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# SF to upgrade voting machines, but keeps eye on developing an open-source system



Nick Coudsy with Dominion Voting Systems demonstrates one of the new machines S.F plans to adopt, which allows people to rank up to 10 candidates in ranked-choice voting contests (Kevin N. Hume/S.F. Examiner)

By Joshua Sabatini on March 7, 2019 1:00 am

New voting machines will allow voters to pick up to 10 candidates in ranked choice contests this November including the mayor's race.

While San Francisco continues to develop plans for an open source voting system, city supervisors are expected to approve a new contract next week for machines from Dominion Voting Systems that come with some new features.

Instead of being able to rank three candidates in ranked choice voting contests, as they have been able to do since 2004, city voters will now have the opportunity to rank up to ten.

The new system will be in place in time for this November's election when Mayor London Breed is up for re-election — although it doesn't appear she faces a competitive race. There is a competitive District Attorney's contest with an open seat.

The Board of Supervisors Budget and Finance Committee on Wednesday approved the proposed four-year contract with Dominion Voting Systems with two one-year options. It costs $2.1 million a year.

The full board is expected to vote on the contract next week.

John Arntz, director of the Department of Elections, said it was an intentionally "very short" agreement to allow for switching to an open source voting system in four years. He also noted the contract allows The City to terminate the agreement earlier if an open source voting system is certified by the secretary of state for use before then.

The Department of Technology is taking the lead on developing an open source voting system which supporters say would bring more transparency and cost-savings by allowing the public access to the software and ending a reliance on a few voting machine companies.

The ballots will also come with what's described as a more user-friendly format. In a left column the list of the candidates will appear. Then in rows are ovals to fill out in columns for first choice, then second choice and so on. Gone is the "complete-the-arrow" format of past elections.

Supporters of ranked-choice voting welcome the ability to to rank up to 10 candidates. When given the choice to rank more candidates many voters will, judging by the Santa Fe 2018 mayoral contest when 60 percent of voters ranked all five candidates.

Steven Hill, known as the architect of the ranked choice voting, said the charter amendment creating ranked choice voting called for the ranking of at least three candidates.

Hill said the ability to rank more is something "we've been wanting for 15 years."

"It's not John Artnz' fault. It's those crummy vendors," Hill added.

Ranked choice voting allows a voter to rank a candidate in the order of their preference. The candidate who first receives more than 50 percent of the votes prevails. If a candidate doesn't receive more than 50 percent of the first choice votes, then the candidates with the least votes are eliminated in rounds

and voters who picked them first have their second and third choices factored in until a candidate receives the more than 50 percent threshold.

Hill noted that some of the recent criticism about the system is that not every voter may have the opportunity to cast a vote for the winner of an election. By opening up the ranking to up to 10 "that will no longer be a sticking point," Hill said.

But just giving more choices doesn't mean everyone will use them. Take the last mayoral race.

Pedro Hernandez, of FairVote California, a group that supports ranked choice voting, analyzed data from the Department of Elections along with Hill for the June 2018 mayoral race and found that 8.6 percent, or 21,510 voters, had a ballot that was not counted in the final round where Breed and challenger Mark Leno were the two finalists. Of these "exhausted" ballots, 8,181 used all three choices but didn't pick Leno or Breed among their three choices while 13,329, were "exhausted" because they did not use all three of the rankings.

Christopher Jerdonek, a member of the Elections Commission and an advocate for open source voting, said he supports the Dominion contract because it allows an early termination "when the open source voting system is ready and gives us a better system in the meantime."

He noted that the additional rankings of candidates "gives voters more expressive power and brings the system in line with the city's charter and other jurisdiction like Santa Fe and Cambridge, MA" and "addresses a criticism that some people leveled when more candidates are running."

jsabatini@sfexaminer.com