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Many SF Voters Used Ranked-Choice Voting Incorrectly

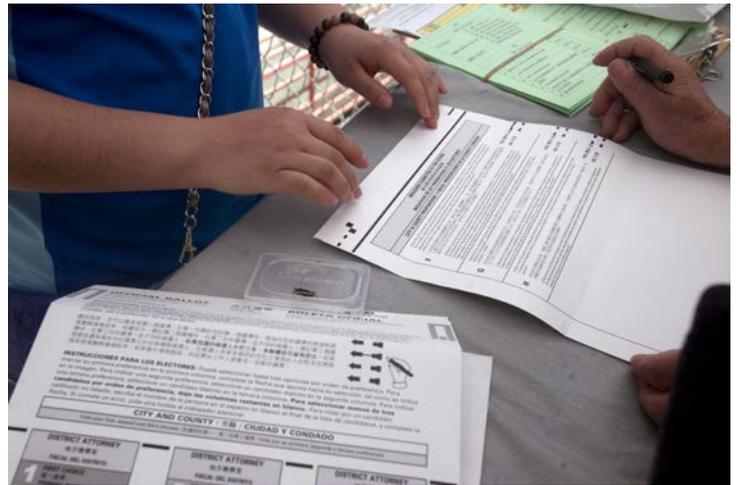
Analysis finds voting patterns break down by neighborhood boundaries

By: [Shane Shifflett](#)

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The results are in: San Francisco voters have trouble with ranked-choice elections.

Despite a \$300,000 educational campaign leading up to last month's elections, including a new smiley-face mascot, publicity events, and advertising on buses and in newspapers, only one-third of voters on Nov. 8 filled out all three choices in all three races, according to an analysis released this week by the University of San Francisco.



Under the city's system, voters were asked to rank their top three choices for mayor, sheriff and district attorney.

Perhaps the analysis' most troubling finding is that 9 percent of voters, mostly in Chinatown and southeastern neighborhoods like the Bayview, marked only one choice for each office, likely either because they considered only one candidate suitable or because they did not know how to fill out their ballot correctly.

"Some people just prefer to rank one," said Corey Cook, a political science professor at the university who wrote the report with David Latterman. "But the geographic component suggests it's more systematic."

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Cook and Latterman plan to do further research into the question of why some voters consistently chose only one candidate.

Although Ed Lee did not receive a majority of first-place votes, he became the city's first elected Chinese-American mayor based on the ranked-choice system, which was first used in San Francisco in 2004.

Latterman, an associate director of the Leo T. McCarthy Center for Public Service and the Common Good at USF, said voters in neighborhoods with large black or Asian populations tended to vote for different candidates than residents in other parts of the city. But the Nov. 8 election was the first time researchers saw a geographic or perhaps ethnic difference in how people used ranked-choice voting.

[The findings](#) indicate one of two things, Latterman said: Either campaigns tried to manipulate the results by focusing on specific groups of people or there is not a clear understanding of how to use the system.

A [recent Bay Citizen analysis revealed](#) that 16 percent of ballots in the mayoral race — those of more than 31,500 people — were filled out correctly but were discarded when all of their chosen candidates were eliminated from the race. San Francisco does not allow voters to rank all the candidates on the ballot.

In June, a voting task force created by the Board of Supervisors [recommended that the Department of Elections consider allowing voters to rank all the candidates to avoid this issue](#).

The panel urged the department to work with city supervisors to increase voter education.

Hence the mascot. “We made the conscious decision to have an image of a correctly marked ballot and to have a smiley face to draw people’s attention,” said John Arntz, the director of the Department of Elections.

When asked whether ranked-choice voting has worked well for San Francisco, Arntz said, “I guess it depends if your candidate wins or not.”

This article also appears in the Bay Area edition of The New York Times.