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Residents get 6 votes each in suburban New York election

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PORT CHESTER, N.Y. — Arthur Furano voted early — five days before Election Day. And he voted often, flipping the lever six times for his favorite candidate.

Furano cast multiple votes on the instructions of a federal judge and the U.S. Department of Justice as part of a new election system crafted to help boost Hispanic representation.

Voters in Port Chester, 25 miles northeast of New York City, are electing village trustees for the first time since the federal government alleged in 2006 that the existing election system was unfair. The election ends Tuesday and results are expected late Tuesday night.

Although the village of about 30,000 residents is nearly half Hispanic, no Latino had ever been elected to any of the six trustee seats, which until now were chosen in a conventional at-large election. Most voters were white, and white candidates always won.

Federal Judge Stephen Robinson said that violated the Voting Rights Act, and he approved a remedy suggested by village officials: a system called cumulative voting, in which residents get six votes each to apportion as they wish among the candidates. He rejected a government proposal to break the village into six districts, including one that took in heavily Hispanic areas.

Furano and his wife, Gloria Furano, voted Thursday.

"That was very strange," Arthur Furano, 80, said after voting. "I'm not sure I liked it. All my life, I've heard, 'one man, one vote.'"

It's the first time any municipality in New York has used cumulative voting, said Amy Ngai, a director at FairVote, a nonprofit election research and reform group that has been hired to consult. The system is used to elect the school board in Amarillo, Texas, the county commission in Chilton County, Ala., and the City Council in Peoria, Ill.

The judge also ordered Port Chester to implement in-person early voting, allowing residents to show up on any of five days to cast ballots. That, too, is a first in New York, Ngai said.

Village clerk Joan Mancuso said Monday that 604 residents voted early.

Gloria Furano gave one vote each to six candidates. Aaron Conetta gave two votes each to three candidates.

Frances Nurena talked to the inspectors about the new system, grabbed some educational material and went home to study. After all, it was only Thursday. She could vote on Friday, Saturday or Tuesday.

"I understand the voting," she said. "But since I have time, I'm going to learn more about the candidates."

On Tuesday, Candida Sandoval voted at the Don Bosco Center, where a soup kitchen and day-laborer hiring center added to the activity, and where federal observers watched the voting from a table in the corner.

"I hope that if Hispanics get in, they do something for all the Hispanic people," Sandoval said in Spanish. "I don't know, but I hope so."

FairVote said cumulative voting allows a political minority to gain representation if it organizes and focuses its voting strength on specific candidates. Two of the 13 Port Chester trustee candidates — one Democrat and one Republican — are Hispanic. A third Hispanic is running a write-in campaign after being taken off the ballot on a technicality.

Campaigning was generally low-key, and the election itself was less of an issue than housing density and taxes.

Hispanic candidates Fabiola Montoya and Luis Marino emphasized their volunteer work and said they would represent all residents if elected.

Gregg Gregory gave all his votes to one candidate, then said, "I think this is terrific. It's good for Port Chester. It opens it up to a lot more people, not just Hispanics but independents, too."

Vote coordinator Martha Lopez said that if turnout is higher than in recent years, when it hovered around 25 percent, the election would be a success — regardless of whether a Hispanic was elected.

"I think we'll make it," she said. "I'm happy to report the people seem very interested."

But Randolph McLaughlin, who represented a plaintiff in the lawsuit, said the goal was not merely to encourage more Hispanics to vote but "to create a system whereby the Hispanic community would be able to nominate and elect a candidate of their choice."

That could be a non-Hispanic, he acknowledged, and until exit polling is done, "it won't be known for sure whether the winners were Hispanic-preferred."

The village held 12 forums — six each in English and Spanish — to let voters know about the new system and to practice voting. The bilingual ballot lists each candidate across the top row — some of them twice if they have two party lines — and then the same candidates are listed five more times. In all, there are 114 levers; voters can flip any six.

Besides the forums, bright yellow T-shirts, tote bags and lawn signs declared "Your voice, your vote, your village," part of the educational materials also mandated in the government agreement. Announcements were made on cable TV in each language.

All such materials — the ballot, the brochures, the TV spots, the reminders sent home in schoolkids' backpacks — had to be approved in advance, in English and Spanish versions, by the Department of Justice.

Conetta said the voter education effort was so thorough he found voting easier than usual.

"It was very different but actually quite simple," he said. "No problem."

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Please write a 1 page paper about your reaction to this article.

Use the following questions to help guide you.

- 1. Describe why history should or should not be a consideration when deciding whether or not people or ethnic groups are fairly represented.**
- 2. Why is it fair or unfair to give people 6 votes in an election?**
- 3. Explain whether or not you believe in-person early voting is a good idea.**
- 4. What suggestions do you have for resolving the issue of lack of Hispanic representation?**