# San Francisco Tomorrow
## Working to Protect the Urban Environment

# SFT Election Endorsements for November 8, 2011

In selecting candidates for Mayor of San Francisco, the SFT Board of Directors used ranked choice voting and came up with these choices:

1. **Leland Yee**        2. **John Avalos**        3. **Dennis Herrera**

*(After presenting SFT Board's recommendations on ballot issues, this entire issue of the newsletter is dedicated to an explication of Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV).  See the story starting on page two. )*

## BALLOT ISSUES:  SFT recommends

**YES on PROPOSTION A -** A follow-up to the San Francisco Unified School District approved bond measure of 2003 and 2006 for $745 million.  Prop A proposes the authorization of $531 million bond to be used to upgrade the last 50 of 140 schools in the district not covered by the previous bonds.  Homeowners will pay about $21 per $100,000 of assessed value every year until the bond is paid off.

**NO on PROPOSITION B** - This is a Road Repaving and Street Repair Bond.  SFT decided that Bonds to maintain infrastructure should be on an ongoing basis funded with a capital account set aside and not burden the taxpayers with an expensive bond measure.

**NO on PROPOSITION C -** Pension Reform.  One of the poison pills imbedded in this measure is the taking of control of the Health Service Board away from the employees who formerly had the majority say in its policies implementation. There is fear that the Board will no longer serve the very people it was set up to serve and may eventually be dismantled or cause skyrocketing medical premiums and a cut back in service.

**NO on PROPOSITION D** - Is another version of Pension Reform, put on the ballot by Jeff Adachi.  This measure fails to address the matching annuity plus interest given to the pension contributions of highly compensated employees who leave after only five years and does not address either health care programs or their escalating costs. Ed Lee, mayoral candidate and current interim mayor, has offered Police and Fire Departments a delay in the increase in contributions to the pension system should D pass, in exchange for their endorsement of his race. Thus, many of he City's highest compensated workers would b exempt from the increase pension contribution.

**NO on PROPOSITION E** -This measure would allow the Board of Supervisor to amend or repeal voter initiatives.  Why vote on an initiative either proposed by the voters or one the voters favor if, by fiat, they can be dismantled at the whim of the Board of Supervisors.

**NO on PROPOSITION F -**Campaign Consultant Ordinance.  This measure would require any consultant who has taken more than $5,000 in fees in the past 12 months to register with the Ethics Commission as a lobbyist. As the Ethics Commission currently has the power to regulate lobbyist activities, including requiring registration, it was felt this measure was completely redundant

**NO on PROPOSITION G -**SALES TAX INCREASE by 5% to fund public safety programs for children and seniors.

# Ranked-Choice Voting:  How Losers Become Winners

After nine years, most San Francisco voters still do not understand Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). In 2002, San Francisco voters passed Proposition A, a charter amendment that requires the City to use ranked choice voting to eliminate run-off elections that San Francisco had traditionally used for electing the Mayor, City Attorney, District Attorney, Public Defender, Sheriff, Assessor-Recorder, Treasurer, and Board of Supervisors.

Supporters of RCV felt it would save the City money by disposing of "costly" run-off elections which have notoriously low voter turn-out in a December run-off. Former City Controller Ed Harrington predicted at the time that San Francisco would save $1.6 million annually by using RCV.  Only then-City Supervisor Leland Yee voted against placing the RCV system on the ballot.

This is what RCV is supposed to do:  Each voter is allowed to cast a first-, second-, and third-choice vote among candidates running for office.  The votes would be counted in rounds.  If one candidate received more than 50% of the first-choice votes in the first round, then that candidate would be elected without further ado.

If no candidate received more than 50% of the first-choice votes, the candidate with the lowest number of first choice votes would be eliminated.  All the voters whose first-choice candidate was eliminated would have their second-choice vote transferred to their second-choice candidate.

As each candidate with the "fewest votes" is eliminated, their votes are to be redistributed among the remaining candidates — until one candidate receives more than 50% of the vote.  The first candidate to receive more than 50% of the vote ends up winning. The entire RCV process is explained at sfgov.org/election. After many rounds it is possible for losers to become winners.

## More confusion

The 50% vote majority that a candidate needs to win an election will NOT be 50% of the total votes cast in the election.  For example, if a total of 100,000 first-, second-, and third-place votes were cast for ten candidates, the vote total will shrink after each candidate is eliminated.  After the first five candidates are eliminated, hypothetically 10,000 first-place votes are now gone.  To win the election, a candidate will now need to win 50% of the remaining 90,000 votes.

As the RCV process continues with the elimination of more candidates and the further elimination of first-, second-, and third-place votes, the winning candidate will need 50% of a smaller and smaller pool of votes.

A smaller and smaller pool because votes (along with their failed choices) are also eliminated.

The election run-off system used before RCV was instituted came into play only if no candidate running for an office received over 50% of the vote in November.  A separate run-off election was held in December during which the candidate who received the most run-off votes won the election.  This majority-rule voting system was formerly commonly called "representative democracy," says West of Twin Peaks activist George Wooding, tongue in cheek.

Times have changed.  San Francisco's new RCV system allows a candidate with far fewer first-place votes to win an election.  Contrary to the election run-off system, the RCV system rewards the candidate who is least objectionable to voters — not always the candidate most liked.  Candidates who receive the most first-place votes in the first round often no longer win elections.  Some refer to this new system as "settling for the lowest common denominator."

## What happened?

In November 2000, San Francisco voters approved Proposition O, the Fair Elections Ordinance, by 52%. Among other things, Proposition O allowed partial public funding for Board of Supervisor candidates.  If a candidate qualified for, and accepted, public funds, they had to stay in the race to the end, or had to pay back public funding they had received.  The availability and acceptance of public funding means that larger numbers of candidates now run for elected political office.  If several viable candidates run, a single candidate will seldom receive over 50% of the vote during the first round of RCV.

If one candidate does not win an election with 50% of first-place votes, the RCV's lowest common denominator system favors the candidate who can "race to the bottom" faster than their competitors.

For example, newly-elected District 10 Supervisor Malia Cohen won by receiving only 11.7% of first-place votes cast in her district.  After *19 rounds* of ballot counting, she finally received 51% of the remaining votes by tallying 2,878 total votes.  Less than 50% of District 10 voters even voted for Cohen.  Cohen won because she was the best at attracting second- and third-place votes of candidates who were eliminated.  Is this representative democracy?

 Under the old run-off system, Cohen would have been eliminated immediately, because she only had enough votes to be in fourth place out of 21 candidates.

# THE RULES:

**Here are the RCV election rules that San Francisco voters need to understand:**
- **If you select the same candidate three times, only the first-choice vote will count;**
- **Always use all three of your votes;**
- **If you only vote one time and your candidate is eliminated, your vote is eliminated;**
- **If you vote more than three times, none of your ballot counts;**
- **Your second-choice vote will count only if your first-choice candidate has been eliminated;**
- **Your third-choice vote will count only if BOTH your first- and second-choices have been eliminated.**

## Conformity = Winning

The new voting reality of RCV has changed the formula for winning elections by turning losers into winners.

Under the run-off system, politicians were rewarded by taking unique stands and developing innovative solutions to problems. Politicians tried to develop unique voting blocks of support to win elections.

Now, under RCV, politicians win elections by spending private and public money, building name recognition, and conforming on issues. If you want to attract your competitors' voters you need to have: 1) Some Mayoral job qualifications, 2) Name recognition, 3) The ability to raise public/private money, 4) Non-controversial positions, 5) The same positions on issues as your competitors, and 6) No qualms about pandering to the same voters as your competitors.

With no clear front-runner and a crowded field of candidates, it could be said that the RCV system rewards chameleons and sheep, not wolves.

***Mayoral Candidate Dennis Herrera, City Attorney***
says, "On balance, I prefer the traditional runoff system for citywide elections. But, like most San Franciscans (and perhaps more than most San Franciscans, admittedly) I'm keeping an open mind to see how RCV works in the current election. This competitive mayoral election is likely to have a decisive influence on how San Franciscans view ranked-choice voting going forward. As a voter-approved scheme, the decision about whether to continue with it or not belongs, ultimately, to them.

"I'll concede that there are pluses and minuses to RCV, and that it does encourage some coalition building," says Herrera. "Unfortunately, it has also discouraged many candidates from staking out tough stands on issues, or moving beyond empty platitudes to address the serious challenges San Francisco faces."

On February 8, 2006, the Board of Supervisors passed Ordinance file number 051439, and amended the existing campaign and government conduct code to establish public funding for Mayoral Elections. The Ordinance was passed, according to Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi to "ward off the interests of big money and special interests." In reality, Ordinance 051439 should have been submitted to *voters* during an election, since it was conceptually identical to 2000's Measure O.

The RCV process was not needed in 2007 when Gavin Newsom won re-election with 72% of the vote against 13 other candidates. The current RCV race for Mayor may well cost citizens between $8.5 million and $11.0 million, and some of the votes for less-popular candidates may end-up costing taxpayers over $100 per vote.

The lethal combination of receiving public funds to run for election and the uncertainty of RCV means that several candidates will now run for each elective office. These are the current 16 candidates running for Mayor: Jeff Adachi, Michela Alioto-Pier, Cesar Ascarrunz, John Avalos, Terry Baum, David Chiu, Paul Currier, Bevan Dufty, Tony Hall, Dennis Herrera, Emil Lawrence, Ed Lee, Wilma Pang, Joanna Rees, Phil Ting, and Leland Yee.

***Mayoral Candidate Leland Yee, State Senator,*** says "While I have not always felt Ranked Choice Voting is the best way to conduct elections, it is the system San Francisco voters approved and thus I will work to ensure as many 1st, 2nd, and 3rd choice votes as possible (for my candidacy)."

In Oakland's first ever RCV contest for mayor, candidate Don Perata received 35% of first-place votes, while Jean Quan received 24% of first-place votes, in a ten-candidate field. Quan teamed with third-place candidate Rebecca Kaplan to wage an "anybody but Perata" campaign with their respective supporters. With seven candidates eliminated, Quan had 31% of the vote and Perata had 40% of the vote. When Kaplan was eliminated, over 75% of her 20,000 votes went to Jean Quan, and Quan won the Oakland Mayoral election. This November's Mayoral race is San Francisco's first RCV election for mayor and the specter of the Don Perata / Jean Quan Mayoral race hangs heavily over a crowded field.

San Francisco's mayoral race is heading for a perfect storm of "consensus building, mediocrity, and horse trading." A recent poll of 700 likely voters conducted by the Beneson Strategy Group and commissioned by interim mayor Ed Lee shows that Lee will receive only 31% of the first place votes. This is bad news as Lee's first-place vote count may actually be under 30%. After watching what happened to Don Perata with 35% of the actual first-place votes, you know that selected candidates must be considering an "Anybody But Ed Lee" option.

***Mayoral Candidate/Supervisor John Avalos*** says of his campaign for mayor: "We have not used public financing dollars to hire consultants or strategists, and we aren't enriching any pollsters. My campaign has been funded almost entirely by San Franciscans. We have a team of neighborhood activists in the progressive community to turn out the vote. But our fundraising dollars are obviously a fraction of what some of these other campaigns, with their paid fundraisers are able to pull in.

"I have no qualms about talking about the real issues," Avalos continues. "I have enough faith in the voters in this City to believe that they will vote for me for first, second and third under the RCV process precisely because I have talked about real issues and real ideas. Regardless of how the math works, I have faith that the big ideas will win out."

Yet, rather than seizing the initiative with the public and being bold, most of the front-running candidates are too afraid of offending one another' voters, for fear that they may not receive the other candidates' second- and third-place votes when candidates start being eliminated.

But in most cases, the real RCV election winners are the candidate's campaign managers, strategists and pollsters, as there has never been more private and public money available, or greater demand for their services by so many candidates.

The Mayoral candidates who have accepted public money and have no real chance of winning must also keep campaigning. If they quit the race they have to pay back the public funds they have received.

Losing candidates now have an opportunity to "shop" their votes to more viable candidates for future jobs and appointments. Think carefully if your first-place vote candidate starts requesting that votes go to a specific candidate. It will be interesting to see which candidates "lose" the mayoral election, but receive well-paying jobs in the next City Hall administration.

"Now that a candidate who represents only a small fraction of City voters is capable of becoming mayor," says George Wooding. "we voters must be very wise with all three of our votes. "Vote for the three mayoral candidates who represent your interests and points-of-view. It is our responsibility to understand the vagaries of San Francisco's Ranked Choice Voting system."

Meanwhile, Supervisor Sean Elsbernd has promised to introduce legislation that would rescind RCV, after this election is concluded.

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