

VOTER EDUCATION AND OUTREACH IN SAN FRANCISCO TO IMPLEMENT INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING: A Description and Evaluation



OVERVIEW: San Francisco voters approved Proposition A in March 2002 that adopted instant runoff voting (also known as ranked choice voting) to elect local offices in San Francisco. The first election occurred in November 2004. For that election, the Board of Supervisors funded and the Department of Elections conducted a voter education and outreach campaign leading up to the first election. Approximately \$750,000 was spent by the Department of Elections to educate the 440,000 registered voters in San Francisco.

Prior to the education campaign, the Department of Elections smartly made two key decisions:

1) **Focus on voters' role.** All education and outreach material showed a visual representation of the actual ballot, so voters could learn HOW they would be voting, i.e. ranking their ballots. This reflected an emphasis on the voters' role in voting, rather than explaining how the ballots are counted or how IRV works;

2) **Concentrated outreach.** Most of the outreach, particularly mass communications methods, was concentrated in October, the final month before the election, focusing limited resources on the time period when most voters are paying attention to an upcoming election.

The following is a list of some of the key education and outreach methods that were conducted in San Francisco, as well as a brief analysis regarding effectiveness.

Direct mail, citywide. The Department of Elections sent out a mailing the size of a large postcard, in multiple languages. This mailing was sent to every registered voter and was one of the primary means for engagement. An exit poll survey showed that it reached many voters, successfully alerting voters to the fact that they would now be ranking their candidates. However, the postcard was not well-designed and hard to read, primarily because its multilingual format meant all information was repeated four times in four different languages. This made the print too small and left no room for an attractive or eye-catching design. A better approach would have been to sort the mailing by ZIP codes and surnames, mailing postcards with only two languages, one language being English, leaving more room for a better design.

Voter Information Pamphlet. The VIP, which already is mailed to all registered voters before each election, had a separate section in the front of the pamphlet that was devoted to IRV. That section highlighted how to correctly mark the ranked ballot and included a sample IRV ballot showing the exact layout of the contests and the candidates as they appeared on the Official Ballot for the election.

Bus Advertising. The Department of Elections purchased bus ads on the back of city buses. While this method increased the visibility of IRV, it had limited effectiveness because the ads were not well designed. The ads were multilingual in four different languages, all text being repeated four times, making the print as well as the headlines impossible to read unless you were standing next to the ad. The bus ads should have been mostly in English with a few slogans in other languages, with a more attractive, eye-catching design.



Community Newspapers. The Department of Elections purchased ads in community newspapers (though not in the major dailies like the San Francisco Chronicle and San Francisco Examiner, where ad rates were a lot more expensive). The community newspapers have a modest distribution, published every two weeks to every month. The ads had good visibility for an extended period of time

Public Service Announcements. The Department of Elections was successful in getting some free public-service announcements placed on various radio stations, including ethnic radio stations with ads in the correct language for each station.

Community Groups. Approximately \$225,000 was given to a dozen community organizations specifically targeting minority communities, elderly communities, young people, and those with disabilities. The grants ranged from \$10,000-\$40,000. Those community organizations used the money to hire staff and create materials to do outreach and education in their particular communities. They organized community forums and also sent speakers to the meetings of other organizations to make presentations. Although this was a much-anticipated part of the community education effort, an exit poll revealed that not a large percentage of people were educated via this method. However, the exit poll also showed that those who received education through a personal presentation had a higher level of IRV understanding. Nevertheless, the vast majority of people received their education through the various mass communications methods.

Ethnic Media. Print ads were purchased in various ethnic media newspapers and radio ads in various ethnic radio stations. The grant money was allocated to a specific organization, New California Media, who created the ads in multiple languages and

then made ad buys in many different ethnic media newspapers and radio. This was an effective use of money, and the exit poll data showed that most voters received their information from various forms of mass communication like this.

Web Site. The Department of Elections hired an outside consulting firm to create a web site, including a flash animation showing how IRV works, how the ballots are counted, and how voters cast their ballots, i.e. rank their candidates. The web site generally received praise for its presentation of material.

Brochures and posters. The Department of Elections hired an outside consulting firm to design a brochure that received high praise for its effectiveness. The brochure had a colorful presentation of the actual ballot and how voters rank their candidates. This was a two-fold brochure, with different versions in English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese and Russian. Also created were large and medium sized posters explaining how IRV works and how voters rank their ballots, and showing the actual ballot. These posters were distributed around town, especially in libraries and public buildings, and also on Election Day (see below).

ELECTION DAY: using the polling station as the final education tool

The Department of Elections smartly gave a great deal of thought to setting up the polling station so that even a voter who had heard nothing about instant runoff voting from the other pre-election methods would be able to have a successful experience. On the whole, these efforts were highly successful. Here's what was done:

Extra training for poll workers. All poll workers were given an extra hour of training specifically about IRV, how to rank the ballot, how to help voters having difficulty, how the equipment handles the ranked ballots, and how to deal with issues that might potentially arise.



IRV-specific script for poll workers.

During their training, each poll worker was instructed to recite the following script to each voter as they handed that voter their ballot cards (San Francisco uses an optical scan system where having four ballot cards per voter for all the various races and ballot propositions is not uncommon): "Your top ballot card is for the election to the Board of Supervisors. For that election, you are using ranked choice voting in which you are to rank as many candidates as you wish up to three candidates."

Making the IRV ballot stand out. The IRV ballot, which was only used for Board of Supervisors races, was printed as a slightly different color to further demarcate it as different. Also, on the optical scan ballot each column representing one ranking was a slightly different color from the other columns/rankings, giving the voter a visual cue about which ranking they were using.

Educational Posters on the walls and in the voting booth. Large posters explaining about IRV, how to rank your ballots and more were placed on the walls in every polling station. The posters were multilingual, and were designed to answer questions. A smaller version of the same poster also was placed inside each voting booth, reminding voters how to rank their ballots. Poll workers showed these posters to any voter having difficulty.

Error notification. The final "line of defense" is that all of San Francisco's optical scanning equipment has what is known as "error notification" -- if the voter makes a mistake on her or his ballot the machine buzzes as they try to put their ballot into the optical scan reader, and the scanner declines to accept the ballots. The machine then prints an error message which the poll worker reads to the voter. The error messages conveyed things like the voter did not use all of their rankings, or ranked the

same candidate more than once, or selected two candidates as their first ranking (an over-vote). The voter then had the option of correcting their ballot, even if it meant taking a new ballot, or telling the poll worker to override that and accept their ballot anyway.

OTHER PUBLIC OUTREACH EFFORTS

Free Media. The San Francisco Chronicle and the San Francisco Examiner ran a couple of articles in October (before the November election) about IRV, how it works, how you rank your ballots and some of the politics swirling around it. Some of the radio stations like KGO and KCBS, which are the two largest, plus the two NPR stations KQED and KALW, gave a bit of news coverage as well. Op-eds were published in community newspapers and online web magazines. The San Francisco Bay Guardian, an alternative weekly, covered the implementation fairly regularly. Most of this free media occurred in the month of October, right before the November election.

Political Organizations. San Francisco has a lot of political organizations and clubs who are very engaged in politics, and within those organizations there was lots of discussion about IRV. That certainly helped to create a buzz on the street. Some of them even conducted mock elections showing their voters how to rank their candidates. Some of these organizations had articles about IRV in their newsletters.

Nonprofit organizations. Other community, nonprofit organizations organized their own educational events. The Center for Voting and Democracy organized a speakers bureau with a half-dozen volunteers who made presentations to approximately 25 organizations reaching approximately 700 people, educating them about IRV, how it works, how to rank the ballot, and showing them the actual ballots.

San Francisco Youth Commission. The San Francisco Youth Commission oversees the election of a nonvoting student representative to



San Francisco's school board of education in which approximately 8000 students vote. They decided to use IRV for their October 2004 election, just a few weeks before the November election. The media covered this event, which helped alert people about the new method that was about to be used for San Francisco elections just a few weeks later.

Candidates and Campaigns. The candidates themselves had a vested interest in making sure their voters know how to vote correctly. Thus, many of the political campaigns were telling their voters, "rank me first" and a few of them even said "if I don't win, here is who to rank second," and otherwise instructed their voters about the ranked ballot.

MULTIPLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

By Election Day, given all the activities described above, the information about ranking candidates was widespread. And some of the most effective methods were by public service announcements, news articles in daily newspapers, outreach from political campaigns and political and nonprofit organizations, all of which was free.

Several exit polls revealed the effectiveness of the various educational and outreach efforts. One poll by the Public Research Institute at San Francisco State University found that 87% of voters said that they understood instant runoff voting. This high self-reporting cut across all ethnic, age and socio-economic lines. The SFSU report concluded: "The majority of voters appear to have made the transition to Ranked-Choice Voting with little problem...The overall finding on RCV is positive. Wide majorities of voters knew about Ranked-Choice Voting, understood it, and used it to rank their preferences."