

What Happened in Florida's 2016 Presidential Election?

A Search for Clues in Miami-Dade County

By Kitty Garber, FFEC, February 2017

Leading into Election Day, and even throughout the day, polls and media outlets confidently predicted that Hillary Clinton would win the state of Florida and the presidency. The predictions were not only wrong, but dramatically so. The following report is the first in a series that will look at county-level data from Florida's 2016 presidential election to find out what actually happened that led to the unexpected Trump victory and why political pundits and pollsters failed to see it coming. We begin with an examination of the election data from the state's most populous county, Miami-Dade. We caution the reader that this paper is not meant to be an exhaustive examination of the county's 2016 election, but only one step in the process of understanding this most unusual election.

Miami-Dade County has more voters than any other county in Florida. In the 2016 general election, nearly a million people voted in Miami-Dade—more than one in ten of all Floridians casting their ballots in the 2016 election (998,605 of 9,580,489).¹

Despite the county's overwhelming numbers, its choice in the presidential race did not prevail statewide. Miami-Dade voters chose Clinton by a wide margin—63% to 34%. But statewide, Trump won narrowly, 49.0%, to Clinton's 47.8%.

On Election Day, projections from real-time turnout data predicted that Clinton would carry Florida. These projections, in part, were based on numbers in south Florida that showed turnout among her voters to be higher than for Obama in 2012 when he carried the state by a slim margin.²

These projections were made using predictive turnout modeling (sometimes called predictive data modeling)—a campaign tool long used by candidates and parties to compile and analyze information on voters in order to develop detailed individual voter profiles. These models allow campaigns to target specific voters with messages that are crafted to address the issues of importance to them. Once voting has begun, turnout data is fed into the model to determine how the campaign is faring so that strategies can be altered and resources redirected.

Unlike opinion polls and exit polling, predictive turnout modeling is usually very accurate—that's why campaigns spend huge amounts of money to create and maintain these campaign

¹ Data on turnout and election results are from Florida Department of State, Division of Elections, November 8, 2016 General Election, Official Results, accessed at

<https://results.elections.myflorida.com/Index.asp?ElectionDate=11/8/2016&DATAMODE=>

² From "Hillary Clinton has to Like Where She Stands in Florida," Josh Vorhees, Nov. 8, 2016, 4:27 pm, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2016/11/08/hillary_clinton_has_t...

tools.³ Yet, the most-touted of the new predictive turnout models—VoteCastr—was wildly off the mark in its projections for Florida.⁴ In the months prior to the general election, the media widely publicized the new company’s controversial decision to break with tradition and publish real-time projections on Election Day of who was leading in presidential and senate races in key states—including Florida. Like many who study and analyze elections, we at FFEC were alarmed by the idea and warned of the potential for disaster. The founders of VoteCastr countered that their methods were far more accurate than those used in the past. VoteCastr went ahead with its arrangement with news sites Slate and Vice to publish projections and update them in real time on Election Day.⁵

Final projections for Florida on Slate.com at 6:30 p.m. election night had Clinton beating Trump by a substantial margin. Her final vote was projected to be nearly 5 million (4,959,569). Instead her final totals (as shown on the DOE website) were only about 4 ½ million (4,504,975). Yet, VoteCastr’s projection for Trump turned out to be quite accurate. At 6:30 p.m., its numbers for Trump showed him with 4,644,007; his final totals were only slightly less at 4,617,886. In sum, the projections for Clinton were off by more than 9% while the projections for Trump were only off by about half a percent, well within a reasonable margin of error.⁶

After the election, VoteCastr countered criticism that it had failed abysmally by saying that Slate had not posted its final projections. But those numbers, posted on Vice.com, were also well off the mark, giving Clinton a nearly 4 percentage lead over Trump in Florida. For our purposes, the precise numbers don’t matter. We are not concerned with the particular problems with VoteCastr’s methodology. Polls and pundits throughout Florida and the nation got Florida wrong. The question is: Why? What happened in Florida that confounded the experts? That is what we seek to answer with our examination of the data in Miami-Dade.

Background--Race, Ethnicity, and Language

While Miami-Dade comprises a large segment of the total Florida electorate, it is very different from Florida’s other 66 counties. Perhaps the most obvious difference is race and ethnic identity. Unlike most of the other counties, non-Hispanic whites are not the largest group of voters in Miami-Dade. Only slightly more than 18% of its voters identified themselves as non-Hispanic white, and 17% identified themselves as black, not Hispanic. More than half (57%) of

³ To learn more about predictive turnout modeling and other computer analytics for elections, see the website of Magellan Strategies, a firm that sells these services. <http://magellanstrategies.com/>

It explains what services are available and gives testimonials from clients about their success.

⁴ For more information about VoteCastr, see “Real-Time Vote Projections May Upend News Tradition,” Nick Corasaniti, Sept. 10, 2016, New York Times. Accessed online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/us/politics/election-results-voting.html>.

⁵ To read about the objections we expressed in September 2016 to VoteCastr’s project, see “Real-Time Vote Projections on Election Day – A Truly Bad Idea,” Kitty Garber, FFEC, September 2016.

⁶ VoteCastr numbers are from http://www.slate.com/votecastr_election_day_turnout_tracker.html. To see the numbers from Vice.com and a discussion of the specific problems, see “Where VoteCastr Went Wrong: Assessing Our Election Day Experiment, Julia Turner & Josh Vorhees, Slate.com, Nov. 11, 2016.

Miami-Dade's registered voters identified themselves as Hispanic. The remainder came from other ethnic groups or did not choose a racial identification. In contrast, more than 64% of Florida's registered voters are white. Only 16% of the state's registrants are Hispanic.⁷

Miami-Dade's Hispanic population is itself diverse. While it is well known that Miami has a large Cuban American population, the county is also home to large Hispanic populations from the countries of the Caribbean and Central America. Likewise, the Black population of Miami-Dade County consists not only of African Americans, but also immigrants from Haiti and other Caribbean countries.

Partisan Affiliation

At the time of book closing for the 2016 general election, Miami-Dade had 1,379,230 registered voters⁸. More than 42% of its registered voters were Democrats, making them the largest partisan group. Those with no party affiliation (NPA) comprised the second largest group of voters at 29%. Republicans only accounted for 27% of registered voters. Minor parties claimed about 2% of the county's electorate.

Statewide, Democrats were still the largest partisan group, but at 28%, their percentage of the electorate was 4 percentage points less than in Miami-Dade. Republicans comprised the second largest group of Florida voters, with 35% of registered voters—8 percentage points higher than in Miami-Dade. NPAs accounted for 24% of the state's registered voters. Minor parties only accounted for about 3% of registrations.

In sum, Miami-Dade had not only far more Democratic voters than the state as a whole, it also had considerably more non-affiliated voters and far fewer Republican voters.

Turnout

Turnout in Miami-Dade was about 72.4% of registered voters, which was close to the turnout rate of 74.5% for the entire state. The county's turnout represented an increase of about 5 percentage points over 2012, when turnout was a dismal 67.59%.⁹ This is consistent with the Slate report at 4:30 pm. Election Day that turnout for Clinton was higher than for Obama in 2012 when he won Florida narrowly. It was also higher than in 2008 when turnout was only 70.2%. In fact, in recent history, only 2004 had a higher turnout—and then only marginally so at 73.6 percent. So while turnout was not at record-setting levels as some predicted going into Election Day, it was the highest turnout in twelve years.

⁷ Statistics on race/ethnicity and partisan affiliation are available at <http://dos.myflorida.com/elections/data-statistics/voter-registration-statistics/bookclosing/>.

⁸ This number varies slightly depending on the source. The election results show 1,379,248 registered voters while the book closing shows 1,379,230.

⁹ Voter turnout numbers for past elections are available both from the Florida Division of Elections and the Miami-Dade Elections websites.

Turnout by Method

Going into Election Day, predictions abounded among political scientists and news analysts that Clinton was well ahead in Florida based on record turnout in heavily Democratic counties during early voting. Miami-Dade set records for the most votes cast in a single day on the final Friday (more than 48,000) and then again on the final Sunday (53,000) of early voting, according to media accounts.¹⁰ Election data analyst Daniel Smith of the University of Florida announced that turnout at early voting among African Americans and Hispanics was up substantially over 2012. In fact, according to Smith, Hispanics had increased their numbers by 100%, and one of three of the Hispanic early voters had not voted at all in 2012. In all, the numbers indicated that Clinton held a significant lead—as much as 3 percentage points—based on the early voting turnout.¹¹

An examination of the final numbers for Miami-Dade bears out the optimism about early voting turnout. In fact, the actual number of people who voted during the early voting period more than doubled—from about 236,000 in 2012 to more than 475,000 in 2016. As a percentage of the total vote, early voting increased from about a quarter of the total ballots in 2012 (26.5%) to a little less than half in 2016 (47.8%).

The percentage of those who cast their ballots by mail went up a few points—from about 27.5% to 30.5%. But, the percentage of the vote cast on Election Day declined drastically. In 2016, Election Day voters only accounted for about 22% of all votes cast in Miami-Dade, compared to about 46% of all votes in 2012. In terms of the actual number of voters, Election Day 2016 saw a very substantial decline in the number of people who voted—from 408,000 in 2012 to 218,000 in 2016.

The increase in early voting as the method of choice was not confined to south Florida. Across the state of Florida, early voting attracted a much larger percentage of voters than in the past. For the first time, more Floridians voted during the early voting period than on Election Day. Statewide, more than 40% of Florida's voters cast their ballots during early voting. Only about 31% of voters cast ballots on Election Day, and 29% voted by mail.

The possible reasons for the huge increase in early voting in Miami-Dade, however, are more complex than they might at first appear. In 2012, Florida reduced the number of early voting days from fourteen to just eight. Since early voting was seen as the method of choice for Democratic voters, the Florida Democratic Party denounced the move as a blatant attempt to

¹⁰ "Florida's Early Voting Ends with Record Turnout in Democratic Strongholds," Nico Pitney, senior editor, *Huffington Post*, Nov. 7, 2016.

¹¹ It is sometimes difficult to tell what a particular analyst or news correspondent means by "early voting." For county and state election officials, it means the two-week period just prior to Election Day when voters may vote in person at established locations in their county. Sometimes, however, a news article may be referring to all ballots cast prior to Election day, which includes both in-person early voting and absentee ballots. For Daniel Smith's projections, see ElectionSmith blog postings at www.electionsmith.com.

suppress the Democratic vote. As predicted, the result was long lines in many Democratic strongholds, including Miami-Dade. Thus, it is likely that the shortened period and the long wait times reduced early voting turnout in 2012, particularly among Democratic voters. No doubt, many would-be early voters opted to vote on Election Day rather than stand in line for hours at early voting locations. But after the bad publicity and lawsuits of 2012, the state restored the fourteen-day early voting period.

This year, both parties encouraged their supporters to vote before Election Day—either by voting at early voting or by using vote-by-mail. Inducing voters to cast their ballots before Election Day allows the parties to use their predictive data models to judge how they are doing each day and re-direct resources accordingly. The county supervisors of elections also favor early voting because it is cheaper and less troublesome for them.

Thus, Election Day turnout may have been low simply because those who planned to vote had already done so. But it is also possible that many Democratic voters didn't bother to show up given the projections of an inevitable Clinton victory. And it is also possible that the projections for Clinton allowed Democratic voters who were not strong Clinton supporters to vote for a write-in or minor party candidate, believing that it no longer mattered.

At this point, we don't have enough data to answer the question of the effect of the projections on turnout. One problem, however, is that information on turnout was being gathered and processed in real-time to produce the projections. Thus, if Democratic turnout was below expectations, that should have been a part of the calculation. Presumably, that information was available and being fed into the models in real-time. The question of whether Election Day Democrats abandoned Clinton in favor of a protest vote—particularly given FBI Director Comey's announcement about the discovery of new Clinton e-mails—requires that we look at the election results.

Election Results

In fact, election results show that Clinton did indeed win a slightly larger percentage of the vote than Obama did in 2012 (63% vs 62%). But our research showed that support for Democratic presidential candidates has been steadily increasing in the county since the 2000 election, while support for the Republican candidates has declined considerably. In 2000, the county, like the state, split its vote for Bush and Gore—48.8% for each. In 2004, Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry took the county with 53% to Bush's 46%. In 2008, the county voted for Obama 58% to 42%. In 2012, Obama won resoundingly, 62% to 38%.¹² Between 2000 and 2016, the Democratic presidential candidate's share of the vote increased by 14 percentage points, while the Republican candidate's share declined by 15 percentage points.

¹² Official election results available both from Florida DOE and Miami-Dade Elections websites.

Other reasons given for the failure of the predictive models were (1) unexpected strength of minor party candidates among south Florida Democratic voters; and (2) high rates of residual votes (invalid write-ins, overvotes, and undervotes) in areas of south Florida that were her strongholds. The following table shows a breakdown of the Miami-Dade results:

Table 1.
Election Results, 2016 General Election, Miami-Dade County

	Party	Votes	% of Votes
Trump	REP	333,999	33.83%
Clinton	DEM	624,146	63.22%
Johnson	LPF	13,219	1.34%
Castle	CPF	1,273	0.13%
Stein	GRE	5,985	0.61%
De la Fuente	REF	1,582	0.16%
Write-In		6,987	0.71%
OV		3,472	0.35%
UV		7,940	0.80%

Source: <http://www.miamidade.gov/elections/results.asp>

While minor party candidates certainly gained more votes in this election than usual, it isn't clear that they hurt Clinton more than Trump. In fact, Miami-Dade voters were less likely to cast their ballots for minor party candidates than were Florida voters overall. Statewide, Johnson received 2.2%, but only 1.34% in Miami-Dade. Castle earned 0.2% at the state level, but only 0.13% in Miami Dade; Stein received 0.7% statewide, but 0.6% in Miami-Dade. Only De la Fuente received slightly more support in Miami Dade than statewide, with 0.1 statewide and 0.16 in Miami Dade.

Excessive residual vote rates in Clinton strongholds in south Florida have also been suggested as a possible reason for the turnout models to have gone astray. Compared to 2012, Miami-Dade's invalid write-in and undervote rates rose considerably, while its overvote rate declined. In 2012, invalid write-in ballots accounted for only 0.10%, compared to 0.71% this year. The undervote rate rose from 0.32% in 2012 to 0.80% in 2016.

Miami-Dade's rates of invalid write-ins, overvotes, and undervotes are not significantly different from those experienced statewide. Invalid write-ins, which were up dramatically statewide, were somewhat lower in Miami-Dade than statewide—0.70% vs 0.85%. The overvote rate for Miami-Dade at 0.35% is higher than the statewide rate of 0.15%, but that is nothing new. Unfortunately, the county has had a relatively high overvote rate in the past two presidential elections.¹³ The county's undervote rate at 0.80% is slightly higher than the 0.68% rate statewide,

¹³ For a discussion of overvote problems in Miami-Dade, see "Overvoting in Miami-Dade's 2008 General Election," accessible at <http://www.ffec.org/reports/factsheetedited.pdf>.

but that, too, is not unusual. The county's undervote rate was higher than the statewide rate in 2012 as well.

Further, is there any reason to believe that higher residual vote rates would affect Clinton more than Trump? Our examination of write-ins in Volusia County suggested that Trump may have lost as many votes as Clinton due to write-ins. The fact that the rate of write-in balloting in the state overall was higher than in Miami-Dade further suggests that this was not a predominantly Democratic problem. Overvotes are errors, and therefore related to machine or ballot problems, not voter preferences. Previous research has shown that overvoting may be more prevalent among minority voters, but the numbers are not significant enough to have affected this election. Undervotes, however, are somewhat higher in Miami-Dade than statewide. That could suggest a greater tendency to undervote among Democratic voters, but it is noteworthy that undervoting in Miami-Dade tends to be higher than it is statewide.

Results by Voting Method

Statewide, Clinton won by 5 percentage points among early voters—51.5% to 45.6%. She even won by about 2 percentage points (49.1% to 47.6%) among those who voted by mail—a category that usually disproportionately favors Republican candidates.¹⁴ Therefore, with more than 70% of the vote already accounted for, Clinton really did hold a sizable lead. In order to lose when less than 30 percent of the votes remained to be counted, she had to lose resoundingly on Election Day, which is what happened. Trump received about 53.4% of the vote to her 41.8%. This suggests that Election Day voters in Florida were far different in some respect from those who voted during early voting or by absentee. While early voters are usually more Democratic than those who vote on Election Day, it is unusual in my experience for absentee balloters to be more Democratic than Election Day voters.

Was this the case in Miami-Dade? The following table shows the county's results by method of voting. It is, more or less, what we would expect—that is, Clinton's percentage of the vote was higher during early voting than it was for either mail-in ballots or for Election Day. But unlike the statewide results, her Election Day and mail-in ballot percentages were almost identical. There is no huge difference as there is in statewide results.

Table 2.
Candidate Vote Percentages by Mode of Voting, Miami-Dade 2016 General Election

Candidate	Early Voting	Mail-In Ballots	Election Day	Total
Trump	31.56%	35.43%	34.81%	33.83%
Clinton	65.41%	59.75%	59.99%	63.22%

¹⁴ Smith, Daniel, "Presidential Vote by Method," ElectionSmith, posted January 19, 2017. Accessed at www.electionsmith.com.

Candidate	Early Voting	Mail-In Ballots	Election Day	Total
Johnson	1.08%	1.45%	1.68%	1.34%
Castle	0.08%	0.17%	0.16%	0.13%
Stein	0.51%	0.54%	0.87%	0.61%
De La Fuente	0.08%	0.27%	0.15%	0.16%
Write-Ins	0.55%	0.82%	0.87%	0.71%
Overvotes	0.18%	0.48%	0.53%	0.35%
Undervotes	0.52%	1.11%	0.95%	0.80%

Source: www.miamidade.gov/elections/results.asp

Also, we see that votes for Green Party candidate, Jill Stein, were somewhat higher on Election Day than on early voting or mail-in ballots. A previous inspection of Volusia County ballots indicated that Stein (as would be expected) probably took Democratic votes from Clinton. But we also see that votes for Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson, who took Republican votes, were also higher on Election Day. Undervotes were higher on Election Day than during early voting, but slightly less than on absentees. Without an examination of the ballots containing the undervotes, we can't say what this means.

In sum, the distribution of candidate votes and residual votes by method of voting seems unremarkable. It is precisely what we would expect to see given that so many Democratic voters showed up at early voting. It also reflects the usual differences in Democratic percentages by method of voting—quite unlike the statewide results.

Revelations from Precinct-level Results

We looked at precinct-level results to see if we could discern any patterns that might account for an overestimation of Clinton voters in Miami-Dade. Unfortunately, Miami-Dade has many very small precincts; some even have only one or two voters. As it was difficult to get any meaningful data from these, we eliminated all precincts with fewer than 200 voters from our analysis. We were left with 705 precincts: Clinton won 569 precincts, while Trump prevailed in only 136 precincts.

Of Clinton's 569 precincts, Democrats held the partisan edge in 376. She won 105 precincts where "Other" was the principal partisan affiliation. But more surprising is the fact that she won 87 precincts in which Republicans held a registration advantage.¹⁵ In some of these Republican precincts, she won by a fairly wide margin.¹⁶

In terms of racial and ethnic composition, Clinton won every precinct—136—in which black voters were the largest racial group. All of the black precincts were majority Democratic in registration. She won 97 precincts that were principally white. Of these, fourteen were also

¹⁵ Clinton won one precinct that had exactly the same number of Democrats and Republicans.

¹⁶ Precinct-level data on race and party affiliation were obtained from book closing reports on the Florida Division of Elections website at <http://dos.myflorida.com/elections/data-statistics/voter-registration-statistics/bookclosing/>.

Republican. The remaining 336 precincts were Hispanic in composition. Of these, 73 were also largely Republican.

In contrast, all but six of the 136 precincts won by Trump were Republican in registration. Three of these were Democratic precincts, and three were “Other” precincts. Five of the six non-Republican precincts won by Trump were mostly white; one was Hispanic.¹⁷

Fifteen of Trump’s 136 precincts had a plurality of white voters. The remaining 121 precincts were Hispanic. The data alone do not disclose the national origin of these voters, but the fact that all but one of the Hispanic precincts had a plurality of Republican registrants suggests that these precincts may be largely Cuban Americans. They are the only Hispanic group that tends to be more Republican than Democratic.

In contrast, Clinton not only carried nearly every Democratic precinct, but more than 40% of the precincts in which Republicans had a partisan advantage. She also won all but 3 of the 108 precincts in which NPAs were the largest group. She not only won all the black precincts, but 97 of the county’s 112 white precincts, and more than three-quarters (336 of 457) of the county’s Hispanic precincts. Even among the 194 precincts that were both Hispanic and Republican, she did reasonably well – taking 38 percent of the Republican base.

Trump’s precinct numbers suggest that he mostly won those voters any Republican candidate would expect to win – that is, Cuban American Republicans and white Republicans. But the numbers suggest that some white and Hispanic Republicans voted for Clinton instead of Trump. And he was not able to attract any significant numbers of Democratic or NPA voters.

Conclusions

At this point, we need to re-iterate that the question here is not why Trump won Florida. That is a related but different question. What we want to know is if the data from the election results in Miami-Dade support projections that Clinton would win based on the numbers in south Florida. And it seems that they do. Anyone looking at only the results from Miami-Dade would be likely to think Clinton would win statewide. It means we still do not know why the models overestimated her total votes.

Certainly, the early voting in Miami-Dade may have suggested that turnout would reach record levels, but it should have been obvious from the data being collected on Election Day that turnout would not shatter records. Given that models are looking at likely voters, there should have been plenty of evidence that there just weren’t that many Democratic voters left. Further,

¹⁷ Interestingly, the one that was Hispanic in registration only went for Trump by 20 votes.

there is no evidence that the lower level of voting at the polls was skewed. On the contrary, it looks as though the partisan distribution on Election Day was about what we would expect.

No doubt, Miami-Dade supplied fewer Clinton votes than the models predicted, but at most that would account for a deficit of about 15,000 votes. Given that the county's results seem perfectly normal, it doesn't seem likely that gross errors in estimating the Democratic vote here were the main culprit in the wildly inaccurate projections of a Clinton win in Florida.