

Precinct voting studies suggest sizable Gore victory margin in Florida

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Evidence continues to mount that if all the votes in Florida had been properly counted, Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore would have defeated Republican George W. Bush by a decisive margin.

A study published Saturday by the *Miami Herald*—which has been editorially critical of the Gore campaign's efforts to secure manual recounts—estimated that Gore would have won the state by 23,000 votes if all votes had been counted, instead of the 537-vote victory for Bush that was certified November 26 by Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris.

The study was conducted for the *Herald* by a former research editor for the newspaper who is now a journalism professor at Arizona State University. He examined the voting pattern in all 5,885 precincts in the state, and estimated on that basis how to divide up the 185,000 ballots which were classified as either undervotes or overvotes by county election officials.

Undervotes were those with no presidential choice or where a presidential choice could not be detected by machine scanning (hanging chads and dimpled chads, for punch-card machines). Overvotes were those in which two presidential candidates were selected, mainly because of the confusing butterfly ballot in Palm Beach County and an equally confusing two-page presentation of the candidates in Duval County (Jacksonville), where voters were given instructions to “vote on every page,” whose effect would be to invalidate their vote.

The shift to Gore in this estimate arises from the fact that the undervotes and overvotes were concentrated in precincts carried by the Democratic candidate—either in heavily Democratic areas such as Palm Beach, or in poor and minority districts of Republican counties, such as Duval. Overall, 1 in 40 ballots was rejected in precincts won by Bush, compared to 1 in every 27

ballots in Gore precincts.

Of the estimated 23,000-vote margin for Gore, nearly half, or 11,000 votes, would have come from Palm Beach alone, where some 19,000 ballots were disqualified because voters punched the holes for both Gore and ultraright Patrick Buchanan. Heavily Jewish precincts in the county turned in improbably high totals for the anti-Semitic Buchanan, because many voters thought they were voting for Gore instead.

The kind of machinery used to record and count ballots had a major impact on the outcome of the closely contested presidential race. In the 43 counties which used optical readers and ballots marked by penciling-in circles, only 1.4 percent of ballots were recorded as undervotes or overvotes for president. In the 24 counties using punch-card voting, that figure nearly tripled, to 3.9 percent. The punch-card counties are disproportionately the large, urban areas which did not have the financial resources to scrap thousands of voting machines and install newer systems.

The methodology of the *Herald* study was actually conservative, since it assumes that the undervotes and overvotes in each precinct were divided in exactly the same proportions as other votes. It is unlikely, however, that this was a phenomenon spread evenly across the socioeconomic spectrum. Those confused by butterfly and two-page ballots or denied assistance or a fresh ballot by poll workers, for example, are far more likely to be among the poor and uneducated than among the affluent. This social layer voted disproportionately for the Democrats.

A similar study of the precinct-by-precinct vote, published Sunday by the *Washington Post*, found enormous racial disparities in the pattern of ballot disqualification. In Miami-Dade County, for example, only 3 percent of ballots for president were disqualified

in precincts with fewer than 30 percent black population. In precincts with black populations of 70 percent or more, the rate of disqualification soared to nearly 10 percent.

Throughout the state of Florida, the *Post* observed: “The more black and Democratic a precinct, the more likely it was to suffer high rates of invalidated votes.” In black precincts in Jacksonville, 20 percent of ballots were spoiled, compared to 2 percent spoiled in largely black Washington DC.

Again, such figures fly in the face of common sense, since black voters were arguably the most passionate and determined Gore voters, and the huge turnout in predominately black areas was fueled by a campaign, spearheaded by the NAACP, Jesse Jackson and black churches, which focused largely on the necessity to vote in the presidential contest. Black turnout in Florida jumped from 541,000 in 1996 to 893,000 in 2000, and the proportion voting Democratic increased from 85 percent to 93 percent.

The Republican campaign has denounced Gore for seeking recounts only in four large Democratic-leaning counties, while remaining silent on the real reason that the Bush campaign did not seek recounts anywhere. The *Post* reported, “Senior GOP strategists say privately that a key reason the Bush campaign did not ask for a statewide recount was it feared that Gore would pick up more votes than Bush, because of the high rate of ballot spoilage in black precincts.”

The Bush campaign also benefited from instant check procedures in place in 23 of the counties which used optical scanners. Ballots there were checked before voters left the polls, allowing them to seek a new ballot in the event of a mistake. In those counties only 1 percent of presidential votes were discounted, compared to 4 percent in punch-card counties where no instant checks were possible.

Further information discrediting the certified Florida vote count has emerged in the course of the two-day hearing before Leon County Circuit Judge N. Sanders Sauls in Tallahassee on the suit brought by the Gore campaign to contest the result. Witnesses have testified to the deficiencies in the punch-card voting system, especially, as in the case of Florida, when vote-counting machines are poorly maintained and not even properly cleaned of the buildup of chads.

The most striking testimony came from Bush

campaign witness Jack Ahmann, representing a punch-card manufacturer, who initially hailed the accuracy of the machine-count system and dismissed hand recounts as inherently inaccurate.

Gore attorneys then introduced a 1981 patent application written by Ahmann, which explained why local election authorities should purchase new and improved machines, citing extensive problems and defects in the older systems—those which are still in use throughout Florida. Under cross-examination, the witness admitted that the only remedy to the admitted errors in the older system of punch-card voting was to conduct a manual recount of each ballot card.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of these revelations is the indifference in the media and the cynical contempt for public intelligence expressed by the Bush campaign. Ray Sullivan, a Bush spokesman interviewed by the *Post*, declared, “We believe that in most if not virtually all so-called undervotes, individuals didn't intend to vote for president.” Other spokesmen suggested that overvotes were deliberate acts of protest by those opposed to both the Democrats and Republicans. But they did not bother to explain why such acts of protest should have been concentrated so disproportionately among black voters.

During a Sunday morning roundtable discussion on the election crisis on Fox News, anchorman Brit Hume, a conservative Republican, readily conceded that more Florida voters went to the polls November 7 intending to support Gore than intending to support Bush. Unfazed by this admission, he argued that this made no difference, and that Gore voters failed to execute their intentions, leaving Bush the winner of the election.



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