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# A Critical Spotlight Shines on Ranked-Choice Voting

By SCOTT JAMES

Steven Hill is not on San Francisco's November ballot, but few actual candidates have been as influential, or controversial, in this year's election.

Mr. Hill, an author and public speaker, is considered the guru of ranked-choice voting, a system that creates an instant-runoff by having voters select their top three favorite candidates in order of preference. The system was adopted in San Francisco in 2004, but this election is the first time it will be employed in a competitive mayoral race in the city, since Gavin Newsom ran without serious opposition in 2007.

Mr. Hill, who travels the world promoting changes in electoral systems, said that ranked-choice voting improved turnout, saved money by avoiding expensive, and usually poorly attended, runoff elections and encouraged politicians to reach out to more-diverse constituencies.

"You need both a strong core of support to avoid being eliminated in the first round, plus a broad base," Mr. Hill said.

The system has made campaigning more complex. If no candidate gets a majority, the person at the bottom of the poll is dropped and the second and third choices of his supporters are added to the tallies of the remaining candidates. This continues until someone reaches 50 percent. In some cases, candidates who were not the first choice of a large majority of voters have been elected.

And there is new evidence that many voters do not understand ranked-choice voting, which has led to some ballots being invalidated in numbers high enough possibly to affect the outcome.

That insight comes from research under way at the University of San Francisco that is scrutinizing the results of the 2010 mayoral race in Oakland, the most-high-profile ranked-choice election in the Bay Area to date.

On election night, only 24 percent of Oakland voters picked Jean Quan as their first choice, compared with 35 percent who chose former State Senator Don Perata. But with ranked-choice voting in a crowded field of nine candidates, Ms. Quan was the dominant second or third choice of so many voters that she eventually won, with 50.96 percent.

In analyzing the votes, Corey Cook, a professor in the university's political science department, said 21 percent of voters did not use all three of their choices, effectively limiting their participation in the instant runoff

There were also many who overvoted, picking two or more candidates in a single voting-choice field (for example, marking two for first choice), which invalidated their ballots. This occurred on 0.6 percent of regular ballots on Election Day and on about twice as large a proportion — 1.1 percent — of mail-in ballots. Nearly half of the 122,000 votes cast were mailed in.

“In a close election, half a percentage point is huge,” Dr. Cook said.

It is difficult to predict whether overvoting will be a problem in the coming San Francisco mayoral election. But more than half the votes are expected to be cast before Election Day using mail-in ballots, which had the higher failure rate in Oakland, or early voting done in person at City Hall (beginning Tuesday) .

And there already are indications that San Francisco voters might not fully understand ranked-choice voting. In the heavily contested 2010 city supervisor elections, nearly 55 percent of voters did not use all three of their choices.

In February, a survey of 500 voters by the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce found that 70 percent were confused about whether the system accurately tallied their votes.

Mr. Hill dismissed that poll as manipulative, and when asked about the complexity of the system said, “I don’t think one, two, three is too complicated.”

The ranked-choice system is also supposed to save money, a key promise when it was adopted. But with 16 candidates — many believe that the possibility of a Quan-like come-from-behind victory has lured this large number — and public financing set to cover up to \$900,000 per candidate, savings are unlikely.

Supervisor Sean Elsbernd said he planned to ask voters to repeal ranked-choice voting in 2012.

These factors have put Mr. Hill on the defensive, and he has reacted like an embattled candidate. He and his associates at [FairVote](#), a left-wing group based in Maryland that advocates for voting changes, have relentlessly berated people (including me) who have raised concerns.

Mr. Hill and his associates are “zealots,” said Ron Dudum, an unsuccessful candidate for city supervisor who has repeatedly challenged ranked-choice voting in the courts and lost “They will persecute you aggressively.”

But for Mr. Hill, who is more thoughtful and less combative in person than in the bellicose e-mails he tends to send, there is much at stake in ranked-choice voting. He wants “to make San Francisco a model that could be exported to the rest of the country,” he said.

*Scott James is an Emmy-winning television journalist and novelist who lives in San Francisco.*

*[sjames@baycitizen.org](mailto:sjames@baycitizen.org)*