

Ranked Choice Voting – Karen Butter

Should the Alameda City Charter be amended to add an option for Ranked Choice Voting for single winner offices when there are two or more candidates running for office?

In our current system, called plurality voting, each voter is allowed one vote for a candidate. The candidate with the most votes wins. This works well for races with only two candidates because one of them is guaranteed to win with majority support. But three or four-way races among competitive candidates are common and lead to results where the winner fails to receive majority vote. Another concern mentioned with plurality voting is that it does not encourage those with minority opinions to participate but rather discourages them by excluding them from gaining any representation.

Ranked Choice Voting can be used with either a single winner race or a multi winner race. A single winner race is a Mayoral race while a multi winner race is with City Council. In a single winner Mayoral race with five candidates, voters would rank as many candidates in order of choice. First choices are counted and if no candidate has the majority of the vote then a runoff occurs in which the candidate with the least support is eliminated. Voters who picked the eliminated candidate as their first choice have their vote counted for their next choice. In a three-person race, a winner emerges with majority support in the final round of tabulation. In a race with more than 3 candidates, this process is repeated until one candidate has a majority. When used with a single candidate such as a Mayoral or Governor race, Ranked Choice Voting helps reflect a candidate that better reflects the support of the majority of the voters.

In a recent Bay Area study, Ranked Choice Voting is one of the three structural reforms that would have the greatest impact on US democracy and help elect more people of color. The Alameda County Registrar of Voters has authorized Ranked Choice Voting in most offices in Berkeley, Oakland and San Leandro. One current limitation is that Alameda County limits the choices to three.

The pros is that discourages negative campaigning, reduces the effects of money in politics and provides more choice for voters, rewards candidates who have more support and it potentially eliminates the need for a primary or runoff election. The cons are that it is new and may be misunderstood by some voters and requires educating the voters and ballots and the counting of ballots may be more expensive and ballot counting may be delayed. It could result in sore losers where a candidate with high visibility is defeated by a candidate with a broader base of support. Another con is that there will be an additional cost for the Alameda County Registrar of Voters.