Alternative Voting Systems

1) Should we study Alternative Voting systems? What problems are we trying to solve?
    a. There is evidence that Sunnyvale candidates have "gamed" the current system
        i. There is anecdotal evidence that candidates have intentionally encouraged other candidates with opposing views to run in hopes of splitting the opposing votes.
        ii. There is also anecdotal evidence that candidates have discouraged other candidates with similar views or demographics to run because of fear of splitting the vote
    b. Vote Splitting is a real risk and does occur in Sunnyvale elections.
2) Should we study only Ranked Choice Voting, or should we study multiple systems? If so, Which ones?
    a. Alternatives include
        i. Ranked Choice Voting
        ii. Approval Voting
        iii. STAR Voting
        iv. Score Voting
        v. Proportional Ranked Choice Voting
        vi. Others
3) Voting Systems
    a. Traditional Plurality Voting (AKA first past the post. This is our current system)
        i. Can current Santa Clara County (SCC) voting machines use this method?: yes
        ii. Supporters argue that it:
            1. Is the simplest, most easy to use system
            2. Results in the fewest voting errors
            3. Is easier to recount than more complicated systems
            4. It has been working for the past 200+ years
        iii. Opponents argue that it:
            1. Often produces winners without majority support of voters
            2. Favors a party system which makes it more difficult for moderate candidates to win in a primary/general system
            3. Reduces choice
            4. Often results in vote splitting – the "spoiler effect"

a. Incentivizes candidates to split opposition votes
b. Incentivizes candidates to discourage other candidates with similar views
c. Reduces choice for the voters

5. Promotes negative campaigning
6. Results in a polarized government (and electorate)

b. Traditional Plurality Voting with Primary and General elections

i. Can current SCC voting machines use this method?: yes
ii. Supporters argue that it:
    1. Has the same benefits as single election plurality
    2. Decreases vote splitting
iii. Opponents argue that it:
    1. Has the same problems as single election plurality voting
    2. Vote Splitting may be reduced, but is still a major drawback
    3. Is very expensive for the voting jurisdiction
    4. Is very expensive for the candidates

c. Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) AKA Instant Runoff Voting (IRV)

i. Can current SCC voting machines use this method?: yes
ii. This is the most popular and most studied alternative voting system
    1. Used in multiple countries (notably Australia & Ireland) for >100 years
    2. Used in 2 states (Maine, Alaska)
    3. Used in multiple cities in California and elsewhere in the USA
iii. History of Ranked Choice Voting in Sunnyvale
    1. In 2006 some Sunnyvale residents were concerned about negative campaigning and undue influence of money donated by special interest groups during recent elections. The city studied the issue and in 2007 the City Council adopted Ranked Choice Voting for appointment of the mayor and vacant council seats (only the council members voted for these positions at that time). They could not adopt it for general city council elections because the voting machines supplied by the county were not able to handle Ranked Choice ballots. Ref: https://archive.fairvote.org/index.php?page=703&articlemode=showspecific&showarticle=1399, Mercury News June 14 2006 by Julie Patel
    2. Unfortunately, RCV does not work well when the number of voters is small because there are often ties that are hard to resolve. RCV was stopped for mayoral selection in 2010 and for council member appointment in 2022 after cumbersome

appointments. Those removals were appropriate because the number of voters was only 6 or 7 council members, but there has been continued interest in RCV for large city-wide elections such as mayoral or council seat elections where registered voters number in the thousands.

a. Council Policy Manual, Chapter 7.0 Long-term Advocacy Positions – Planning and Management Section A Elections, Item 6 [Adopted in 2009 , revised May 21, 2024] says: Support Instant Runoff Voting if/when it is determined to be economically and technologically feasible for the county. Lead Dept. OCM

iv. Santa Clara County may start using Ranked Choice Voting for their elections.
    1. In the County, Ranked Choice Voting would eliminate the primary election. This is desirable because the primary has much lower turnout and lower representation of young, minority, and low income voters. In Sunnyvale, we do not hold primary elections, so this is not a concern.
    2. A decision on whether to use Ranked Choice Voting in Santa Clara County is expected within a year.
v. Supporters argue that RCV:
    1. Results in more representative outcomes because it eliminates Vote Splitting and the spoiler effect
    2. Allows voters to vote their conscience and eliminates "Strategic Voting"
        a. Voters whose first choice does not win still have a chance to affect the outcome of the election by selecting a second choice.
    3. Discourages negative campaigning, and encourages issue-based campaigning
    4. Favors candidates who build consensus rather than candidates who disparage opponents
        a. May reduce polarization in the government
    5. Winners tend to have broader support among all voters
        a. Winners always have a majority in the last round, and usually, but not always, have a majority of all voters
    6. Winners need both deep support (enough first choice votes to stay in the race) and broad support (enough second and third choice votes to reach a majority)

7. Lowers the barriers of entry for women and candidates of color (barriers include fear of splitting the vote, and pressure not to run because of gender and minority biases)
    a. Gives voters more choice
    b. More women and candidates of color win
8. It would be easier for voters to use the same voting style in the city as well as county elections.

vi. Opponents argue that RCV:

1. Adds complexity to the voting process which results in:
    a. Voter Confusion resulting in
        i. Ballot errors
        ii. Incomplete rankings
    b. Disenfranchisement of older, minority, and low income voters because these groups are more likely to be confused
    c. The candidate with the most first choice votes doesn't always win
    d. Winners don't always have the majority of all votes cast
    e. It's too much work for voters because voters have to know something about all of a potentially long list of candidates in order to rank all candidates.
    f. Potential for error in the computer set-up or programming that could affect the outcome
    g. Voter mistrust in the fairness of vote counting
2. Does not always elect the candidate who most people approve of (the Conodorcet winner). This is known as the "Central Squeeze" because candidates with moderate views who would be approved of by most voters may not get enough 1st choice votes to advance to the end of the runoff cycles.
3. Adds cost
4. Was already tried and rejected (see history above)

d. Approval Voting

i. Can current SCC voting machines use this method?: yes

ii. Voters either approve (vote for) or don't approve (don't vote for) every candidate. The candidate with the most approvals wins.

iii. Supporters argue that it:

1. Eliminates Vote Splitting
2. Is simple for voters

3. Is easy to count
4. Only requires one round
5. Eliminates the "central squeeze" of primary and Ranked Choice elections
6. Favors candidates who build consensus – reduces polarization

iv. Opponents argue that it:

1. Gives every approved candidate the same weight, does not allow voters to express their preference
2. An approval for your second choice hurts your first choice
3. This incentivizes strategic "bullet" voting
4. Candidates "game the system" by telling supporters to only vote for them

e. Score Voting

i. Can current SCC voting machines use this method?: no

ii. Voters give each candidate numerical a score. The candidate with the highest average score wins.

iii. Supporters argue that it:

1. Adds to Approval voting by allowing voters to express a preference

iv. Opponents argue that it:

1. Giving a score to your second choice hurts your first choice
2. A candidate with a majority of first choice scores can lose
3. Suffers from the same incentive for "bullet" voting that Approval Voting does

f. STAR Voting (Score Then Automatic Runoff)

i. Can current SCC voting machines use this method?: no

ii. This variant of Score Voting adds a runoff of the two highest-scoring candidates after the initial score tally. Of the two highest-scoring candidates, the winner is the one most voters ranked higher.

iii. Supporters argue that it:

1. Mitigates the incentive and effect of strategic voting

iv. Opponents argue that it:

1. Giving a score to your second choice hurts your first choice
2. A candidate with a majority of first choice scores can lose
3. A candidate who is no-one's favorite can win.
4. Because of the above, voters vote strategically and do not give scores to any candidate except their first choice.

g. **Proportional Ranked Choice Voting (AKA Single Transferable Vote)**

i. Can current SCC voting machines use this method?: yes
ii. This is a multi-winner option that would eliminate the current district system. Options include:
    1. two districts with elections every 2 years in alternating districts, and 3 winners in each district for 4 year terms.
    2. a single district with 6 winners selected every 4 years for 4 year terms.
    3. a single district with 3 winners selected every 2 years for 4 year terms.)
iii. PRCV would address several issues before the CRC:
    1. Voting System (fairness and proportional representation)
    2. Drawing Districts (There would be fewer districts with less susceptibility to gerrymandering)
    3. Residency requirement for candidates (A move of a short distance would be less likely to affect candidate eligibility)
    4. It would also address the problem of insufficient candidates in a district race (a larger district means that it would be likely that there would be more candidates running, giving the voters more choice)
iv. Supporters argue that it:
    1. Has the same benefits as Ranked Choice Voting and
    2. Greatly reduces gerrymandering
    3. Allows minority groups who are not distributed solely to geographical districts to have representation on the council.
    4. Leads to proportional representation of all substantial voting blocks in the district.
    5. Is already used in one California City, Albany, since 2022, as a remedy to claims under the California Voting Rights Act.
    6. Is used in 5 additional cities in the US, and is soon to be implemented in 4 more.
v. Opponents argue that it:
    1. Requires candidates to campaign to a larger group of voters and therefore would be more expensive and difficult
        a. This could be a barrier to candidates without significant resources
    2. It is more complicated than other systems and may result in voter confusion and mistrust.

h. Others?