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New Runoff System in San Francisco Has the Rival Candidates Cooperating

By Dean E. Murphy

Eugene C. Wong is running for an office that typically does not draw the national spotlight. Yet Mr. Wong and the 64 others seeking seats on the County Board of Supervisors here are being closely watched by advocates for election reform around the country.

In Mr. Wong's case, the reason was evident on Wednesday, at one of his first big fund-raisers in the third district, an ethnically mixed area that straddles North Beach and Chinatown. The evening was unconventional, to say the least, with Mr. Wong sharing top billing with two principal rivals in the race, Sal Busalacchi and Brian Murphy O'Flynn.

"We are going to have more joint fund-raisers," Mr. Wong said. "I am not opposed to saying that if I don't win, then I hope one of these other guys wins."

The cooperation is in response to a new election system, instant-runoff voting. The system, which voters approved in 2002 and is having its first run, is viewed by critics of winner-take-all elections as the start of a long-overdue overhaul of the way Americans choose elected officials.

Under this system, voters can choose three candidates for each office, ranking them in order of preference. If no candidate wins more than 50 percent of the first-choice votes, the lowest-placing finishers are eliminated, and the second and, if necessary, third choices on those ballots are counted until someone garners a majority.

The system removes the need for a separate runoff election, saving money and, if the recent past is a guide, increasing the number of voters who have a say in choosing the winner. Under the old system, turnout usually dropped significantly in runoffs.

"People are hungry for change," said Lani Guinier, a professor of law at Harvard who has written about alternative election systems and is among those closely watching the San Francisco example.

"There is a simmering dissatisfaction with not only what happened in Florida in 2000," Professor Guinier said, "but with some of the responses that the election officials, Congress and others have implemented, and a sense that if the voters and citizens want to participate in our democracy, the voters and citizens have to take the initiative."

Critics of **instant runoffs** fear it is too difficult to pull off, for voters and election officials, and that it could reduce turnout among some minorities, especially those who speak English poorly and are new to voting. Some critics have also questioned whether it might violate the principle of "one man, one vote" that the Supreme Court established in 1964.

Even some supporters of the system acknowledge that its logistics can be daunting. It took San Francisco more than two years to use the system, a process that included making changes to its optical-scan voting machines that required the approval of the secretary of state. The changes were too late for the elections last year for mayor and district attorney.

Because of the complicated counting, experts expect that just first-choice results will be available on election night, leading some critics to complain that the "instant" is being taken out of **instant-runoff** voting.

"It will be a negative," said Lillian Sing, a former judge who is among six candidates challenging Supervisor Jake McGoldrick in District 1, in the Richmond area. "We are just beginning to get language minorities to vote more, and now all of a sudden we have this complicated process. It is a distraction to talk about how people should vote."

San Francisco is the first major city in the country to try **instant-runoff** voting since the 1970's, when Ann Arbor, Mich., abandoned it after one election. Variations of the system exist in a few places, including Cambridge, Mass., where the City Council and school board are elected by proportional representation, which includes ranked-choice voting.

Until they were abolished by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, the community school boards in New York allowed voters to rank candidates. Student governments at dozens of colleges and universities also use versions of the system.

But San Francisco is the sole major jurisdiction to incorporate what advocates of **instant-runoff** voting consider three essential components for its success, ranked-choice ballots, a single election and the requirement that each winner receive a majority of the votes cast.

"San Francisco is being seen as a very good test," said Robert Richie, executive director of the Center for Voting and Democracy, an organization in Takoma Park, Md., that advocates changes in election laws.

The center, founded by a former independent presidential candidate, John B. Anderson, was a leading force behind the 2002 ballot measure here.

Mr. Richie and other supporters of a broader push for **instant runoffs** see past San Francisco to places like Florida. If Florida had the system for the 2000 election, proponents say, there is little doubt that Al Gore would have won the state instead of George W. Bush. Most of the people who voted for Ralph Nader, the logic goes, would have listed a Democrat as their second choice.

"I am not going to hide the fact that if you look at it, there is analysis to show it could help the Democrats," said Thomas D. Bull, a Democratic state representative in Maine who sponsored a measure there in the spring to instruct the secretary of state to study **instant runoffs**.

A tally kept by the Center for Voting and Democracy shows that Maine is among 22 states that have explored the idea in recent years.

"There are also examples of where it might have helped the Republicans," Mr. Bull added. "If you look at the Libertarians and along that line, there are conservative third-party candidates siphoning off Republican votes."

Professor Guinier said the voting system favored outsiders, no matter their politics or party registration. That is also the belief of Jim Stearns, a Democratic consultant here who opposed the ballot measure because, he said, he feared that **instant runoffs** would hurt so-called progressive politicians who have become the insiders on the officially nonpartisan Board of Supervisors.

"The irony of a lot of progressive reforms is that the system becomes legally more complicated and electorally more complicated, meaning those candidates who can afford high-quality help are going to be benefited," said Mr. Stearns, who is now running the re-election campaigns of three incumbent supervisors.

An early effect has been to introduce a new civility among the candidates, something many San Franciscans have wholeheartedly embraced. Because the winner in each district might be determined by voters' second and third choices, candidates have quickly learned that it is best to be on friendly terms so as not to alienate their opponents' supporters.

"Even if you come in second among the first-choice votes, you still have a shot at winning, so long as you can reach out to be the No. 2 choice to the rest of the people," said Mr. Wong, an immigration lawyer.

In District 5, Supervisor Matt Gonzalez, a big backer of **instant runoffs** in 2002, is not seeking re-election, creating the biggest free-for-all of the season. Many of the 22 candidates vying for his post participate in a so-called Candidates Collaborative, meeting publicly every few weeks to discuss district problems. The setting is decidedly congenial.

One candidate, Michael O'Connor, a nightclub owner, said the consensus among most candidates was that opting out of the collaborative would be political suicide in the new get-along environment. Last month, Mr. O'Connor also held a joint fundraiser with a rival, Robert Haaland.

"The way I see how it works," Mr. O'Connor said, "win or lose, you may as well get along with people."