

Low-income voters struggled with ranked-choice voting

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Voters from low-income neighborhoods had a tougher time with the complexities of the ranked-choice voting system in November's election.

That's the bottom line of a California Watch analysis of voting data from the electoral district that arguably faced the most complicated ballot in California: San Francisco's Supervisorial District 10.

In a swath of the city's west end that includes the housing projects in Bayview/Hunters Point and middle-class homes on Potrero Hill, voters were confronted with a long list of electoral decisions.

First there were the races for governor, U.S. Senate and Congress, followed by a tangle of other state races and initiatives.

After that, district voters faced a ranked-choice election for the Board of Supervisors, with 21 candidates vying for a single seat. Voters were asked to select their first, second and third choices for a replacement for Supervisor Sophie Maxwell, who was termed out.

The eventual winner was political newcomer [Malia Cohen \(http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/12/28/BA8F1GS8FI.DTL\)](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/12/28/BA8F1GS8FI.DTL). She was in third place after the first round of the computerized instant runoff, but pulled ahead in the 19th round.



campaign photo
San Francisco Supervisor Malia Cohen, left,
with Assemblywoman Fiona Ma.

Signs of voter fatigue were evident by the time voters got to the back end of the ballot. According to data posted by the San Francisco Registrar of Voters, 11 percent of voters – 2,356 people – didn't bother casting ballots in the supervisors' race, according to Registrar of Voters' records.

There was also evidence of confusion over ranked-choice voting, which was first put in place in San Francisco city elections in 2004. (In 2010, it was used for the first time in Oakland, Berkeley and San Leandro.)

In the first round of the system's so-called instant runoff, more than 2 percent of district voters – 489 – spoiled their ballots with what are called "overvotes." That means voters improperly voted for more candidates than allowed. Under

the rules, those votes weren't counted.

Although the voters who didn't vote in the supervisorial election were distributed fairly evenly throughout the district, the "overvotes" were concentrated in lower-income areas, the data show.

In Bayview/Hunters Point, more than 3 percent of the ballots were spoiled because of overvotes. The rate was almost as high in Visitacion Valley, a lower-income area with a large population of Asian immigrants.

Those rates were triple the spoil rate among votes cast on Potrero Hill, where income and education levels are higher, according to census data.

Critics of ranked choice voting contend that confusion about the system is widespread. They say poor people, the elderly and people who aren't native English speakers particularly struggle with it.

"The pure fact is, RCV is misunderstood by many voters, and it discriminates against minorities and individuals who have a problem with language," says former San Leandro Mayor Tony Santos, a onetime former ranked-choice voting booster who now is campaigning against it.

Exit polls commissioned after ranked-choice voting was first used in San Francisco in 2004 (one by San Francisco State University professors, the other by the Chinese American Voters Education Committee) found that the system may have confused Chinese-speaking voters, according to [press accounts \(http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/11/11/BAG869PEDU1.DTL\)](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/11/11/BAG869PEDU1.DTL).

Since then, the city has spent about \$1 million on voter education efforts about the system.

Boosters of ranked-choice voting contend that the new system is legal and fair and a big improvement over a system of local runoff elections that RCV was created to replace.

They essentially deny that voter confusion is a factor in elections at all. Their energetic defense of the system – and their equally energetic critique of [my earlier reporting](#) (<http://californiawatch.org/category/free-tagging/ranked-choice-voting>) on this issue – can be found in the comments section of [an earlier post](#). (<http://californiawatch.org/dailyreport/confusion-about-oakland-s-voting-system-may-have-affected-election-6491>)

Boosters sometimes accuse critics of patronizing voters when they complain that ranked-choice voting is confusing, according to Anthony Gierzynski, a University of Vermont political scientist who has studied the system, which he styles “IRV” for “instant runoff voting.” In a 2006 study, he [wrote \[PDF\]](#) (<http://www.uvm.edu/~vlrs/IRVassessment.pdf>):

Proponents of IRV like to frame this argument about the complexity IRV would add by countering that what critics of IRV are saying is that voters are stupid. Not so.

These analyses are not impugning the intelligence of the American voter, just recognizing the limits to what a political system can ask of its citizens and recognizing that adding complexity to an already complex ballot will disproportionately harm some groups of people more than others.

		Registered	Ballots Cast	Turnout (%)	Over Votes	Under Votes
BAYVIEW/ HUNTERS POINT	Election Day	18274	3720	20.36	124	495
BAYVIEW/ HUNTERS POINT	VBM	18274	4813	26.34	147	378
BAYVIEW/ HUNTERS POINT	Total	18274	8533	46.69	271	873
POTRERO HILL	Election Day	9387	3166	33.73	26	541
POTRERO HILL	VBM	9387	2764	29.44	21	283
POTRERO HILL	Total	9387	5930	63.17	47	824
VISITACION VALLEY	Election Day	8421	1600	19.00	62	217
VISITACION VALLEY	VBM	8421	2416	28.69	53	179

Source: San Francisco Registrar of Voters

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