

New ranked-choice ballots baffle many San Francisco voters

By: **Amy Crawford** | 11/08/11 9:50 PM

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Despite an ad campaign explaining the nuances of ranked-choice voting, many voters were confused Tuesday.

Although citywide figures were not available, Jeff Olsen, a poll-worker trainer with the Department of Elections, noted that about 20 percent of voters at one Bernal Heights polling place made errors.

Olsen said that the machines that read ballots spit out an error message if voters choose the same candidate three times. Voters are then given the option of revoting.

“Even if we tell them, ‘Don’t mark the same person,’ they do,” said Mary Beth Huffman, an inspector at that polling place. “They’re just putting the same person all the way across. They think they’re giving their guy more points.”

Under ranked-choice voting, voters should choose different candidates for their first, second and third choices. The second and third choices become relevant only if one candidate does not win outright and the voter’s first choice is eliminated from the contest.

Early reports suggested that turnout was low, officials said. The department mailed out 213,456 ballots as of Monday and had received only 69,749 back. Voters had until 8 p.m. to cast ballots at their assigned precincts or return mailed ballots.

Turnout usually hovers around 50 percent for San Francisco elections involving a mayoral race.

The low turnout was a relief to workers at 31 Howth St., a garage mistakenly listed on about 115,000 voter information packets.

“Thank God they didn’t all show up at 7 this morning,” said Theresa Muehlbauer, an elections deputy dispatched to the polling place to handle any misdirected voters.

She said fewer than half the 100 voters who came to the garage by mid-afternoon were misdirected. Those voters were then redirected or cast provisional ballots.

Some voters grumbled when they realized they had come miles out of their way, only to wind up at the wrong polling place.

“I’ve got better things to do,” said Michael Gemignani, 59, of Potrero Hill. “I’m supposed to be at work.”

Officials received more than 20 complaints about supporters of Mayor Ed Lee, Sen. Leland Yee and Supervisor John Avalos electioneering too close to polling places. Rules forbid such activity less than 100 feet from a precinct entrance.



Wrong directions: Elections worker Theresa Muehlbauer, right, speaks with Stacy Fowler, center, who was mistakenly directed to vote at a polling place at 31 Howth St. (Mike Koozmin/The Examiner)