Evaluation of San Francisco's First Instant Runoff Voting Election
FairVote - The Center for Voting and Democracy (www.FairVote.org)
Rob Richie, with Caleb Kleppner and Steven Hill, December 2004

On November 2, 2004, the City of San Francisco used ranked choice voting (RCV) – the City's name for what is generally known as instant runoff voting – to elect seven member of its Board of Supervisors. The City is scheduled to elect at least one city office with RCV every November.

RCV has been very well-received in San Francisco. Exit poll findings show that those with an opinion about RCV overwhelmingly liked it and found it easy to use, including people from across racial and ethnic lines. Media coverage of the elections also has emphasized the impact RCV had on campaign styles; negative campaigning wasn't eliminated, but there were numerous examples of a new kind of coalition-building among candidates and constituency groups. Candidates also were able to run just one campaign, significantly reducing campaign costs.

This evaluation reviews the measures of success for the election established by FairVote at a pre-election news conference. We assess each measure of success based on data released by the Department of Elections on November 10. Future analyses by FairVote and by institutions like San Francisco State University will address additional subjects, including attention to how ethnicity and education levels may have affected voter performance.

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Evaluation of Measures of Success

1. The City eliminated December runoff elections and determined clear winners shortly after the November election.
2. The City saved $1.2 million by not having to administer four runoff elections. It will cover all costs associated with moving to ranked choice voting the first time it prevents the need for a citywide runoff, as took place in 1999, 2001 and 2003.
3. Winners received significantly more votes and overall support than winners in traditional runoffs and winners in conventional plurality voting elections.

1. No more December runoff elections.

Supposition: San Francisco voters and election officials will not have to worry about December elections. The Department of Elections will run one fewer election per year, providing more time to prepare for the next election. This will help the Department run better elections.

Assessment: San Francisco indeed will not hold a December runoff election for the first time since 1998. All winners were definitively determined by Friday, November 5. All winners generally will be identified within 24 hours in future races.

2. Significant tax savings.

Supposition: The City will save significant money in eliminating runoff elections. According to figures released by the Elections Commission in 2003, citywide runoff elections in San Francisco cost taxpayers at least $3 million to administer. Administering runoff elections in any one of the 11 supervisorial district races cost a prorated amount. By eliminating the delayed runoff, RCV also will save taxpayers the costs of public financing for supervisor races. Public financing provides up to $17,000 in public funds to candidates in runoff elections, so the savings is up to $34,000 per supervisor runoff as well as the administrative costs of running the program.

Assessment: San Francisco avoided runoff elections in four out of 11 supervisor races, which means that the City saved at least $1.2 million in administration and public financing costs this year alone. Avoiding future runoff elections in the City's annual November elections will quickly repay the one-time costs of implementing RCV ($1.6 million to modify the voting equipment's hardware and software and $800,000 for voter education), leading to substantial ongoing savings to San Francisco taxpayers.

3. Increased votes cast in the decisive election when winners are chosen

Supposition: More votes will be cast in the decisive election and winners will receive more votes in the old delayed runoff system. In the previous two non-RCV supervisor elections in 2000 and 2002, relatively high voter turnout elections in November were followed by runoffs with sharply lower voter turnout. The average decline in voter turnout from November to December was 50.5% in runoffs in December 2000 and 31.4% in runoffs in December 2002.

Winning candidates received a majority of the low turnout December electorate in those two runoff elections, but when compared to the total voters who participated in that supervisorial election in November, winning candidates in December received a low of 25% and a high of 41% of the November turnout. Most races in the low end of this range. See these tables.

Board of Supervisor races, 2000

District	November election (total votes)	December runoff (winner's votes)	Percentage (winner's votes in December compared to total votes in November)
District 1	28,194	7,486	26%
District 2	38,206	No runoff	NA
District 3	24,860	7,202	29%
District 4	27,407	8,453	31%
District 5	36,115	10,384	28%
District 6	23,425	8,472	36%
District 7	33,867	9,333	27%
District 8	38,791	9,578	25%
District 9	23,765	No runoff	NA
District 10	23,884	5,887	25%
District 11	25,023	8,345	33%

Supervisor races, 2002

District 4	20,452	8,289	41%
District 8	31,902	11,096	35%

Assessment: In this year's RCV elections all winning candidates ultimately won a greater share of the first-choice election turnout than any of the winning candidates in the December 2000 runoffs. In any runoff system, the winning candidate must win a majority of valid ballots cast in the final round of counting between the top candidates (e.g., the "continuing ballots" rather than a majority of total ballots that might have been cast for the race. Here are the numbers for 2004 '

San Francisco Supervisor Races with Runoffs (votes counted as of November 10, 2004)

District	Winner	Total valid RCV votes	Votes in final round	Votes counted for winner	Runoff %	Winning votes as % of all votes	Ballots ranking winner	% of all ballots ranking winner
D1	McGoldrick	28,011	25,253	13,615	53.9%	48.6%	16,908	60.4%
D5	Mirkarimi	34,413	25,681	12,999	50.6%	37.8%	16,244	47.2%
D7	Elsbernd	30,838	23,768	13,538	57.0%	43.9%	16,331	53.0%
D11	Sandoval	22,789	18,039	10,513	58.3%	46.1%	12,184	53.5%

All winning candidates in runoffs had larger vote totals and percentages than winners in 2000. While all winners were ahead after the first round of counting, in several cases their share of the vote was small – meaning that it would not have been clear if they had broad support without conducting an instant runoff; in District 5, for example, Mirkarimi received only 28% of voters' first choices among the 22 candidates. Plurality elections can break down in this way whenever more than two candidates run, thereby allowing potentially unrepresentative, polarizing candidates to win with far less than majority support.

Comparing the runoff elections in 2000 to the RCV election in 2004, no December winner in 2000 had more than 36% of the November total. In contrast, every winner in 2004 had more than 38% of the first count total – and all but one (Mirkarimi in District 5) won a percentage greater than 44%. Support for winners was significantly higher if determined by the number of people who ranked the winner with at least one of their three rankings. Even though District Five had 22 candidates, Mirkarimi was ranked by 47% of voters. Every other winner drew at least one ranking from at least 53% of voters.

As another measure of RCV's improvement over the old runoff system, a far greater percentage of voters participated in the final runoff round of ballot-counting than in the December runoff election in 2000, which was the last presidential year. We examined two important RCV results: 1) the vote totals and percentages in the decisive round of counting in which a candidate reaches a majority (or "goes over the top," as it is called); and 2) the final round vote totals when there are only two candidates remaining, since these results will more closely mirror the results of a December runoff election. In most elections, the number of voters participating in the final runoff round using RCV, as well as the number of voters who cast a vote for the winner, i.e., their Supervisor, will be greater with RCV than the comparable numbers of voters in the December runoff election.

- Total runoff turnout in 2000 ranged from 53% to 64% of the November turnout. In 2004, final round RCV turnout ranged from 75% to 90% of first round RCV turnout.

- Winning candidates in 2000 received between 5,900 and 10,400 votes. Winning candidates in 2004 received between 10,500 and 13,600, and were ranked on 12,200 to 16,900 ballots.

Once more precinct information is available, we will look at how the rate of effective votes/exhausted ballots varied throughout the city, with a special emphasis on low turnout precincts, low-income precincts, precincts with high percentages of non-native English speakers, and precincts with high percentages of racial and ethnic minorities

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Special Topics: Continuing Ballots and Effectivness of Rankings in RCV Elections

"Continuing ballots" in RCV's instant runoff process

As with a November-December delayed runoff cycle, winners in ranked choice voting elections receive a majority of "continuing ballots" -- meaning a majority of those ballots being counted in the final and decisive runoff. San Francisco's instant runoff system simulates a series of runoff elections rather than just one. The candidates with least support are eliminated sequentially, one at a time, instead of all candidates but the top two as happens in a traditional delayed runoff cycle. (The only time more than one candidate is eliminated at the same time is if their combined vote is less than the vote total of the next highest-ranked candidate.)

Sequential elimination heavily weights a candidate's first choice support, but also ensures that a strong candidate does not lose out if first choice support is divided with weaker candidates. By reducing the field immediately to two candidates, delayed runoff candidates can create anomalous results depending on how first round votes are dispersed. In November 2004, three Republicans and three Democratic candidates ran for Louisiana's third congressional district seat. Louisiana has a unique law for federal elections where candidates must win a majority of the vote on Election Day to win; otherwise there is a December runoff. One Republican ran first. The leading Democrat won in a spot in the runoff by finishing second, but was only two thousand votes ahead of a second Republican. If the third Republican candidate had chosen not to run, his 10,300 votes would likely have boosted the other two Republicans, and the runoff almost definitely would have been between two Republicans. As it was, the Democratic candidate won the December 4th runoff.

RCV elections can be run under similar "reduce the field to two" rules. (Indeed they should be done that way whenever the victory threshold is established as less than 50% because in such a case the order of elimination of weak candidates could affect which candidate first crosses the victory threshold.) In the United Kingdom, London's mayor is elected with an IRV system where all but the top two candidates are eliminated at once, closely simulating a traditional delayed runoff. But the downside of this method is that it allows weaker "spoiler" candidates to eliminate a candidate from the final runoff who could defeat the winner.

<u>Effective use of rankings</u>

We looked at the extent to which supporters of losing candidates made effective use of of their #2 and #3 rankings. Of course if voters support one of the final two candidates with a #1 choice, it doesn't matter whether or not they rank candidates second and third: their vote will count for their #1 choice in all rounds. But if their #1 choice is one of the less popular candidates who gets eliminated before the final two, then it can be important whether the voter used a #2 and #3 choices to support one of the contenders. We eventually plan to compare the rate of exhausted ballots for supporters of eliminated candidates by precinct, with analysis by turnout, income, education level, rate of non-native English speakers and people of color.

Preliminary analysis of District 1 results *

* This table is based on data from 11/9. The rest of this document is based on data from 11/10.

Candidate	1st Round Votes	Average Rankings	Effective Votes	Effective Percent
McGoldrick	11,290	2.41	11,290	100.0%
Sing	8,647	2.57	8,647	100.0%
Tuchow	2,767	2.70	2,011	72.7%
Tsai	1,529	2.58	1,011	66.1%
Heller	1,947	2.61	1,116	57.3%
Dawydiak	1,343	2.65	801	59.6%
Overall	27,650	2.53	24,937	90.2%

These results give a sense of the effectiveness of the City's voter education, poll worker training, and "error notification" on the Optech Eagles. Did voters effectively use the ranked choice system? Did they rank three candidates? Did rates of exhausted ballots vary according to turnout, income, or education levels, or rates of non-native English speaking, or by racial or ethnic group? These are important indicators that point the direction for improvement and for ongoing education about ranked choice voting in San Francisco.

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Addressing Frequently Asked Questions about RCV in San Francisco

Question: Under RCV will it regularly take as much as three weeks to know who won?

No, definitive results were released on Friday, November 5 despite several races with large numbers of candidates. The length of time it takes to figure out the winners is a function of how close the race is and the number of absentee and provisional ballots – not RCV. The Department of Elections released all first-choice rankings on election night. When a race is not close and the winner has an outright majority among first choices, we can know who is going to win on election night, even if the results are not officially final. We could quickly determine three winners this year in Districts 2, 3 and 9.

If a race is close, then we can't determine a winner without first counting more absentee and provisional ballots and conducting an instant runoff. The Department of Elections planned to

release the results for all rankings and the first preliminary RCV tabulation on Wednesday, November 3 at 4 pm. A software glitch prevented the City's vendor from being able to integrate data from the absentee votes. Once that software was fixed on Thursday, the first rankings were released on November 5, and winners were clear in the remaining races.

Note that delays will happen if a race were razor-thin close, as is true of all elections. A non-RCV supervisorial race in District 7 in 2000 between Tony Hall and Mabel Teng was so close that it took several weeks to recount the ballots. 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. When the race is close, final determination will depend on the counting of absentee and provisional ballots. When the race is not close, we will know who won on election night or in the first few days after the close of the polls.

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

No. Every voter has one vote in each round of the instant runoff. But in case your favorite candidate doesn't win, you have the option of ranking two runoff choices (also called backup or insurance choices) in case your first choice can win. This is an advantage over the previous runoff system -- with RCV, you are allowed two runoff choices instead of just 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 help defeat your higher-ranked choices. There thus is no advantage to ranking the same candidate three times or ranking only one candidate (known as "bullet voting"). It is best to use all three of your rankings for three different candidates.

Preliminary data suggests that voters on average ranked between two and three candidates. Once voting equipment has been upgraded, the City will provide voters with the option to rank more than three candidates, thereby giving voters even more runoff choices.

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

No. Ranking a candidate more than once does not benefit the candidate. Also, there is no advantage to bullet voting (ranking only one candidate, 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 valid ranking is indicated.

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

No. With ranked choice voting, every voter has one vote in each round of counting for the instant runoff. 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 instant runoff 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 run in the December runoff election. They were what we call "continuing candidates." All those voters who voted for one of the final 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.

Every voter is treated the same in each round of the runoff, which is why courts have upheld this electoral method as constitutional and not a violation of "one person, one vote."

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

Not using all of three of your rankings reduces your chances of having a vote in the final runoff count. If all of your ranked candidates are eliminated, your ballot becomes what is known as "exhausted" and no longer can count. However, it's true that if you rank only one candidate and that candidate is one of the top two finishers, it won't matter 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 your first choice is not one of the strongest candidates.

Some critics of ranked choice voting have said that this method discards all the votes of some voters who don't make smart choices, and whose three candidates all get eliminated. Is that true?

There's never a legal guarantee to cast a vote for a winner in any election. That's not only true of RCV elections, but all American elections. Some voters pick the winners, others pick the losers. Think about our elections for governor, president, Congress, state legislative representatives – in those elections, if you guess wrong and pick a losing candidate your vote is discarded in those races as well. And the winner can win and represent a group of people even if receiving far less than half of their votes. At least with RCV you get three tries to pick a winner, and the winner will have a majority of continuing ballots.

Compare RCV's three rankings to the method used to elect more offices in the U.S. than any other: "plurality wins all" elections where the highest vote-getter wins even if less than a majority. With that method, millions of voters don't make smart choices and guess wrong. Many of the nearly hundred thousand Ralph Nader voters in the 2000 presidential election in Florida

probably wish they could have known the impact of their vote and had a second chance to make a better choice – such as by ranking a second choice with ranked choice voting. But no one is calling into question the use of that plurality method, because it is so familiar.

Other places using ranked ballot elections like Australia, Ireland and Cambridge (Mass.) allow their voters unlimited rankings. Why does San Francisco only allow three rankings?

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 if San Francisco ever elects to do a hand count, by law the Department of Elections must increase the number of rankings.

Is ranked choice voting too complicated for voters?

No. The media widely reported an impressively smooth election for a new system. There certainly were instances of confusion by voters and pollworkers, which happens every election, but considering that this was the first use of a new system and a particularly high turnout election with many first-time voters interested in the presidential race, the level of confusion struck most observers as minimal.

According to an exit poll survey of 2,108 San Francisco voters released on November 10 by the Chinese American Voter Education Committee (CAVEV, those respondents expressing an opinion about RCV overwhelmingly expressed support for it, while similarly larger majorities found that the system was easy to use.

69% of those surveyed in CAVEC's survey expressed an opinion about RCV. Of these voters, fully 71% indicated they liked RCV, with most indicating they liked RCV "a lot." This support crossed all racial and ethnic lines:

- 83% of Latinos liked RCV
- 70% of whites liked RCV
- 72% of Asians liked RCV
- 63% of blacks liked RCV

Despite the first RCV taking place in a year with high voter turnout where most media attention was focused on the federal elections, only 18% of voters found the new system difficult to use, according to the CAVEC survey. In every racial and ethnic group a majority of voters indicated the system was easy for them.

- Overall, 67% of voters found it easy to use, compared to only 18% who found it difficult. (The rest did not express an opinion.)
- 74% of Latinos found it easy to use, compared to only 14% who found it difficult.
- 71% of whites found it was easy to use, compared to 13% who found it difficult.
- 57% of blacks found it easy to use, compared to 35% who found it difficult.
- 59% of Asian Americans found it easy to use, compared to 27% who found it difficult.

These findings are consistent with historical norms. For many decades political scientists have observed literally thousands of elections using ranked ballots under all sorts of conditions in places like Cambridge (Mass.), Australia, the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain, Papua New Guinea, Bosnia, Utah, and elsewhere. There is simply no evidence that voters have any difficulty ranking their candidates, as long as the voting instructions are clear. According to Dr. Shaun Bowler, a professor of political science at the University of California-Riverside who specializes in voting systems, the idea that ranking candidates is too hard for the voters is, "flat wrong."

That's because with RCV, all the voter has to do is indicate their first choice and if they wish, a second and a third choice, ranking one or more candidates, 1, 2, 3. It's like renting a video or picking an ice cream flavor: What video (or flavor) do you want? That's your first choice. If they don't have that video (or flavor), what would you like? That's your second choice. If they don't have that, what's your third pick? That's all there is to it.

Also, the City's 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 the final ballot. This year not all pollworkers were properly trained on this error notification – in some cases telling voters they had to rank three different candidates to cast a valid ballot, even if they didn't want to do so, or in other cases simply overriding the notification without informing the voter they had the right to rank more candidates. This problem was corrected in many polling places during the course of the day and should be less of a problem in each subsequent RCV election.

Some have said that non-English speakers may have difficulty ranking ballots. Is this true?

No. An analysis of exhausted ballots (ones that did not rank either of the top two candidates in the final round of counting) in District 1 shows that first-choice supporters of different candidates ranked on average between 2.4 and 2.7 candidates. The low number of average rankings was for first-choice supporters of incumbent McGoldrick (2.4 rankings), and the high was Tuchow (2.7 rankings). The average number of rankings on ballots ranking Asian American candidates Sing and Tsai first was 2.6 out of a possible 3.0.

Historically, non-English speakers in Australia, London, New York City, and Cambridge (Mass.) are able to rank their ballots effective in ranked-choice elections. There is no evidence that ranked ballots have been a barrier to electoral success for language minorities in these elections, quite the contrary. For decades New York City used a ranked ballot system to elect its community school boards, for example, and non-citizens are permitted to vote if they have children in school. In 1999, when the City tried to change the system to a non-ranked choice system that could be conducted on the City's lever machines rather than on paper ballots, the Department of Justice intervened to block the change due to its adverse impact on communities of color in the City's three boroughs covered by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act.

Racial and language minorities have enjoyed their greatest electoral success in New York City's community school board elections, compared to City Council or state legislative races. The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), the nation's leading civil rights organization for Asian Pacific Americans, has written, "Based on our experience in New York City, it would seem that ranked choice voting could be used in San Francisco to benefit racial and language minority communities in the November elections."

This year, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors granted approximately $800,000 for community education and outreach, with money being particularly targeted at low voter precincts, minority precincts, seniors, and young people. The Asian Law Caucus was chosen by the Department of Elections to receive funding to conduct RCV community education and outreach to the Chinese/Asian communities. To find out how those efforts went for the targeted communities, contact ALC Executive Director Phil Ting at (415) 896-1701 x123, philting@asianlawcaucus.org.