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## Diaz: When more equals less

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The campaign for mayor of San Francisco is beginning to resemble a bicycle race. Mayor Ed Lee, who surged to the front the instant he announced his candidacy, is taking the full brunt of wind resistance. Other major candidates are sitting back in the pack, drafting off each other, keeping their heads down and hoping the Lee phenomenon will lose steam by Nov. 8.

San Francisco has 11 candidates for mayor who have at least a conceivable chance of winning. In an ordinary year, the field would start thinning by now. Candidates languishing in the pack - whose ideas or personas proved bland or unappealing on a citywide stage - would drop out. But this is no ordinary year.

This election presents the first real test of San Francisco's experiment with partial public financing and ranked-choice voting in a mayoral campaign. Those systems were in effect in 2007, but the absence of any credible challenge to incumbent [Gavin Newsom](#) deferred the verdict until now.

The effects of these so-called reforms have begun to unfold. One obvious upshot: Once in the race, candidates who have qualified for public financing have a huge incentive to stay in the race - even if only going through the motions - so they don't have to repay the public funds they drew. The nine who have qualified for public financing could receive up to \$900,000 each in city matching funds. Lee and Public Defender Jeff Adachi have declined public financing.

So it was no surprise to see all 11 candidates on the stage Tuesday night for a 90-minute debate at UCSF's Mission Bay campus. Neither the format nor the time frame allowed much opportunity to compare the candidates' views on critical issues. When it came time for candidates to question each other - usually an ideal chance to draw distinctions - some went warm and fuzzy. Bevan Dufty and Michela Alioto-Pier exchanged softball questions with each other, as did Leland Yee and Dennis Herrera. John Avalos gave Public Defender Adachi a chance to expound on the causes of crime. These team-ups were the equivalent of drafting in a bicycle race. The only pointed questions - from Adachi and David Chiu - were aimed at front-runner Lee.

It was mostly a night for suppressing yawns.

Is San Francisco getting its money's worth out of public financing? The early evidence is that it is not.

It's instructive to revisit the rationale behind San Francisco's partial-public campaign financing:

-- **Create opportunities for newcomers.** All but one of the mayoral candidates receiving public financing are politicians who have been elected to office - and the exception, venture capitalist Joanna Rees, is someone who clearly could run for office without taxpayers' help. "Public financing, all by itself, isn't a panacea that will allow Buster in BART to stop playing guitar and run for mayor," said Alex Clemens, a political consultant and lobbyist not affiliated with any of the candidates in this race. Or as political consultant Jim Ross put it, "This system encourages ambitious politicians to run ... because you're getting up to \$900,000 to advertise your brand and drive up your name ID ... for a future race for state Assembly or whatever."

-- **Give the candidates more time to discuss issues.** Tuesday's debate was a prime example of how more can be less. Each candidate had, at most, six or seven minutes to talk about the issues. Most candidates were allowed to walk out of the hall without having to say a word about pressing issues such as pension reform or homelessness.

-- **Reduce overall spending.** With the public subsidies, this election has become an absolute windfall for the town's political consultants. Also, the system does nothing to chill "independent" advertising by special interests, which is where the big money flows - and nastiness reigns - in San Francisco politics.

The effect of the other major reform experiment - ranked-choice voting - remains to be seen. Consultants working for several campaigns agreed with the bicycle-race analogy: Don't be too bold or daring, especially in the early going, don't take chances. Court those second- and third-place votes.

As for the notion that ranked-choice voting somehow promotes positive, issue-oriented campaigns, the attacks on Lee have the familiar ring of the "Anybody but Don" Perata strategy that worked so successfully for Jean Quan, with the assist of other underdogs, in Oakland last year.

[San Francisco Supervisor Sean Elsbernd](#), who opposed the public financing and ranked-choice voting experiments, has begun drafting ballot measures to repeal them in June 2012. Taxpayers may well have second thoughts about public financing if it turns out they were contributing \$900,000 to a campaign that ends up with 5 percent or less of the vote.

Ranked-choice voting could be similarly doomed if the election is close, with the winner finishing with 20 percent or less of the original vote - and a computer methodically sorting out the field in a

process that leaves many voters angry and disenfranchised, and the new mayor without any semblance of a mandate.

"We'll see how it all rolls out," Elsbernd said. "My suspicion is there's going to be a lot of frustration, especially with public financing."

### **New rules of the road**

This year's mayoral race is the first test of these new rules. Here's how they work:

#### **Public financing**

Candidates qualify for matching funds by raising \$25,000 from 250 donors. Qualified candidates (who must agree to an overall \$1.45 million spending limit) get an initial payment of \$50,000 in public funds. They can then begin drawing matching funds up to a maximum of \$900,000, based on the level of contributions they receive from city residents.

#### **Ranked-choice voting**

Voters rank their top three choices in order of preference.

If a candidate wins a majority, he or she is declared the winner.

If no candidate wins a majority, the candidate who received the fewest first-place votes is eliminated - and votes for the second choice of the eliminated candidate's voters (at least for those who named a second choice) are counted in the next round.

The process continues, eliminating the lowest-scoring candidate each round, until a candidate reaches a majority. The "instant runoff" for San Francisco's District 10 supervisor's race, which had 21 candidates, went 19 rounds.

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