

S.F. ranked-choice voting slow, confusing

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(11-05) 20:28 PST -- In most cities, when the election is over the candidates hold a party. In San Francisco they hold their breath.

"I have had so many people come up to me today and say, 'I'm so sorry you lost,' " said supervisor candidate Mark Sanchez.

Actually, Sanchez hasn't lost - at least not yet.

Two days after the election, he's still locked in a close race with opponent David Campos in District Nine, which covers parts of the Mission and Bernal Heights. Because of the city's complicated ranked-choice voting procedures, in which voters pick a second and third candidate to avoid costly runoff races, election officials aren't expected to have results in some supervisor races until Friday.

Is this really the best way to run an election? Although experts say ranked-choice voting is here to stay, it has so many negatives that it is hard to believe this is the best we can do. The system encourages wheeling and dealing among candidates, allows someone who did not gain a majority of the votes in the first round to win, and doesn't create a head-to-head runoff between the two top candidates.

Besides that, it is incredibly confusing.

"It's kind of like democracy or socialism," said political strategist Alex Clemens. "In the abstract they are all perfect. In reality the complexities are burdensome."

Ranked-choice voting is one of those cutting-edge innovations that this city loves. It was national news in 2004 when San Francisco became the first major metropolis to try the concept. At the time it was suggested that it would work so well that the idea would sweep the nation. So far it has swept over to Oakland (which adopted ranked-choice procedures but didn't use them in this election) but it hasn't exactly set the country ablaze.

On Tuesday, every city voter was allowed to vote for three candidates. If no one gets a 50 percent majority of the voters' top choices, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. The second choices of voters who picked the eliminated candidate are then figured in.

Have I lost you yet?

The process continues, eliminating the lowest candidate and transferring the backup votes until someone gets 50 percent and is declared the winner.

Former Mayor Willie Brown is no fan of the procedure.

"It has clearly been designed by the left to have this very small majority win," Brown said. "I say if you're for majority rule, you're for majority rule."

Brown is among those who would like to see elections go back to the old way. If no candidate got a majority, a runoff election was held between the two top vote-getters.

Unfortunately, runoff elections had their problems, too.

"We had them in December, it was around Christmas, and nobody voted," Brown said.

A better suggestion, he thinks, is a runoff after the first of the year. That idea isn't problem-free. It means more delay and extra cost of putting on yet another election.

Brown is not impressed with that argument.

"That's BS," he said. "You can't overspend in the perfection of democracy."

In ranked-choice elections, the candidates with better name recognition often prevail in the second and third rounds of vote counting. Campos, who is currently leading Sanchez, knows his ranked-choice history. In 1984, former Supervisor Ed Jew won the election in the heavily Asian Sunset District even though he trailed Ron Dudum after the second round.

"The way we understand that experience," Campos said, "you had a non-Chinese candidate running against a Chinese candidate. We don't feel that will be the case here."

What he means is that he, Sanchez, and Eric Quezada are expected to split the Latino vote. That leaves the door open for what critics say is one of the flaws of the system - it encourages secret deal making.

"Two of the (other) candidates, Eric Storey and Tom Valtin, approached me and said they would support me with their second and third choice," Sanchez said. "And then Quezada, who is more left than Campos, said he'd support me, too. It was definitely done informally, but (ranked choice) does provide that opportunity."

So does that mean that Sanchez is poised for a come-from-behind victory? It is certainly possible. District Nine is the closest race this year, and Quezada has more than 3,000 votes that could be reassigned.

But the reality is Jew's comeback was unusual. In most situations, the person who gets the largest number of votes in the first place ends up winning.

"The reality is, in ranked-choice elections," said political consultant David Latterman, "the way to win the election is to get the most votes."

So the day after the election Sanchez was cleaning up a few things at his campaign headquarters, waiting for election officials to run through the second and third choices. Campos said he was doing pretty much the same thing - just waiting.

Would you rather see that, or a slam-bang runoff between two evenly-matched candidates in an election that really meant something?

C.W. Nevius' column runs Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. E-mail him at cwnevius@sfchronicle.com.

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