

From: Commissioner Cynthia Dai
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Clarifying Election Results Reporting

As a follow-up to my comments at our June meeting and in response to recent inaccuracies in the media, I'm including this under Commissioners' Reports to share some ideas to improve general elections result reporting. The Department of Elections has always aimed to be transparent and timely with its reporting, as well as proactively ensuring multiple voting options. However, the plethora of data has resulted in confusion about interim and final results—even among more sophisticated journalists, much less members of the public.

Election Day Reporting

With the automatic mailing of vote-by-mail (VBM) ballots to all registered voters since the pandemic, fewer than 3% voted in person in the February 15 Special Municipal Election (School Board recall), fewer than 2% in the April 19 Special General Election, and fewer than 5% in the June 7 Primary Election, respectively. Put another way, well over 90% of the ballots cast in the 3 elections so far in 2022 were VBM. Yet the initial reporting on Election Day shows "Precincts Reported: X out of Y" leading many unfamiliar with the Department's processes to incorrectly conclude that the results are final when "Y out of Y (100.00%)" are posted. Even turnout is inaccurately interpreted, as this typical [Nextdoor exchange](#) about our most recent election demonstrates, requiring explainers like this: [No, Voter Turnout Wasn't 'Abysmally Low' in SF This Election](#).

A possible way to clarify this misperception is to annotate the results with "X out of Y (N% of in-person ballots only)" for example. An explanatory paragraph such as the following would be helpful: "90+% of ballots are typically voted by mail which are valid up until 7 days *after* the election if postmarked on or before Election Day. These will be reported as they are processed. Check this page daily for updated results."

Ranked-Choice Voting Results

Even those facile with our voting methodology may be confounded by the results reporting, which by definition must be reported in several rounds as lower-ranked candidates drop out. (To make things even more complex, the average voter might not remember that only municipal contests offer this option.) This may have contributed to misleading information in articles like [Run, Chesa, Run? For better or worse, Boudin could win back San Francisco DA's office](#) where the columnist claimed "Thanks to San Francisco's absurd electoral system, it took over 50% of votes to remove him from an office he won with 36% of the vote." He might be forgiven however since the [Final Summary Report](#) of the November, 2019 election does list Chesa Boudin as having received only 35.17% of the votes for DA. On the website, it is clarified as "RCV first choice totals" but the link for [Complete RCV results](#) takes one to the Detailed Reports page where again that first Summary document shows the 35.17%. To get the correct final result, one must click on the nonobvious "[Ranked-Choice Voting: District Attorney Short Report](#)" to get the correct result of 50.83%.

Ideally, any report with the descriptor "Final" in the title should list the *actual final* results, which for a RCV contest is *not* the first-choice total. At minimum, the website summary should show this final information accurately OR link directly to the accurate reports if this is a limitation of the voting software.