

Newspaper studies confirm Democrat Gore won Florida vote

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Two newly published studies of the ballots cast in the US presidential election confirm that Democrat Al Gore was the choice of more Florida voters than Republican George W. Bush, who was installed as president after an unprecedented and anti-democratic intervention by the US Supreme Court.

One study was conducted by the *Washington Post*, the other by Tribune Co., which owns the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Orlando Sentinel*, and the *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*. The *Post* endorsed Gore editorially in the November election, while the *Tribune* endorsed Bush.

The *Post* reviewed computerized records of 2.7 million votes in eight of Florida's largest counties to examine the pattern of the so-called overvotes, those ballots on which computer scanners or other vote-counting machines detected votes for more than one presidential candidate and discarded the ballots as invalid. The newspaper did not recount individual ballots, but relied on reports from county officials based on machine tabulation of the invalid ballots.

The analysis found that of the more than 60,000 ballots in the eight counties showing overvotes—the bulk of the statewide total—Gore's name was marked on 46,000, while Bush was marked on only 17,000. This includes several thousand ballots in which both Gore and Bush were marked.

The 3-1 Democratic to Republican ratio among the overvotes was confirmed in the analysis of other votes cast by those voters further down the ballot. Three quarters of those who improperly cast a presidential overvote marked their ballots correctly for US senator. Of these, 70 percent voted for Democrat Bill Nelson, only 24 percent for Republican Bill McCollum, while 6 percent voted for third-party candidates.

The nearly 30,000-vote margin for Gore among the overvotes dwarfs the 537 votes which was Bush's official margin of victory in Florida. On the basis of that minuscule and highly dubious number, the Republican-controlled state government, headed by his brother, Governor Jeb Bush, awarded him the state's 25 electoral votes and a four-vote margin in the Electoral College nationally.

The eight counties examined by the *Post* included Miami-

Dade, Palm Beach, Broward (Fort Lauderdale), Pinellas (St. Petersburg), Hillsborough (Tampa), Marion (Ocala), Highlands and Pasco. Four of these counties went for Gore and four for Bush. The pattern of more overvotes for Gore prevailed in all the counties, however, regardless of who won the county overall.

The notorious “butterfly ballot” in Palm Beach County accounted for 8,000 of the Gore overvotes, most of them double votes for Gore and far-right Reform Party candidate Patrick Buchanan, who was listed across from Gore on the ballot, with his punch-hole close to the names of Gore and Lieberman. Gore-Buchanan voters in Palm Beach County voted 10-1 Democratic in the US Senate race.

In the other seven counties, the largest group of overvotes were for Gore and the candidate who followed immediately after him on the ballot, Libertarian Harry Browne. Such a combination is incomprehensible as a protest vote, especially one supposedly chosen by 6,800 voters. It more likely reflects confusion among voters who thought they had to cast votes for president and vice-president.

Confirming the notion that the overvotes were largely intended for Gore is the fact that most of the third-party candidates on the ballot for president received more votes paired with Gore as overvotes than they did in their own right. In the eight counties, Socialist Workers Party candidate James Harris received a total of 300 votes, but his name was punched 12,600 times on ballots with Gore, Bush or another presidential candidate—42 inadvertent votes for each intentional vote.

The Republican head of the Florida Division of Elections, Clay Roberts, dismissed the *Post* analysis with an argument of stupefying cynicism, claiming that overvotes were intentional political choices. “People who are engaged in politics can't understand why people would overvote,” he said. “But there are valid reasons for undervotes and overvotes. For some voters, that undervote or overvote is their decision.”

The *Post* also found more than 15,000 voters in the eight counties who cast no recorded votes for any office or

referendum. This suggests widespread difficulty with voting equipment, or major errors in the computerized count, or both, since it is impossible to believe that so many people turned out at the polls, many of them waiting hours in line, only to cast a blank ballot.

The Tribune Co. study examined ballots in 15 smaller counties—not including any of the eight in the *Post* study—that used paper ballots that were marked in pencil and then read by optical scanners.

While much public attention has been given to the punch card ballots that proved so defective in major urban counties, the rate of invalid votes was actually higher in these 15 counties, ten of which are predominately white and rural areas in north Florida. The reason is that these counties lacked the financial resources to have an optical reader in each precinct.

In the 26 counties that did have scanners available in each precinct, voters were instructed to put the ballot in the scanner themselves. In the event of an improper vote, the scanner rejects the ballot and the voter corrects the mistake and resubmits it. In the poorer counties, the ballots from each precinct are delivered to a central counting location. Voters who mark their ballots improperly have no chance to correct an error, since the mistakes are not detected until the ballots are fed into the scanner at the county seat. Their votes are simply discarded.

Counties with optical scanners in each precinct had a vote error rate of less than 1 percent. By comparison, punch-card counties had an error rate of 3.9 percent, and counties with optical scanners only in a central location had an error rate of 5.7 percent. In Gadsden County, the only black majority county in Florida, which used optical scanners at a central location, the error rate was 12.4 percent, and in some precincts as many as one vote in four was ruled invalid.

The poorest and least educated voters were obviously those most likely to make a mistake in casting their ballots. These voted overwhelmingly for the Democratic Party. As a result, the Tribune Co.'s recount of the 15,596 invalid ballots showed a gain for Gore of 366 votes, even though Bush carried 14 of the 15 counties.

A key factor in overvoting errors was the design of the ballot, almost as confusing as Palm Beach's butterfly ballot. In 13 of the 15 counties, the candidates for president were divided into two pages. Eight were listed on the first page and two, Monica Moorehead of the Workers World Party and Howard Phillips of the Constitutional Party, on the second.

Some 4,252 voters cast ballots for Gore or Bush on the first page, and then for Moorehead or Phillips on the second page. If those votes had been counted for Gore and Bush, Gore would have gained 564 votes, more than Bush's

statewide margin.

It is a curious fact that the designer of the two-page ballot, Hart InterCivic, is a consulting firm based in Austin, Texas, headquarters of the Bush presidential campaign. The company said it followed a format sent out by the Florida secretary of state, Katherine Harris, Florida co-chairman of the Bush campaign and a member of the cabinet of Governor Jeb Bush.

There were other anomalies. Officials in Lake County, who are Republican loyalists, ruled that a presidential ballot with two marks on it—one by the name, the other a write-in for the same candidate—was invalid, although state law allows them to be counted. The result was that 628 legal votes were discarded, votes which went disproportionately to Gore. Including these votes would have cut Bush's lead by 122 votes. Gore would have gained another 72 votes from similar double votes discarded in several smaller counties.

Lake County also printed the name of Joe Lieberman in small type directly above the word Libertarian in the party label on the line below. As a result, nearly 300 voters in Lake County cast ballots for Gore and Libertarian Harry Browne, which were ruled invalid.

The *Post* and *Tribune* studies have gone virtually unmentioned in the America media, except for the newspapers that commissioned them. Not a single prominent Democratic Party politician has taken note of their findings.

Speaking on a television interview program January 28, House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt repeated what has become the standard Democratic refrain. He said that in his opinion, Gore had won the most votes nationally and the most votes in Florida. But, he added, his opinion no longer mattered, and he accepted the legitimacy of Bush as president, following the Supreme Court decision of last December 12.

Such comments, and the ongoing silence over the evidence trickling in from Florida, demonstrates how far the Democratic Party is from any principled defense of democratic rights. Prostrate before the right wing, this big business party is incapable of defending its own immediate electoral interests, let alone the social and political interests of working people.



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