

## Florida

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Gore supporters improperly marked their ballots, leaving Bush with more valid votes.

A consortium of eight news organizations commissioned the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago to take the deepest look yet into the Florida ballot box, trying to determine why the state's voting system broke down.

The study's findings refute some commonly held assumptions. Contrary to popular belief that first-time minority voters likely spoiled significant numbers of ballots, the black voter turnout did not appear to affect problems at the polls. In fact, the percentage of blacks turning out to vote was barely higher than in the previous presidential contest.

The study does not support charges that the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to halt recounts altered the course of history. The numbers suggest that Bush would have prevailed had the counting continued under the standards set by the Florida Supreme Court.

Finally, each campaign's strategy for recounts now seems flawed. In fact, had Gore's top legal argument been granted — that four specific counties get a hand recount — it would have benefited Bush. Had one of Bush's arguments been accepted — favoring the counting of ballot chads detached at two corners — it would have benefited Gore.

If the ballots had been recounted using a restrictive standard favored by Bush lawyers, the study found Gore could have won the state by about 100 votes. But Gore's initial strategy to ask for recounts in four counties limited his campaign's ability to pick up the number of ballots that a statewide inspection may have.

### Finding insight, not answers

The Florida Ballot Project reviewed 175,010 ballots that went uncounted in the presidential election, only a fraction of the state's 3.1 million votes cast. The study focused on two kinds of ballots that were the subject of dispute during the recount: undervotes, where a vote for president could not be detected, and overvotes, where more than one candidate was selected.

In the end, the county-to-county disparity between election laws, the decisions made by local election officials and the fact that a small margin of ballots could not be located for review made drawing precise conclusions impossible for researchers.

It probably is impossible to design a study that would determine the winner of the presidential election. That is particularly true given the degree to which the Florida election was tainted. Thousands of felons voted, those not registered were allowed to vote, some voted twice and even the dead voted in small numbers. Other voters were erroneously turned away from the polls.

Instead, the review was undertaken to examine the balloting process and provide insight into what happened. Even that goal was hampered because election workers in one county couldn't determine which ballots they disqualified. In addition, chads in some punch cards were knocked loose during handling, altering their original appearance.

Depending on how the ballots were counted, Gore might have garnered more votes, while in other cases the margin stayed with Bush. The diversity of results is limited only by the dozens of ways the election could have been conducted, underscoring the critical role that subjectivity by election officials played in the final outcome.

### More voters chose Gore

For the first time, the ballot review offers insight into what Florida voters may have been trying to do when they walked into their polling places on Nov. 7, 2000.

Determining the intent of the voter was the single largest controversy during the presidential recount last year. While no review can ever definitively resolve the question, the study offers strong suggestions that more voters intended to vote for Gore, following the trend of the national popular vote.

The study revealed that Florida voters who invalidated their ballots by selecting Gore and another candidate outnumber those who chose Bush and another candidate by a 3-1 ratio, which suggests more of them likely intended to vote for Gore.

Had different voting equipment been in place statewide, voters would have been given a second chance after they spoiled their ballots, and the outcome of the presidential race could have been different.

A year after the bitter election, both candidates seem to have little interest in dissecting the vote. "The American people moved on a long time ago," White House spokeswoman Nicolle Devenish said Sunday.

In a written statement, Gore said: "We are a nation of laws, and the presidential election of 2000 is over."

Confusing ballots, invalid voters The Tribune analysis uncovered some interesting points. For example, it found that the ballot spoilage rate in majority black precincts was one in every 45 votes. In other precincts, it was one in 142. The reason why so many black votes were discarded remains unclear.

In addition, registered voters complained poll workers turned

them away for failing to present the right identification. A botched effort to clean up the state voter registration files after an election-fraud scandal in 1999 instead yielded a large group of people who had been mistakenly cut from the voter rolls as convicted felons when they had no criminal records.

Even though civil rights groups, law enforcement agencies and newspapers devoted thousands of hours investigating the possibility of organized fraud, little evidence has turned up to support those allegations.

The confusing designs of ballots were at the root of more discarded ballots than anything else in Florida, the analysis showed.

For the first time, 10 candidates appeared on the presidential ballot, prompting election officials to devise creative solutions to find a spot for everyone's name on the paper ballot. Palm Beach County Elections Supervisor Theresa LePore, concerned about the large number of candidates on the ballot, did not want to squeeze the names onto one page. So LePore, a Democrat, designed a ballot with larger type that spread the candidates across facing pages.

The Tribune analysis shows ballots with the presidential candidates split across two columns or pages were far more likely to result in invalidated votes. Counties using those designs had over-vote rates four times higher than other counties.

If they had used better-designed ballots, Florida might have seen thousands fewer overvotes. Gore, whose name appeared on overvoted ballots three times as often as Bush's, presumably would have picked up most of those votes.

### Inconsistent counties

There are few consistent rules governing election recounts. Each of Florida's 67 counties had devised their own standards. What qualified for a vote in one county — a hanging chad, for instance — was disqualified in another.

These problems, long known by election officials, had been widely ignored because most races were won by wide margins. But even on election morning, it was becoming clear a wide margin would not exist in this race.

Even though Bush held an early lead, state law required all counties to automatically recount ballots because the margin was so narrow. Gore's demand for a limited recount touched off a contentious debate centering on how to deduce voter intent.

The consortium study tried to figure out which candidate might have benefited most if the statewide recount had been completed. The statistical analysis shows that Bush likely would have prevailed.

The election did inspire Florida officials to enact what their counterparts elsewhere in the nation failed to do: They adopted the most sweeping election reform measure of any other state in the country.

Consistent election rules have been written for all counties to follow. Punch card ballots have been banned. And new balloting equipment will give voters a second chance if mistakes are made on a confusing ballot.

In Congress, though, efforts aimed at bringing about major election reform have fallen short. Only in recent weeks has there been a renewed effort to fund reforms after a year of waning interest.

Tribune staff reporter Stephen J. Hedges contributed to this report. © 2001, Chicago Tribune. Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services.

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