

Ranked Choice Voting and Racial Group Turnout: Methodological Flaws Skew Recent Study on RCV

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In the recent journal article “Writing the Rules to Rank the Candidates: Examining the Impact of Instant Runoff Voting on Racial Group Turnout in San Francisco Elections,” Professor Jason McDaniel of San Francisco State University argues that the adoption of ranked choice voting (RCV) in San Francisco mayoral elections has been associated with lower turnout among white voters and African Americans, as well as younger voters and voters with lower levels of educational attainment.¹ This conclusion is based on an examination of five mayoral elections: three non-RCV elections that were decided in runoffs and two RCV elections in which incumbent mayors won by wide margins. McDaniel does not examine the other 51 RCV elections that took place in the city in 2004-2014, nor does he study any other cities and their voter turnout trends in mayoral elections.

Because these findings run counter to much of the existing research on RCV, it is necessary to give this new study careful consideration. We find that omissions and inconsistencies in the construction of the study’s model are likely to have erroneously shifted attribution for declines in turnout among certain demographic groups to RCV, as more likely explanations are left unaccounted for.

Ranked Choice Voting, Racial Minorities, and Voter Turnout

Many American cities recently adopting RCV have experienced significant increases in racial minority representation. [In 2013](#), for example, Minneapolis, MN elected its first-ever Latino, Somali and Hmong American city council members, and St. Paul, MN elected its first Hmong American city councilor. San Francisco’s RCV elections have been consistent with this trend: today, sixteen of the eighteen offices the city elects with RCV are held by people of color, up from nine when elections were held without RCV.

A [recent study](#) of the impact of RCV in San Francisco elections by Denise Munro Robb found that the system has resulted in “increasing minority representation and greater participation rates at the ballot box,” particularly in contrast with the low turnout runoff elections previously held for the Board of Supervisors.² By eliminating runoffs, RCV ensures that all races are decided in the November election, when turnout is at its highest. RCV elections in Oakland find similarly encouraging outcomes.³

These results are consistent with past research on the impact of RCV in American cities. A [2008 study](#) by FairVote and the New America Foundation found that racial minority voters have consistently made effective use of RCV ballots. A [2014 study](#) from the Eagleton Poll at Rutgers University found that 90% of African American voters in RCV cities reported that understanding ballot instructions was easy, compared to just 65% in cities using plurality voting.⁴ The same study also found that the number of voters reporting that they understood RCV was actually highest among those without a college education, and that middle-aged voters were more likely to report understanding the system than older voters. Finally, a 2014 study by David Kimball of the University of Missouri – St. Louis [found](#) that the adoption of RCV was associated with a 10 point increase in the turnout over primary and runoff elections, and did not exacerbate inequities in voter turnout.

Other research on RCV contradicts the study’s assertions about voter error and discomfort with RCV. For example, the number of Bay Area voters participating in elections for president and governor that skip local elections further down the ballot – the “undervote” – has not risen since those races began using RCV.⁵ Furthermore, the overvote errors discussed in “Writing the Rules” are more closely correlated with the number of candidates in a race than with RCV. As one example, California’s U.S. Senate primary in June 2012 had 24 candidates, and the overvote rate in San Francisco was more than five times the

rate it was in the 2011 RCV mayoral race with 16 candidates; the rate of overvote in Oakland in that election was more than ten times the rate of its 2010 RCV mayoral race with 10 candidates.

The inconsistency of McDaniel's study with this body of research calls for a closer examination of its methodology.

Serious Flaws in Model Design Cast Doubt on Findings

The most provocative conclusions of "Writing the Rules to Rank the Candidates" associate the adoption of ranked choice voting with sharp declines in turnout among African American voters, White voters, and voters with lower levels of education. At the same time, McDaniel also finds that there was not a decline in turnout among Latino or Asian American voters associated with RCV, and that RCV elections showed a significant *decrease* in the turnout disparities related to income.

These contradictory conclusions conflict with previous research on RCV, and raise questions about study. McDaniel's model takes into account only three election-level control variables: public financing, the presence of an incumbent, and the presence of a viable in-group candidate for the major ethnic groups that make up the San Francisco electorate. Dubious assumptions that underlie two of these variables and the omission of a measure of electoral competitiveness from the model mean that the most logical and likely explanations for shifts in turnout were missed, with much of the blame falling to the change in electoral system as a result.

Omission of competitiveness

The most serious flaw in the study's model is the omission of competitiveness as a control variable. Turnout is generally higher in elections that are competitive. This is especially true in odd-year elections like San Francisco's, when the lack of simultaneous federal or state-wide elections means that the Mayoral race is the most significant contest on the ballot.

The first three of the five elections in the sample were competitive enough to trigger a runoff. However, the city's first RCV election, in 2007, was wholly uncompetitive. Incumbent mayor Gavin Newsom faced no serious challengers and received 74% of the vote, with the next-highest finisher earning only 6%. The two other citywide races in 2007 were also not competitive; one was uncontested and the other was won by a margin of 47%.

Unsurprisingly, turnout among the white and African American voters who together represent a majority of the city's population declined significantly in the absence of meaningful competition. However, since the model does not take into account any measure of the elections' competitiveness, and the presence of "in-group" candidates for white voters and African Americans was constant between the 2003 and 2007 elections, much of the dramatic decline in turnout among these groups is attributed to the use of ranked choice voting, when the fact that the election was little more than a formality is a far likelier explanation.

The other RCV election in the sample, from 2011, was also never in serious doubt. Popular incumbent Mayor Ed Lee (who was appointed after Newsom's resignation in January 2011) held a massive lead in the polls, with first choice support more than three times greater than that of any of his challengers in every poll taken within three months of Election Day.⁶ While several well-funded candidates ran against

Lee, the only real controversy in his campaign was his breaking of a promise not to run after his performance as mayor was met with wide approval.

With little reason to believe that the outcome of the election was in doubt, and no white or African American candidates among the top six finishers, turnout among white and African American voters remained depressed in 2011. But, without any measure of the election's competitiveness included in the model, the blame for this outcome was again attributed in large part to the use of RCV to decide the winner.

Lee not recognized as incumbent

As the presence of a popular incumbent is associated with less competitive elections, McDaniel's use of incumbency as a control variable could have served as a rough proxy for measuring electoral competition. However, this potential was negated by the choice not to classify Ed Lee as an incumbent in the 2011 election. Although Lee had been in office for ten months, had an approval rating of 78%, and was the first Asian American mayor in a city in which Asian Americans make up over one third of the population, the model treats the election as if it were an open-set contest—a level playing field without any candidates that enjoyed the benefit of political networks and name recognition that come with incumbency.

McDaniel explains his decision to classify the election as an open seat contest by arguing that before Lee announced he would run, several high-quality candidates had already entered the race based on the assumption that Lee would step down, and that Lee “lacked experience and skill as a campaigner.” However, these conditions do not change the fact that by the time his campaign began, Lee was in fact, a popular and well-known incumbent with a significant lead in the polls.

Like the omission of a measure of competition, the decision to code the 2011 contest as an open-seat race shifts undeserved blame for the decline in turnout among white and African American voters on to the use of ranked choice voting, as the statistical model entirely ignores the fact that both RCV mayoral elections in San Francisco were dominated by popular incumbents whose momentum going into the election left voters with little reason to believe that their participation would be decisive.

Oversimplified view of “in-group” candidates and racialized politics

Another of the three control variables – the presence of “in-group” candidates – is based on two tenuous assumptions and a simplistic view of the role of race in San Francisco politics. Like the flaws discussed above, these choices about the model's construction again skew the results of the analysis against ranked choice voting.

First, the model controls for the ethnicity of “viable” candidates, based on an assumption that voters will be motivated to turnout to vote for candidates that share their background. While it is true that voters are generally inclined to support candidates that they see as representing their community, assuming that a candidate's ethnicity will be the dominant factor in voters' decisions is an oversimplification that underestimates the ability of voters to make informed choices particularly in the context of San Francisco politics.

For example, in the 2003 mayoral election, Gavin Newsom is coded as a white in-group candidate, despite the fact that he likely lost the white vote to the Hispanic in-group candidate, Matt Gonzalez,

whose Green Party platform was more in line with the highly progressive views of the city's white voters. Meanwhile, Newsom, a relatively moderate Democrat, edged out a victory that was based in large part on very strong support from Asian American voters, who clearly saw him as a candidate that represented their interests.⁷ In light of results like these, the practice of controlling for the presence of in-group candidates using only their ethnicity appears highly suspect, as San Francisco voters have clearly demonstrated that they possess the sophistication necessary to base their votes on candidates' positions, rather than their skin color.

Again, this element of the model results in blame for declining turnout, this time among whites, being shifted to the use of RCV as other, more likely explanations are ignored. In the first RCV election in 2007, Gavin Newsom is again listed as an in-group candidate for white voters, despite the fact that white voters had preferred his opponent in the previous election. As white voters failed to turn out in strong numbers, the classification of Newsom as a white in-group candidate combined with the model's ignorance of the utter lack of competitiveness in the election led to the decline being attributed largely to the use of RCV. The ambivalence of white voters towards Newsom and the fact that the election was never in doubt offer far likelier explanations.

Similarly, the failure to account for Asian American voters' strong support of Newsom led the rise in the group's turnout in 2007 to be dubiously attributed to the fact that there was an incumbent in the election, while the group's affinity for Newsom and other candidates in elections with incumbents is a more natural explanation. The model associates the presence of an incumbent with a 15 percentage point increase in the level of Asian American turnout, even though this runs against understandings of the effects of incumbency.

Inconsistencies in the Model Consistently Disadvantage RCV

The chart and table below, taken from McDaniel's paper, illustrate the way the flaws described above each shift blame for the decline in turnout among black and white voters to RCV, by ignoring more likely explanations. Each removes a variable that would have been constant between the RCV elections in 2007 and 2011, leaving RCV as the only consistency. As a result, the blame for the consistently depressed black and white voter turnout is largely attributed to the change in electoral system.

Table 1 – From “Writing the Rules to Rank the Candidates”

Changing Electoral Rules and Candidate Characteristics in San Francisco Mayoral Elections 1995–2011					
	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011
Instant-runoff voting				X	X
Incumbent	X	X		X	
Asian candidate					X
Black candidate	X	X			
Latino candidate			X		X
White candidate	X	X	X	X	
Public finance					X

Figure 1 – From “Writing the Rules to Rank the Candidates”

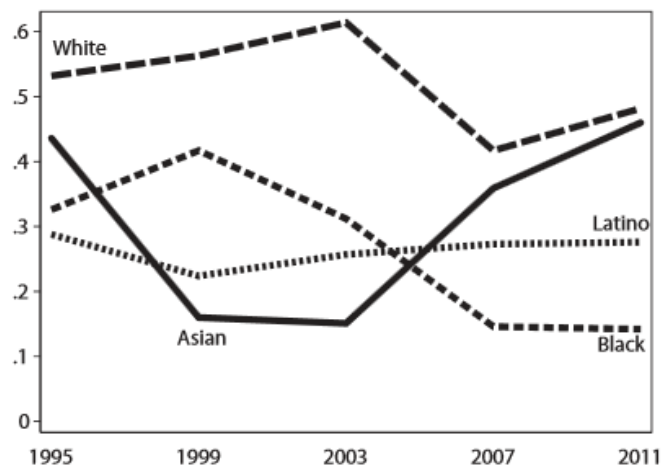


FIGURE 1

Average Voter Turnout by Racial Group for the Five San Francisco Mayoral Elections 1995–2011.

Note: Turnout as proportion of group citizen voting age population estimated at the precinct-level with a geographically weighted ecological inference model.

In reality, the decline in black and white turnout in 2007 very likely results from the fact that each election was uncompetitive, a factor that the model does not account for. Meanwhile, the labeling of Newsom as an in-group candidate for white voters negates an alternative explanation for their declining turnout, and obscures an explanation for the rise in Asian American turnout, as Newsom was most popular among Asian voters, while white voters were more ambivalent. With a more nuanced measure, Newsom would not be seen as a white “in-group” candidate, adding another variable that would be constant across RCV elections and would thus help to explain the lower turnout among white voters in these contests. And finally, the questionable classification of the 2011 election as an open seat removed another constant between the RCV elections, ignoring the fact that each race included an incumbent, and was therefore likely to be less competitive, and draw fewer voters to the polls.

Given the doubts cast by these inconsistencies, the conclusions of the study associating RCV with a decline in turnout among younger and less educated voters should also be called into question. It is entirely plausible, for example, that younger voters or voters with less education are more sensitive to electoral competition when deciding if they should participate in the election, and that by ignoring competition, the study ignored the true explanation for these trends. After all, the study also found that RCV was associated with a weakening in the relationship between voter turnout and income levels, a finding that seems to contradict many of its other conclusions.

The Study in Context

It should be noted that, while RCV has been used in numerous elections for many offices in cities throughout the Bay Area, McDaniel’s paper draws conclusions about the system from an analysis of elections for one office in one city, only two of which occurred after the adoptions of RCV. San Francisco’s mayoral elections are the only contests in which a primary benefit of RCV is not applicable,

as it is the only race in which turnout in the now eliminated runoff election was consistently comparable to turnout in the first round. For other offices, runoff elections generally meant that a much smaller group of voters would participate in the decisive contest. By limiting the election to one round, RCV maximizes the number of voters who participate in the decisive election. McDaniel's study thus overlooks the many non-mayoral runoffs that, held previous to implementation of RCV, resulted in large declines in voter turnout.

As an example of the value of considering non-mayoral elections in San Francisco, Dr. Christopher Jerdonek, now president of the San Francisco Elections Commission, studied the use of ranked choice voting (RCV) in San Francisco's November 2005 election and concluded that RCV increased voter participation in the decisive round of the Assessor-Recorder race by 2.7 times. His analysis showed that six out of twenty-five neighborhoods in San Francisco experienced an estimated tripling or greater of turnout after the adoption of RCV, with most of these neighborhoods "among the poorest and most racially diverse in San Francisco."⁸

The study also examines San Francisco in isolation without accounting for downward trends in voter turnout in California, and across the country. California experienced the nation's largest decline in turnout between the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections. Despite these trends, a 2014 analysis found that turnout in San Francisco's 2011 mayoral election was the second highest among the nation's 22 largest cities, even in the absence of strong competitiveness.

Improving Ranked Choice Voting

To be sure, RCV's implementation in San Francisco can be improved. For example, voters should be able to rank more than three candidates, as a majority of voters are clearly ready to do in high-profile elections. The ballot design should be clearer, with candidates listed only once and columns to indicate rankings positioned closer to each other – both changes that have already been implemented in cities with better voting equipment. Improved voter education efforts should focus on the reasons voters may want to rank candidates, not just on how to do so.

Conclusion

Isolating the sources of fluctuations in turnout is difficult in light of the multitude of variables at play, especially when looking at only five elections for a single office in a single city. But it is especially dubious when several of the most important variables are omitted, or evaluated inconsistently. In "Writing the Rules to Rank the Candidates," these omissions and inconsistencies cast serious doubts over the validity of the study's findings, especially as they run counter to previous work on RCV. The study's flaws also explain the counter-intuitive nature of many of the conclusions, like the finding that RCV depresses turnout of the young and less educated, while simultaneously reducing the overrepresentation of the wealthy in the electorate. As for the findings on the relationship between turnout and ethnicity, by what mechanisms could RCV be responsible for the very large (18 and 16 percentage point) declines in participation of white and black voters, while turnout among Asian Americans and Latinos remained unchanged? It is clear that there are other factors at play. These findings seem more farfetched than the alternative hypothesis: that the data are too noisy and the model too simple for the findings to be meaningful.

It should be emphasized that ranked choice voting, just like every other voting method, is not perfect. The means through which RCV is administered in San Francisco should be improved. But, to dismiss RCV based on a single, flawed study is a mistake. We urge Professor McDaniel and other scholars to continue to study the effects of RCV, and to engage with the more nuanced operation of RCV in San Francisco.

¹ McDaniel, J. A. (2015). "Writing the Rules to Rank the Candidates: Examining the Impact of Instant Runoff Voting on Racial Group Turnout in San Francisco Mayoral Elections." *Journal of Urban Affairs*.

² Robb, D. M. (2011). "The Effect of Instant Runoff Voting on Democracy." University of California, Irvine.

³ After implementing ranked choice voting for the first time in 2010, Oakland (CA) elected its first female and first Asian American mayor; of Oakland's 18 offices elected by RCV, all but two were won with more votes than in the preceding non-RCV election.

⁴ John, Sarah; and Tolbert, Caroline. Socioeconomic and Demographic Perspectives on Ranked Choice Voting in the Bay Area. 2014. <http://www.fairvote.org/assets/RCV-Civility-Project/Socioeconomic-and-Demographic-Perspectives-on-Ranked-Choice-Voting-in-the-Bay-Area-April-15.pdf>

⁵ Hanson-Metayer, Eli, and Rob Richie, "Voter Error in Top Two Primary Can Be Far Higher than in RCV Races", 8/12/14, <http://www.fairvote.org/research-and-analysis/blog/voter-error-in-top-two-primary-can-be-far-higher-than-in-rcv-races/>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Francisco_mayoral_election,_2011#Polling

⁷ Romney, Lee. The Los Angeles Times. "Chinese Americans Emerge as Political Power in S.F." 2/1/2004

⁸ Jerdonek, Christopher, "Ranked Choice Voting and Voter Turnout in San Francisco's 2005 Election", self-published, February 2006 http://archive.fairvote.org/rcv/brochures/SF_Research_IRV_and_Turnout.pdf



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