted. If any candidate receives a majority of the votes, that candidate is declared the winner. If no candidate receives a majority of the votes, the process of eliminating candidates and transferring votes is repeated until one candidate receives a majority of votes.

### **Who Is Elected Using Ranked-Choice Voting?**

Starting November 2, 2004, San Francisco voters will use ranked-choice voting to elect most local officials. Ranked-choice voting does *not* apply to elections for School Board or Community College Board. Ranked-choice voting also does not apply to federal or State races, or to ballot measure contests.

### **What Will be New to Voters? How Can Voters Familiarize Themselves With This New Voting Method?**

As in past elections, the polls will be open from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. San Francisco will continue to use paper ballots and the optical scan voting equipment it has used since 2000.

What will be new to voters is the design of the ranked-choice ballot card and the instruction to rank up to three choices for each office. Voters will mark a separate ballot card for each ranked-choice contest. Voters can familiarize themselves with the design of the ranked-choice ballot and the new voting instructions with demonstration ballots available at the Department of Elections and on the Department's website. In addition, a sample of the actual November 2, 2004 ballot will be available at the Department of Elections in September, and mailed to each voter in the Voter Information Pamphlet in October. A copy of the sample ballot will also be available at the Department of Elections and on the Department's website.

The Department of Elections encourages candidates and others interested in the elections process to copy, distribute and publicize the availability of these demonstration and sample ballots, as well as this guide and other educational materials prepared by the Department of Elections, to promote awareness and understanding of ranked-choice voting.

### **How Do Voters Mark The Ranked-Choice Ballot?**

As in past elections, San Francisco voters will indicate their selection of a candidate by connecting the head and tail of the arrow pointing to the candidate's name on the ballot.

The voter selects his or her first-choice candidate by completing the arrow pointing to the candidate's name in the first column. The voter selects his or her second-choice candidate by completing the arrow pointing to the candidate's name in the second column. The second-choice candidate may be different from the first-choice candidate. The voter selects his or her third-choice candidate by completing the arrow pointing to the candidate's name in the third column. The third-choice candidate may be different from the first- and second-choice candidates. If a voter chooses the same candidate in more than one column, votes cannot be transferred, as the voter did not choose any other candidate to transfer votes to.

Voters wishing to vote for a qualified write-in candidate for any of their three choices can write in the name of the candidate on the line provided at the bottom of each column and complete the arrow pointing to the hand-written name of the candidate.

A voter may—but is not required to—rank three choices for each office.

### **What Happens if the Voter Ranks More Than One Candidate in the Same Column?**

If a voter gives more than one candidate the same ranking (if the voter selects more than one candidate per column), those votes cannot be counted.

### **What Happens if the Voter Ranks the Same Candidate in More Than One Column?**

If a voter ranks the same candidate in more than one column, his or her vote will count only once. Selecting the same candidate more than once does not benefit the candidate. This is because a voter's second choice will be counted only if his or her first-choice candidate has been eliminated. Similarly, a voter's third choice will be counted only if both his and her first-choice and second-choice candidates have been eliminated.

### **What Will Happen on Election Night After the Polls Close?**

As in past elections, after the polls close at 8:00 p.m. election results will be released as they become available. For election contests involving ranked-choice voting, results concerning first-choice votes **only** will be released as they become available. Absentee ballots received by the Department of Elections before election day will be counted and reported first, shortly after 8:00 p.m. The results from the City's polling places will be reported starting at approximately 9:30 p.m.

Candidates, members of the media, and the public may observe the vote count and vote tabulation from the "Public Viewing Area" in the Department of Elections. Members of the Department will be available to answer questions about the vote count and vote tabulation process. Tours of the vote count and results-reporting process will begin on election night at approximately 8:30 p.m.

The Department of Elections will not eliminate any candidates or transfer any votes until it determines that no candidate has received a majority of first-choice votes. The Department cannot determine whether any candidate has received a majority of the first-choice votes until it processes all provisional and absentee votes. Because San Francisco typically has a large number of provisional and absentee ballots to process after election day, the Department does not expect to complete this processing until at least two weeks after election day.

Results of first-choice votes will be recorded and available by phone and at the Department's website to anyone wishing to monitor the returns. If you wish to obtain election results on or after election night, call (415) 554-4375 or visit [www.sfgov.org/election](http://www.sfgov.org/election).

### **When Will Final Election Results be Released?**

The Department of Elections must gather and process all ballots—ballots cast at polling places, absentee ballots, and provisional ballots—before it can begin the process of eliminating candidates and transferring votes. In general, it takes the Department two weeks to gather and

process all of these ballots, in part because the Department must check the validity of each absentee and provisional ballot.

After election day, the Department will report the approximate number of provisional and absentee ballots that remain to be processed daily at 4:00 p.m. Candidates, members of the media, and the public may observe the processing of these ballots from the "Public Viewing Area" at the Department of Elections.

If the Department of Elections determines, after processing all absentee and provisional ballots, that no candidate has received a majority of the first-choice votes cast for an office, the Department shall publicly announce this fact. The Department shall make this public announcement by issuing a press release, posting a notice on its website, and posting a notice both outside and inside the door of the Department's main office in room 48 of City Hall.

The announcement shall state that, according to the San Francisco Charter, the Department shall eliminate candidates receiving the fewest number of votes, transfer votes cast for the eliminated candidates to the voters' next-choice candidates, and repeat this process of elimination and transfer until a candidate receives a majority of the votes. The announcement shall state that this process of eliminating candidates and transferring votes is, like all aspects of the elections process, open to public view, and shall specify the place and time when the process will begin. The announcement shall be made not less than 12 hours and not more than 24 hours before the time specified for the Department to begin the process of eliminating candidates and transferring votes.

Prior to the final tabulation of results, however, the Department will release preliminary results by applying the ranked-choice method of eliminating candidates and transferring votes. The initial release of preliminary ranked-choice results will occur on the Wednesday following the election, and every Wednesday thereafter.

**Why can't the Department of Elections eliminate candidates and redistribute votes before all the provisional and absentee ballots are processed?**

Even if it is clear that no candidate has received a majority of the first-choice votes cast for an office, it may not be possible to determine which candidate received the fewest votes (the candidate to be eliminated) until every provisional and absentee ballot has been processed. Therefore, every ballot must be processed before any candidate is eliminated and before any vote is transferred.

**What happens if two or more candidates are tied for the fewest number of votes?**

If there is a tie vote between or among two or more candidates with the fewest number of votes, the following procedures shall apply. For each of the two or more candidates with the fewest number of votes, the Department of Elections shall prepare ten pieces of paper with the full name of the candidate printed on one side. All pieces of paper shall be the same size and color. The Department shall fold each piece of paper so that the name of the candidate cannot

be seen. The Department shall place all pieces of paper in an otherwise empty container (such as a glass jar or cardboard box) that has a lid. The Department shall place the lid on the container and shake its contents. The Director of Elections or the Director's designee shall select one piece of paper from the container. The candidate whose name is written on the selected piece of paper shall be eliminated, and votes cast for that candidate shall be redistributed to the voters' next-choice candidate. All aspects of this process for resolving a tie vote shall be open to viewing by the public. The Department shall designate a location that is open to viewing by the public, such as the computer room where the vote tabulation equipment is located, for resolving tie votes.

If there is a tie vote between or among two or more candidates with the fewest number of votes, and if the total number of votes for the tied candidates is less than the number of votes for the candidate with the next fewest number of votes, the Department shall eliminate the two or more tied candidates simultaneously. The Department shall transfer votes cast for each of the eliminated candidates to the voter's next-choice candidate before retabulating the votes.

**What happens if two or more candidates are tied for the highest number of votes?**

If there is a tie vote between or among two or more candidates with the highest number of votes, the Department shall follow section 10551(b) of the California Election Code to resolve the tie. Section 10551(b) provides:

If a tie vote makes it impossible to determine which of two or more candidates has been elected, the [Director of Elections] shall notify the [Board of Supervisors], and the [Board of Supervisors] shall forthwith notify the candidates who have received the tie votes to appear before it either personally or by representative at a time and place designated by the [Board of Supervisors]. The [Board of Supervisors] shall, at that time and place, determine the tie by lot and the results thereof shall be declared by the [Board of Supervisors]. The candidate so chosen shall qualify, take office and serve as though elected at the preceding general district election.

**Is "Ranked-Choice Voting" the same as "Instant Run-Off Voting?"**

In San Francisco, ranked-choice voting is sometimes called "instant run-off voting." The Department of Elections generally uses the term ranked-choice voting, because it describes the voting method – voters are directed to rank their first-, second- and third-choice candidates. The Department also uses the term ranked-choice voting because the word "instant" might create an expectation that final results will be available *immediately* after the polls close on election night. But the term "instant run-off" does not mean instantaneous reporting of results; it means that there is no need for a separate run-off election.