

Ranked-Choice Voting and Flawed Ballots Tax San Francisco's Election



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Rules requiring hand-inspection, confusion over ranking could delay results for weeks

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Rules requiring manual checks of every ballot before counting stemming from concerns over vote counting systems were expected to make this city's municipal elections more complicated than usual. Maybe not quite this complicated, though.

Because of high numbers of ballots needing to be remade before they can be tabulated, getting official results in this week's vote could take weeks.

John Arntz, the city's election director, said at a press conference this week that officials have had to remake 94 percent of absentee ballots cast before they can be counted, because of casting errors, confusion about ranked-choice voting, incorrect pencil or ink and other problems. An informal survey of poll workers indicated that ballots cast on election day at precincts could be similarly flawed.

When a ballot needs to be remade, election officials pull it aside and one election official fills in a new ballot while another official watches. Those two election officials then give the old ballot and the remade ballot to a different pair of election officials who ensure that the new ballot reflects the voter's intentions and code the new ballot so it can be traced back to the original.

While the task of remaking ballots is not unusual, some questioned whether the ranked-choice system, which requires voters to put the names of three candidates on the ballot, made sense in this particular election.

Kim Alexander, president of the **California Voter Foundation**, said she wasn't surprised that so many ballots have needed remaking, noting that there were three places on the ballot to rank candidate choices for the sheriff's race, in which only two candidates were running and the district attorney race in which Kamala Harris ran unopposed.

"I did not understand that," she said. "I was confused looking at the ballot in San Francisco and I imagine a lot of voters would be too."

Poll workers deployed around the city noticed the same thing.

Nick Andraide, a poll worker from Noe Valley at Eureka Playground in the Castro said that as many as a third of ballots cast were initially rejected by the ballot counter because the voter failed to rank three choices. When poll workers explained to the voter why the ballot was rejected, every voter either asked the poll worker to override the counter and let them cast their ballot the way they marked it or they marked the same candidate for all three choices.

Jay Bordeleau, an election inspector at Notre Dame Des Victoires in Union Square concurred.

"There are a lot of people who only mark one [candidate] or the same person three times," he said.

The ballot remaking comes at the direction of Secretary of State Debra Bowen (D) who has expressed concerns that San Francisco's ranked-choice voting (RCV) system by ES&S may not be able to read all ballots cast by voters. Ballots that don't have three choices marked for the mayor's race or are marked with an instrument other than a number 2 pencil or a pen with black or dark blue ink need to be remade.

Remaking ballots is already an accepted practice in some California counties that use the AutoMark ballot marker, said John Gideon, co-director of **VotersUnite**.

"I think that somewhere along the line, election administrators have to be trusted to do the right things and I think this is one of those cases," he said.

Since election officials aren't allowed to count ballots until they inspect the ballots and remake them if necessary, unofficial election results released Tuesday night only included the estimated 44,000 absentee ballots received before election day.

Steven Hill, director of the political reform program at the **New America Foundation**, said he also wasn't surprised by the high percentage of remade ballots. Hill worked on a study to estimate how many ballots would have to be remade in San Francisco by examining an election with similar characteristics and found that more than 60 percent of the ballots would have had to be remade in the election he studied. Hill predicted that about 70 percent of ballots cast at the polls will have to be remade.

While perhaps the most challenging and time consuming, remaking ballots is not the only challenge facing the elections department as they work in 24 hours a day to count the vote.

While San Francisco voters have used RCV before, confusion remains. "People get confused when their ballot comes back, [they ask] 'what do I do?'" Bordeleau said.

Geraldine Lum, a poll worker at Maria Manors in downtown San Francisco was careful not to tell voters how to vote.

"They know what they want, if they want to vote they'll vote but we can't tell them what to do," she said.

Voters also questioned the value of ranked-choice voting. Andraide said that when he told the voters ranked-choice voting was useful because it eliminated the need for a runoff election, voters told him there wouldn't be a runoff. "

"I guess it's useful when there's a lot of candidates," Wendy Lee, a voter from the Mission said after turning in her absentee ballot at City Hall, but "I don't want to vote for a second one, I want this one."

While he ranked three choices in the mayor's race, Allan Rosenberg, a photographer voting on Russian Hill said, "I don't find it satisfying that I have to make a second choice."

"Would you accept a second choice photograph? Why would I accept a second choice candidate?" he asked.

As confused as the vote has been, it could have been worse.

Poll workers around the city described turnout as low, which may be partly attributed to a **decrease in registered voters**.

"This is what constitutes a big rush," said Mary Dolan, a poll worker from the Tenderloin, "three people at once."

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