## For Voters, Choice Is As Easy As 1, 2, 3

San Francisco Adopts Ranked Balloting

By KIMBERLY EDDS Special to The Washington Post

SAN FRANCISCO hen voters here go to the polls in November to select their top choice for a seat on the city's Board of Supervisors, they also get to pick their second choiceand even their third.

Here, a winning candidate has to receive at least 50 percent of the vote for the Board of Supervisors, which is the local city council. In the past, if nobody did, there was a runoff election.

But this year, San Francisco has become the largest city in the nation to adopt a form of voting that proponents say is a little like walking into an ice cream shop to order a chocolate cone only to discover the shop is all out-no problem, just order your next favorite flavor, and if that's out,

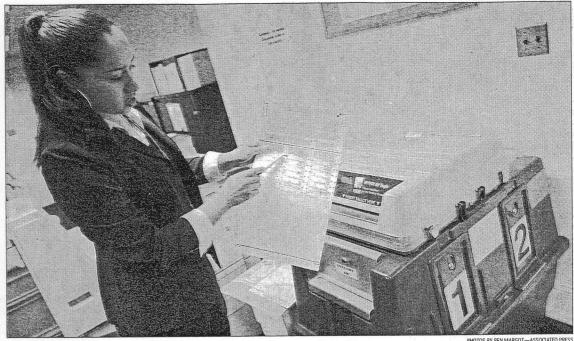
Calvin Lau, 50, an interior designer here, can't wait. He's tired of the heaps of campaign literature cramming his mailbox and dreads the prospect of a runoff.

In this city there are always runoffs. Runoffs for mayor, runoffs for board of supervisor. It's always neck and neck here, and there are always, always runoffs. Let's just get it all over with at once," Lau said. "This is going to save me some time. I already have my three picked out."

Advocates said the new system has made campaigning more civilized-candidates don't want to lose out on the chance to be a voter's second or third choice by appearing too negative. And they say it may increase turnout.

But opponents say the new system is too complicated, will discourage turnout and forces candidates to spread themselves too thin.

Here's how it will work: Voters will select three candidates in order of preference. All of the top-choice votes are tallied. If any candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote, that candidate wins. If no candidate has a majority, the candidate with the fewest first-place votes is eliminated. Voters who marked the losing candidate as their first choice will have their votes counted for their second-choice can-



In San Francisco, Campaign Services Coordinator Giannina Miranda displays the checks on her sample ranked-choice ballot, shown below, on which voters get a second and third choice for city supervisor. Ballot instructions are in English, Spanish and Chinese.

didate. The process continues until one candidate receives a majority of the vote; tallying could take several days.

With runoffs, you have two different electorates going to the polls," said Steven Hill, with the Center on Voting and Democracy, which has been pushing ranked-choice voting in municipalities across the country.
"This way you elect the strong-

est candidate who has the majority of the vote and you're getting it over with in one race. It's just common sense."

Advocates say the best argument for the new system is that it prevents a third-party spoiler. Had the system been in place in Florida during the 2000 presidential election, Ralph Nader-with the fewest first place votes-would have been eliminated. Those ballots would have had their second-choice votes count-

ed—these presumably would have gone to Al Gore. The added votes would have given Gore the majority.

"People really get to vote for the person they want to vote for, not just the person they feel has the better chance of winning," Hill said. "Their vote isn't wasted."

Critics worry that the system could be difficult for voters to navigate and that the added confusion could turn off minority and other groups with already low turn-

The system is used around the world, but it has yet to catch on in the United

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States. Ann Arbor, Mich., abandoned the method after just one election in the 1970s. Cambridge, Mass., uses a version to elect its City Council. Dozens of cities and counties across the country, including Los Angeles, are looking into the idea, and everyone is keeping an eye on San Francis-

Detractors say that despite an extensive public information campaign, many voters don't understand the system. "It's complicated. You're trying to tell people why you're the best candidate while at the same time you're trying to do education about how to do ranked-choice voting," said Robert Haaland, a candidate for a district that includes Haight-Ashbury who nonetheless supports the new system.

In the district near Golden Gate Park, Supervisor Jake McGoldrick has been battling an "anybody but Jake" campaign against six challengers and a host of outside business interests. One of his campaign advisers said the new system did not make for positive campaigning.

"The proponents' pie-in-the-sky idea was that [the new system] will encourage everyone to be nice to each other. It's quite the opposite in that everyone has the incentive to go negative against the incumbent," said political consultant Jim Stearns, who represents two other incumbent supervisors besides McGoldrick.

But 22 contenders battling to fill the spot of Supervisor Matt Gonzalez, who is leaving office, have embraced the concept wholeheartedly. The district is seen as one of the city's more liberal, and candidates have been meeting regularly to discuss the issues facing the area. Candidates have pledged to work together with the winner.

While Haaland and Michael O'Connor, another candidate seeking the same seat, are concentrating on getting as many number one votes as possible, they are sure to mention each other if voters are looking for a number two suggestion.

They have co-hosted a hip-hop party to raise money for their campaigns. Proceeds were split down the middle.

"It was really cool," Haaland said. "Our supporters got together, drank together and got along really well with each other. It wasn't my supporters on one side and his supporters on another."