

SAN FRANCISCO

Ranked voting troublesome for Chinese

Survey finds S.F. bloc may not have understood process

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San Francisco's new ranked-choice system of electing local officeholders may have confused Chinese-speaking voters and resulted in them having less say in the election outcome, according to a voter education group.

A poll commissioned by the Chinese American Voters Education Committee found that Chinese-speaking voters reported more difficulty understanding the new ranked-choice ballots and that they more frequently than other groups failed to take advantage of the opportunity to vote for a second and third choice.

That means that if their first choice didn't win, they didn't get to weigh in further with their second and third choices being considered, said David Lee, the group's executive director.

"While some voters genuinely like this system and found it easy to use, some voters, in particular Chinese-speaking voters, had a very different experience," said Ben Tulchin of the polling firm Fairbank, Maslin, Maulin and Associates, which conducted the poll for the voter education group.

Proponents of ranked-choice voting, however, questioned the validity of the poll and the conclusions Lee is drawing from it.

"They don't know if people only ranked one candidate because that's what they wanted to do," said Steven Hill, whose Center for Voting and Democracy is a leading advocate for ranked-choice voting. "There's no evidence ... because their exit poll didn't ask why."

Hill said reports of some confusion were to be expected because the system was being used for the first time.

Still, Lee's group is using its findings in considering whether to file a voting rights lawsuit against the city or push for a repeal of ranked-choice voting. The system was approved by voters in 2002 and was used here for the first time Nov. 2 to elect seven district supervisors.

The ranked-choice voting method is designed to eliminate runoff elections, which can cost the city up to



\$3 million. The voter ranks his or her three top choices. If one candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote, he or she wins. If not, the lowest vote-getter is eliminated from the race; the second choices on those ballots are redistributed to other candidates. The process continues until one candidate wins the majority of remaining votes.

According to the poll conducted for the Chinese American Voters Education Committee, in which 2,108 voters were interviewed, 71 percent of white voters and 74 percent of Latino voters classified the voting method as easy.

"Chinese-speaking voters had many more problems with RCV voting -- only 49 percent said it was easy to use versus 39 percent said it was difficult," Tulchin said. "This difference ... was one of the starkest demographic contrasts we found in our survey and raised a flag for us."

In addition, Tulchin's survey showed that Asian voters -- of which most are Chinese American -- were more likely to vote for just one candidate when they could prioritize three choices.

The poll-takers didn't ask respondents why they chose to limit themselves to one candidate, but Lee said that -- given the finding that a number of Chinese voters considered the voting method difficult -- he suspects they didn't understand it fully.

Lee said the research also indicated that incumbents are favored to win under ranked-choice voting. Hill, however, contends that it's not the voting system that gives incumbents a leg up -- it's the sheer fact of their incumbency, with the name recognition that goes along with it.

Since there is only one Chinese American on the Board of Supervisors, Lee predicted it would be a long wait for the board to reflect the size of the Asian community in San Francisco.

Elections Director John Arntz said that since May his department has been trying to educate voters through community meetings, mailers, advertising and other methods, all in several languages -- including Chinese.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/11/11/BAG869PEDU1.DTL>

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