

The Real Story on Ranked Choice Voting in Oakland's Mayoral Election, 2010

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Media Advisory

On November 11, Don Perata held a news conference to announce that he was conceding the election for mayor of Oakland. At the same time, he criticized ranked choice voting used in this election, and his campaign distributed a document called "Ranked Choice Voting in Oakland's Mayoral Election, 2010: Internal analysis by the Perata for Mayor Campaign, with external assistance." FairVote, a non-profit organization that includes ranked choice voting among its research interests and reform priorities, developed the following response.

Perata Campaign Claim: "Don Perata beat Jean Quan by over 11,000 first choice votes citywide. This would be a landslide in any other voting format."

Fact: Don Perata won 33.7% of first choices. This means that two-thirds of Oakland voters voted for another candidate and rejected Perata as a first choice. Perata's share of the vote would not be a landslide in *any* format. Before ranked choice voting was adopted in Oakland, Perata would have faced off against Jean Quan in a runoff, given that she finished second in first choices with 24.5%. But RCV allowed a comparison between Perata and Quan in one election. In this one-on-one comparison, Quan wins a majority over Perata. In other words, more voters prefer Quan to Perata when the two are compared head-to-head.

Perata Campaign Claim: "Don Perata beat Jean Quan in at least 78% of all precincts in the first round of voting."

Fact: Perata led with a plurality of first choices in 78% of precincts. But in RCV tallies in each precinct, Quan defeats Perata in 133 (55%) of the city's 245 precincts. In other words, Quan was ranked ahead of Perata in 133 of the city's 245 precincts.

Perata Campaign Claim: The percentage of overvotes in the election was "an indicator of voter confusion," as was the fact that 29% of voters did not rank three different candidates.

Fact: Of all Oakland voters indicating a preference in the mayor's race, 99.7% cast a valid ballot (that's 997 out of every 1,000 voters). Only 0.3% cast a disqualifying overvote. Furthermore, 72% of these voters ranked three different candidates, 13% ranked two candidates and 15% ranked one. Among all voters who did not rank three candidates, 79% had their ballot count in the final round for Perata

or Quan. (For example, of the 10,225 voters who ranked only one candidate, fully 72% ranked Quan or Perata as that one choice – a rational decision for those who knew they were the frontrunners.)

Perata Campaign Claim: “At least 15,000 voters were turned away from the final runoff.”

Fact: Ranked choice voting resulted in a much higher number of voters participating in the mayoral race than in the old system that required a (usually decisive) first round in June. In 2006, only 83,891 voted for mayor. In 2010, 119,607 voted for mayor – a 43% increase, or 35,716 more voters.

Of those 119,607 voters this year, a total of 13,795 voters did not vote for Quan or Perata in the final round. At least some of these voters were not interested in making a choice between the two frontrunners. Furthermore, voters in a plurality voting election (as used in all of California’s statewide elections this year) have only a single chance to cast a decisive ballot between the strongest candidates. In an RCV race, the process of ranking candidates gives voters three opportunities to cast a decisive vote. Far from “turning voters away,” RCV actually provides for fuller voter participation than plurality voting and higher turnout than typical of traditional runoff elections.

Perata Campaign Claim: It is “bizarre” to have “some voters’ second or third place votes count equivalently as others’ first place votes.”

Fact: The whole point of RCV in Oakland was to replace a system based on expensive, low-turnout, multiple rounds of voting with a single election. To do so, rankings are used to simulate a series of “instant runoffs.” In a traditional runoff, any voter whose first choice fails to advance to the runoff has a chance to cast an equal vote in the runoff for a backup choice. RCV works the same way – if your first choice loses, your ballot can count for your next choice among the remaining candidates.

With RCV, every voter has only one vote, and no ballot ever counts for more than one candidate at a time. Your lower choice cannot help defeat your higher choice because by the time your vote goes to your lower choice, your higher choice must be eliminated. RCV is a runoff-type system, not a weighted-voted system as used in some sports polls.

This analysis is based on data provided by the Alameda County Registrar of Voters on November 10.