



Comments on Draft 7 of "Recommendations on Voting Systems for the City and County of San Francisco"

Steve Chessin to: voting.systems.task.force

11/09/2010 10:01 PM

Sent by: Steve Chessin

History: This message has been forwarded.

Dear Voting Systems Task Force Members:

My name is Steve Chessin. I am President of Californians for Electoral Reform (www.cfer.org), a statewide non-partisan organization that does educational and advocacy work around instant runoff voting (IRV, what San Francisco calls Ranked Choice Voting or RCV) and proportional representation (PR). I am considered an expert in this field.

As geography and my job prevent me from attending your meetings in person, I would appreciate your including this email in the record of your November 10th meeting.

While I appreciate that your "Recommendations on Voting Systems for the City and County of San Francisco" is mainly about improving the auditability of San Francisco's elections, it surprises me that, in your "Recommendations that will Guide the City toward its Next Generation System (targeting implementation in 2014)", you say nothing about increasing the number of rankings an RCV voter can indicate. While the courts have upheld the legality of limiting a voter to just three choices, and San Francisco's charter does allow limiting the number of rankings based on equipment limitations, the charter also states a clear preference for equipment that allows "voters to rank a number of choices in order of preference equal to the total number of candidates for each office" (section 13.102(b)).

Such equipment does exist. For example, Cambridge, Massachusetts, uses an optical scan ranked ballot to implement the multi-winner PR cousin of IRV known as Choice Voting. I am attaching sample ballots from their 2001 election that show how their ballots allow as many candidates as appear on the ballot to be ranked. Their 2001 school board contest had 10 candidate for six seats, and their 2001 city council contest had 19 candidates for nine seats. (I believe the equipment they use has an absolute limit of 30 rankings. I know that their 1999 city council election had 25 candidates on the ballot. In addition, voters wrote in the names of five additional candidates, and at least one voter ranked all 29.)

San Francisco's voters would clearly benefit from equipment that allowed for more rankings. Your most recent election had six candidates in District 2, 14 in District 6, and 21 in District 10. While one can endlessly debate how many of the exhausted ballots in those races were voluntarily versus involuntarily exhausted (by way of contrast, in District 8, where there were only four candidates, all the exhausted ballots are voluntary), it is clear that, with more rankings, the number of involuntarily exhausted ballots goes down, and when there are as many rankings available as candidates it goes down to zero.

Given the crowded fields that San Francisco elections often have, I would urge you to include a recommendation for "next generation" equipment that allows for many more than three rankings.

Sincerely,
--Steve Chessin
President, Californians for Electoral Reform

