

The Florida Ballot Project: Frequently Asked Questions

NORC, known since its inception in 1941 as the National Opinion Research Center, is an independent social science research center at the University of Chicago. NORC has completed examination of the uncertified ballots in the Florida presidential race. This effort was conceived and sponsored by a group of the nation's largest media organizations.

What did NORC hope to accomplish?

Our goal was to gather data on the appearance of the ballots that were not certified in the November 2000 election in Florida and to create an archive of the markings. This archive will be available to the public on the day that the media organizations publish and air their stories. NORC will also use this data to examine the reliability of the various voting systems used in Florida.

Which news organizations are involved?

This project was conceived and sponsored by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, Tribune Publishing (which includes the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times* and a number of other newspapers), CNN, the Associated Press, the *St. Petersburg Times* and the *Palm Beach Post*. The news organizations were responsible for securing county cooperation, and paying all associated county fees and ensuring proper presentation of the uncertified ballots. The news organizations will conduct individual analyses of the data and prepare reports for publication and broadcast.

How many uncertified ballots were there?

NORC examined 175,010 uncertified ballots, including 113,820 overvotes (the voter selected more than one candidate for president) and 61,190 undervotes (the voter did not select a candidate for president, or for some reason, the vote counting mechanism did not register a vote for president).

Sixty-five of Florida's 67 counties use one of three voting systems. Table 1 presents the three voting systems and the number of counties utilizing each, as well as the number of undervotes and overvotes examined from each.

When did the examination begin?

NORC staff went to Florida in late January 2001 and began an extensive training effort. Ballot examination began Monday, February 5, 2000 and continued through May.

How did NORC examine the ballots?

In each of the counties, local election officials assigned county workers to display the ballots. NORC coding teams (one or three coders per team) reviewed each ballot and recorded the markings they observed. The team of coders sat side by side, but members worked independently of each other and made individual determinations of the appearance of the ballots. They did not talk among themselves or consult each other in any way.

What specifically did NORC coders look for ?

Coders recorded the condition of each ballot examined. Thus, for Votomatic (and to some extent Datavote) ballots, coders noted whether chads were dimpled and if so, whether light was shining through the dimple. (Each coder worked with a small light table that helped coders to examine for light.) Coders also noted whether chads were completely punched, or hanging by one, two or three corners. For optical scan ballots and any Votomatic or Datavote absentee ballots completed outside the voting booth, coders noted whether the ovals or arrows were fully filled or otherwise marked (with a check, slash, X, etc.) Coders noted whether there were stray marks on the ballot that would confuse a scanning machine and whether ballots were uncertified because the wrong color ink was used. Finally, coders recorded verbatim any written notations on the ballots.

Was every ballot reviewed by three coders?

No. All undervotes and the overvotes from three test counties (Polk, Pasco, Nassau) were reviewed by three coders. In the three test counties (one Votomatic, one Datavote and one optical scan) NORC coders reviewed each overvote to determine whether three coders were necessary. High agreement among the three coders indicated that overvotes were easier to code than undervotes and the decision was made to code the remaining overvotes with one coder. Indeed, overvotes were easier to code because it requires more than one fully punched chad or more than one fully completed oval or arrow (markings more easily identified than dimples) to produce an overvote.

What was done to ensure accuracy in the field?

Because this data set is intended to be the authoritative description of the uncertified ballots, we took a number of steps to ensure high quality. First, we hired only qualified individuals to review the ballots. Because of the nature of the task, all coders were administered a near-point vision test before being staffed on this project. Project coders were trained and tested on coding procedures before being allowed to code. Team leaders -- who were long-term NORC employees -- conducted the training and worked closely with the coders to ensure consistently high performance. Every evening, prior to shipping the coding forms to Chicago, the team leaders reviewed the forms for completeness and legibility of coding. NORC also attempted to verify the accuracy of the coding by randomly selecting ballots from every county to recode. These recodings were later matched with the original codings and reviewed for consistency of coding.

What happened next with the data?

Information on the ballot markings was recorded on coding forms that were sent to our Chicago offices daily. In Chicago, a trained team of data entry specialists entered the information into electronic files.

What was done to ensure accuracy of the data entry?

Each data form was entered twice (by two different data entry clerks). The results of both data entry tasks were compared and data entry supervisors conducted an adjudication

process. Differences between the two data entries were reviewed and the appropriate corrections were made. Supervisors consulted coding forms as necessary. Typos, out of range codes and other anomalies were reconciled during this process.

Were there other steps as well?

For the final data review step, NORC assigned an independent team of statisticians to examine the data. These statisticians reviewed the data and approved them for release to the media group and to the public.

What is the final product?

NORC compiled 17.5 million pieces of information into two primary data sets. One is a ballot-level database (the raw database) that contains information on every chad or candidate space on every ballot across the 67 counties. This file does not attempt to align candidate information across ballots; it simply reflects the reality of the disparate ballot designs used throughout the state of Florida. The second is an aligned database that does reconcile every coder's information for every ballot for each presidential and U.S. Senate candidate. This file contains the first processing step necessary to facilitate comparison of the codings for each candidate regardless of his or her various ballot positions across the state. The raw database is the definitive historical archive of every mark on the uncertified ballots. The aligned file is an analyst's tool, presenting only the markings related to the various candidate positions on each county's ballot.

Secondary data sets include the ballot notations copied verbatim by NORC's coders, the demographic characteristics of the coders, the recoding data collected while coding, and a number of files produced by the media group. The media group files contain qualitative and quantitative county- and precinct-level information used by the media in their analyses.

All data files will be released on the day that the media group members publish their stories. Scholars, journalists, and anyone else interested in examining these data may go to <http://www.norc.org> for access to our files.

Table 1. Florida voting systems by number of counties and number of uncertified ballots examined by NORC

Voting system	Number of counties	Undervotes	Overvotes	Total number of ballots
Votomatic ¹	15	53,215	84,822	138,037
Datavote ²	9	771	4,427	5,198
Optical Scan ³	41	7,204	24,571	31,775
Lever ⁴	1	†		
Paper ⁵	1	‡		
Total	67	61,190	113,820	175,010

Notes. ¹ Voters use a hand-held stylus to punch out the chad for the selected candidate. ² Voters use a mechanical punching mechanism to select candidates. ³ Voters fill in ovals or connect arrows that correspond to the selected candidates. An optical scanning machine reads the forms. In some counties, a prescribed writing implement must be used because regular black pens and lead pencils cannot be read by the scanners. ⁴ Coders working in the lever county used the Datavote coding materials. ⁵ Coders working in the paper county used the optical scan coding materials. † Vote totals for the lever county are summed into the vote totals for the Datavote counties. ‡ Vote totals for the paper county are summed into the vote totals for the optical scan counties.