

Ranked Choice Voting Ballot Design

A report by the Center for Voting and Democracy

Executive Summary

1. Since all voters will see the ballot, the ballot is the single most important element of voter education.
2. Voters overwhelmingly prefer a side-by-side compared to a wrap-around ballot format.
3. The wording and formatting of the instructions to voters can be significantly improved.
4. Significant feedback from affected communities is needed to finalize the Spanish and Chinese translations.
5. The Department should continue to work to improve the RCV ballot format and wording.
6. Improving the RCV ballot will also improve non-RCV ballots.

1. Introduction

The ballot is one the piece of literature that all voters will see. It is therefore the single most important component of a voter education program. A well-designed ballot will lead to high rates of voter success, just as a poorly-designed ballot, such as the infamous butterfly ballot, will lead to high rates of voter error.

To assist with the successful implementation of ranked-choice voting (RCV), the Center for Voting and Democracy posted several proposed ballot formats on its website and solicited input from a wide range of people and organizations. See Appendix 1 for excerpts from the comments received. We received approximately 80 written responses.

Our review included overall ballot format as well as the wording and formatting of the instructions to voters, both at the top of the ballot and at the beginning of each choice.

2. Ballot format

We posted samples ballots at <http://www.fairvote.org/sf/ballots.htm>.

The first review included three ballots

- Side-by-side (<http://www.fairvote.org/sf/sidebyside.pdf>)
- Wrap-around (<http://www.fairvote.org/sf/wraparound.pdf>)
- Old side-by-side (<http://www.fairvote.org/sf/sidebysideold.pdf>)

The results over about 80 comments were nearly unanimous: the side-by-side ballot is strongly preferred to the wrap-around version, and respondents strongly preferred the new side-by-side ballot over the old side-by-side version.

We then developed a second side-by-side version and asked people to compare them:

- Side-by-side #1 (<http://www.fairvote.org/sf/sidebyside.pdf>)

Ranked Choice Voting Ballot Design

- Side-by-side #2 (<http://www.fairvote.org/sf/sidebyside2.pdf>)

We have yet to receive significant feedback on these two side-by-side versions, but we believe they can both be improved. Possible areas of improvement include:

- Right-justifying candidate names and ballot designations;
- Improving the wording and formatting of the office (“Member, Board of Supervisors”) that spans the three columns;
- Deciding whether the red-shaded boxes should cover the candidates and the arrows or just the candidates;
- Aligning the white 1, 2 and 3s in the red boxes with the candidate names, which may end up right-justified;
- Moving to bi-lingual or mono-lingual ballots instead of tri-lingual ones.

3. Wording and format of instructions to voters

The wording and format of the instructions to voters in the wrap-around RCV ballot proposed by the Department suffered from several problems.

- The instructions to voters are in all capitals.
- The instructions lack formatting (bold, underline, italic) and spacing that would make it easier for voters to read.
- The graphic showing how to vote is physically distant from the English wording that says, “Complete the arrow pointing to your choice like this:” and it is unclear that the instructions refer to the graphic. It is extremely unclear what the Spanish and Chinese instructions are referring to.
- The instructions list 3 separate instructions in English, then in Spanish and then in Chinese.
- The instructions incorrectly read that your second and third choice vote *will* not be counted if you don’t vote for a different candidate in each race. In fact, the second *or* third choice *may* not be counted in this case.
- The Spanish translations were poor, and we’re guessing that the Chinese translations are inadequate.
- The instructions use words (First, Second, Third) for numbers (1st, 2nd, 3rd)

Recognizing that there are serious space limitations on the ballot, we recommend the following formatting and wording changes, as described at <http://www.fairvote.org/sf/ballotwording.pdf>:

1. Eliminate use of all capitals and use spacing and highlighting (bold, italics) to make the instructions to voters easier to follow.
2. Space permitting, change RCV instructions to “Ranked choice voting: Vote for your first, second and third choices for supervisor. Vote for a different candidate for each choice, or your second or third choice vote may not be counted.”
3. Try to incorporate an RCV logo showing 1-2-3 on the ballot.
4. List each instruction in 3 languages (Complete the arrow, completa la flecha, Chinese) rather than all 3 instructions in each language. This would allow all languages to be lined

Ranked Choice Voting Ballot Design

- up with the graphic of the hand completing the arrow. Also, change instructions to “Complete the arrow pointing to your choice as shown in the graphic:”
5. In the instructions in the 3 boxes, each line is repeated in all 3 languages (First choice, Primera selección, Chinese, and then vote for 1, etc). Consider whether it’s easier to list all English instructions then all Spanish instructions and then all Chinese instructions, or whether it’s better to list each individual instruction in all 3 languages. This may well depend on space constraints.
 6. Correct Spanish language wording as shown below.
 7. Right-justify candidates names and ballot designations (as done on the Dec 2003 ballot), so that the names appear close to the corresponding arrows.
 8. Consider using numbers (1st, 2nd, 3rd) instead of or in addition to words (First, Second, Third) on the ballot.

4. Proposed wording and format for RCV ballots

(Consider using 1st, 2nd, 3rd instead of or in addition to First, Second, Third)

Instructions to voters: Complete the arrow pointing to your choice as shown in the graphic:

Instrucciones para electores: Complete la flecha que señala su selección, del modo señalado por la gráfica:

(Chinese instructions)

To vote for qualified write-in candidate: Write the person’s name on the blank line provided and complete the arrow.

Para votar por un candidato no listado calificado: Escriba el nombre de la persona en la línea en blanco provista y complete la flecha.

(Chinese instructions)

Ranked choice voting: Vote for your first, second and third choices for supervisor. Vote for a different candidate for each choice, or your second or third choice vote may not be counted.

Vote ranqueando su selección electoral: Vote por un candidato diferente por cada selección, de otra manera, es posible que su segunda o tercera selección no sean tomadas en cuenta.

(Chinese instructions)

Instructions for the banner that crosses all three columns

Member, Board of Supervisors

Vote for your first, second and third choice for Supervisor.

Miembro, Consejo de Supervisores

Ranked Choice Voting Ballot Design

Vote por su primera, segunda y tercera selección para Supervisor.

(Chinese)

Instructions for the red boxes for first, second and third choices

(Consider using 1st, 2nd, 3rd instead of or in addition to First Second, Third)

First Choice

Primera Selección

(Chinese)

Vote for one / Vote por uno / (Chinese)

Second Choice

Segunda Selección

(Chinese)

Vote for one / Must be different from your first choice

Vote por uno / Debe ser diferente de su primera selección

(Chinese)

Third Choice

Tercera Selección

(Chinese)

Vote for one / Must be different from your first & second choices

Vote por Uno / Debe ser diferente de su primera & segunda selección

(Chinese)

5. Conclusions

By seeking and incorporating input from the affected community, the Department can develop a ballot that maximizes success. The Department should make special efforts to seek input from Spanish and Chinese speakers to ensure that the translations and wording are acceptable to those communities.

The side-by-side ballots and suggested wording changes are significant improvements over the originally proposed ballot designs. By fine-tuning these ballots, the Department can help ensure a successful election.

Finally, many of the RCV ballot revisions apply equally to non-RCV ballots, so a side benefit of improving the RCV ballot is a better ballot for all San Francisco elections.

Appendix 1

Please visit <http://www.fairvote.org/sf/appendix1.pdf> to review comments received.