

The following opinion editorial was drafted in response to public questions and concerns around the impact of ranked choice voting in San Francisco's 2018 mayoral election. The intention of the op-ed is to address and clarify any misunderstandings or mischaracterizations around ranked choice voting and preview a series of electoral changes and upgrades that will improve future elections for San Francisco voters. The op-ed has been reviewed by Commissioners Hill, Mogi, and Jerdonek and is presented to the full Elections Commission for recommended publication.

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SF Elections are Working — and Getting Even Better

by the San Francisco Elections Commission

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With high voter interest in this month's mayoral election, the San Francisco Elections Commission would like to report on the election and our future plans. In 2002, the San Francisco Charter established the Commission to oversee elections in San Francisco—setting general policies for the Department of Elections and supervising the Director. Our seven members are each appointed by different elected bodies: the Board of Education, Board of Supervisors, City Attorney, District Attorney, Mayor, Public Defender, and Treasurer.

First, we'd like to congratulate the citizens of San Francisco. The Department of Elections estimates turnout will be at least 53 percent of registered voters, the second highest vote total in San Francisco mayoral election history. Voter turnout across the state is expected to be only 36 percent.

There is no question that the mayor's race drove this higher turnout. San Franciscans cast more ballots for mayor than ballots for governor and U.S. Senator.

As we have seen in previous elections, voters have adapted well to the "instant runoff" ranked choice voting (RCV) system. 86% of voters ranked at least two candidates, and 7 in 10 ranked their top three candidates. More than 9 in 10 voters supported a candidate who made it to the final round of the election—a higher percentage than ever before.

How do we know this? The Department of Elections makes anonymous records of voters' rankings open and transparent to the public, so researchers and observers can monitor our elections process.

The data also shows that both mayoral finalists, London Breed and Mark Leno, did an excellent job at connecting with San Francisco voters. Both were ranked first, second, or third by more than 60 percent of voters.

Voters also made very few errors on their RCV ballots. Only a quarter of one percent of the more than 250,000 ballots had a disqualifying overvote. This is far smaller than in the non-RCV election for governor, where voters were six times more likely to cast an overvote.

The pattern was even more dramatic in the U.S. Senate race, where there were seven times more overvotes than in the mayor's race. Voters were also six times more likely to skip voting in the Senate contest, even with San Francisco's own Diane Feinstein on the ballot.

Our RCV system ensured higher voter participation than in the old December runoff system, which we used until 2004. Under that old system, voter turnout often plummeted in the runoff, on average by more than 30 percent. In the 2001 runoff to elect the city attorney, less than 17% of registered voters participated. In the 1995 mayoral election, when Willie Brown was first elected, turnout was 10 percentage points lower in the December runoff.

Ranked choice voting also let us determine which candidate has the broadest support across the City's electorate. Contrast this with a "plurality" voting system, in which voters choose one candidate and the highest vote-getter wins. Under plurality voting, the winning mayor would have won with only 37% of the

vote, with nearly two-thirds of voters supporting another candidate. San Francisco's RCV elections ensure that the winning candidate has a true majority and is preferred by the most voters.

RCV also ensures that San Francisco voters can choose from a diverse pool of candidates. We are pleased to report that San Francisco's RCV system has a strong track record of electing people of color. Of the eighteen offices in San Francisco elected by RCV, thirteen are held by office-holders of color. Oakland elected an Asian-American woman a few years ago as mayor, and San Francisco just elected an African-American woman. The Elections Commission remains committed to the goal of continually improving voter education and outreach to historically underrepresented communities.

We recognize that there is some concern about the slow processing of election results. It is important to understand that this isn't related to ranked choice voting. It takes only a few minutes to tally an RCV contest. It took more time to determine the winning mayoral candidate because the race was close, and there were many vote-by-mail and provisional ballots to process, which take much longer to process than precinct ballots. Notably, San Francisco also had an RCV contest in District 8, but because the race wasn't close, the winner was clear on election night.

Starting next year, San Francisco will get new voting equipment with a simpler ballot design and that lets voters rank up to ten candidates. Public demonstrations will happen this summer. Yet even with our current three rankings, voters still have two more choices than they receive in most U.S. elections.

The City is also working on developing an open-source voting system. We are excited to implement these long-awaited changes and upgrades and to continue running fair, open, and democratic elections.