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Ranked-Choice Voting: Does Anyone Really Understand It?

By **Chris Roberts** Wednesday, Nov 28 2012

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Every local election since 2004 has allowed voters the option of ranking their top three choices for office. If a voter's top choice is eliminated from contention, they can at least rest assured their support went to a similar candidate. A common complaint is that this system confuses voters. Turns out it also flummoxes candidates, who are losing elections for not adopting a ranked-choice strategy.

This year, outgoing Supervisor Sean Elsbernd and his chosen successor, businessman Mike Garcia, approached the other moderate frontrunner in District 7, labor leader F.X. Crowley. Neither candidate wanted progressive school board President Norman Yee, the clear outlier among the three, to win. But Crowley refused to issue a ranked endorsement, on the grounds that Garcia's lagging campaign just wanted labor's help. Both camps watched the neighborhood go progressive, as Yee won by the razor-thin margin of 130 votes.

Garcia's votes, when distributed to the other candidates after he was eliminated, went to Crowley by a 2-to-1 margin, but not enough of Garcia's ballots had Crowley ranked to make the final difference. Had Crowley agreed to a ranked-choice strategy, "I believe he'd be supervisor," Garcia says.

In progressive hotbed District 5, voters had three prominent left-wing candidates to choose from. It was an ugly campaign — ousted incumbent Christina Olague was blasted for her vote to reelect Sheriff Ross Mirkarimi, and groping allegations sank progressive Julian Davis — and one of the candidates had no second- or third-place candidates marked.

And speaking of Mirkarimi, the city might have been spared much of the drama of the last year had ranked-choice voting been in the playbooks of candidates Chris Cunnie or Paul Miyamoto, either of whom might have beat Mirkarimi with help from the other. Instead, the two most similar candidates — in this instance, career law enforcement officers — finished second and third behind the outlier. Many Cunnie votes had no second- or third-place candidates marked.

These scenarios are sometimes used to argue that ranked-choice voting should be scrapped in favor

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of the old December runoff election. Mostly, it needs refinement: Voters here can pick only three choices; other jurisdictions allow them as many rankings as there are candidates. Nearly 4,000 votes in District 7 were thrown out because they had none of the remaining candidates marked; in last year's mayoral election, 52,000 ballots were so "exhausted." As long as San Francisco's Elections Department lacks the technology to weight votes based on rank, elected officials — like Yee, and like Mayor Ed Lee — will win with only a plurality. Especially if their opponents let them.

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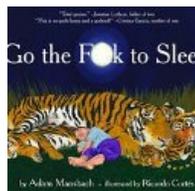


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Ranked Voting is a modern day literacy test for voters. The "informational Costs" are just too high for the average voter - except for those that are deeply involved and invested in Ranked Voting. They understand it, and just cannot fathom how others don't. That's their problem - they just cannot believe people are not as smart as them. And if you say RCV is confusing, you are attacked as "not giving Voters enough credit" or "calling them stupid". Prof. Cook of USF, wrote in a recent article entitled THE TROUBLE WITH RANKED CHOICE VOTING and wrote "Anyone who offers anything short of full-throated support (of RCV) is branded a critic and dismissed with misdirections and ad hominem arguments." He also has pointed out that by his analysis that upwards of 10% of ballots had errors on them, particularly minorities, and elderly voters. Here's the link to his article - <http://www.spur.org/blog/2012-01-06/trouble-ranked-choice-voting>.

Other studies have shown that even those that "say" they understand RCV, do not accurately describe RCV - meaning, they really don;t know how it works.

A quick search of "Ranked Choice Voting Confusion" on YouTube generates a whole list of news reports. My favorite video viewed is this one from the UK, where their national vote on RCV (called Alternative Vote) failed with merely 30% support.

Watch it here: <http://youtu.be/CZwOrySleY>



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