

Florida Fair Elections Center ● 112 W. New York Ave., Ste. 211
DeLand, FL 32720 ● 386-736-8086 ● www.ffec.org
FloridaFairElections@yahoo.com

Report of Findings Ballot Inspection, Precinct 248 Miami-Dade's 2008 Presidential Election

By Mary K. Garber, Research Director

On July 30, 2009, FFEC inspected ballots from Miami-Dade's 2008 presidential election, with the aim of determining why the county experienced the highest overvote rate in the state in this race. Muslima Lewis of the ACLU and Carolyn Thompson of the Advancement Project participated in a portion of the ballot inspection.

Our previous research demonstrated that the ES&S intElect DS 200 digital scanner used by Miami-Dade for in-person voting had failed to provide adequate overvote protection as compared to the Premier Accu-Vote OS/OSx and the ES&S Optech.¹ The level of overvoting in Miami-Dade, however, was substantially above even the high levels experienced by other counties using the DS 200. Further examination of the data from Miami-Dade revealed that its minority voters were much likely to overvote than other voters—even though it was clear that minority voters were highly motivated to vote in the presidential race in this election.² The data also showed that majority black precincts with high overvote rates generally had much lower rates of overvoting for early voters than for election day voters (0.24% vs. 3.76%).³

The purpose of this ballot inspection was to determine what caused the excessive overvoting in the first place, why it affected minority voters more than others, and why early voters did better than those on election day.

Ballot Integrity/Chain of Custody Issues

In addition to requesting the ballots, we asked for the seal log to show an unbroken chain of custody for these ballots. We were troubled to discover that no such log exists. Carolina Lopez, who handles public records requests for Miami-Dade, was able to provide a sheet showing the original seal numbers from the ballot bags brought from the precincts, but acknowledged there was no contemporaneous record of the sealing and unsealing of the ballot bags. In addition to

http://www.ffec.org/documents/Invalid_Vote_Report_Revised_23June2009.pdf)

¹ For a complete discussion of the overvote problem in Florida's 2008 presidential election, see Mary K. Garber, "Examining Florida's High Invalid Vote Rate in the 2008 Presidential Election: How Voting System Design Flaws Led to Lost Votes," (Deland, FL: FFEC, June 23, 2009),

² Preliminary research indicates that the problems with the DS 200 may have disproportionately affected minority voters in general—not just in Miami-Dade. A report on overvoting and Florida's minority voters in the 2008 election will be forthcoming.

³ For more information about overvoting in Miami-Dade, see Mary K. Garber, "Overvoting in Miami-Dade's 2008 Presidential Election: Fact Sheet," (Deland, FL: FFEC, July 29, 2009), at http://www.ffec.org.

seal numbers, such logs should contain signatures, times, and purpose to memorialize each time ballots are unsealed and sealed. In fact, when Ms. Lopez cut the seals from the boxes for the inspection, we saw no evidence that the numbers from the removed seals were compared to the numbers previously recorded to see if they were the same. We were unable, after the fact, to determine which seal came from which box.

It is essential that the elections office be able to show an unbroken chain of custody on the ballots, not only through certification of the election, but for the entire 22-month retention period so the integrity of the ballots can be assured.

We suggest that Miami-Dade elections staff develop a rigorous procedure for handling ballots, including a seal log that contains the signatures of the person unsealing the box and the witnesses, the time and purpose of the unsealing, and the number of the seal. The same log should then show the signatures of the person re-sealing the ballots, the witness, the time, and the number of the new seal. We further suggest that ballots not be in the custody of a single person at any time. Some counties videotape ballot inspections in order to show that ballots are being properly handled.

The Inspection

Election Day ballots from precinct 248, a majority black precinct, with a large Haitian population, located at the North Central Branch Library, were selected for the inspection the day before. We looked at this precinct because it had the highest overvote rate -5%--on election day (39 of 780 ballots cast). Yet the same precinct had a much lower overvote rate for early voting of 0.25% (2 of 802 ballots cast).4 Overvoting among Precinct 248's Election Day voters was 20 times what it was for its early voters.

The Election Day ballots were contained in three cardboard storage boxes, sealed with brown "garbage bag" style seals. As noted earlier, there was no contemporaneous seal log to establish an unbroken chain of custody for the ballots.

The ballot consisted of two-sheets, front and back, for a total of four pages. The presidential race was in the first column of the first page. There were a total of fourteen pairs of candidates for president and vice president, including the write-in slot. (A copy of the ballot is attached as Appendix A to this report.)

Our examination confirmed that there were 780 election day ballots as shown on the county's election results. (EL 30A, with group detail, overvotes and undervotes). There were 39 overvotes listed in this precinct for an overvote rate of 5%.

Of these 39 overvotes, we found that three resulted from an attempt to change the vote and would have counted if the ballots had been inspected for intent. The remaining 36 overvoted ballots had multiple selections in the presidential race. Six overvoters had marked nearly all of the candidates – except McCain. (See Table 1 below.)

⁴ We began inspecting election day ballots from Precinct 108, a majority Hispanic precinct, but were not able to get very far into those in the time allotted. Thus, this report involves only ballots from Precinct 248. We were able to note, however, some of the same problems in 108 as we saw in precinct 248.

Table 1. Overvotes in 2008 Presidential Race, Election Day, Precinct 248, Miami-Dade County

	Number of	Intent
Type of Overvote	Ballots	Discernible?
Changed vote	3	Yes
Selected 2	11	No
Selected 3	10	No
Selected 4	2	No
Selected 5	4	No
Selected 6	1	No
Selected 7	2	No
Selected 8	0	No
Selected 9	0	No
Selected 10	1	No
Selected 11	2	No
Selected 12	1	No
Selected 13	2	No
	39	

Findings

The following evaluation of the ballots is based on our visual inspection of the ballots. Conclusions concerning ballot design and its effects are based on the usability principles and recommendations set forth in the Brennan Center's report on the usability of voting systems, which summarizes research on this topic.⁵ Generally, we found as follows:

- 1. **Overvoters knew their choice for president.** For the most part overvoters seemed to know their choice for president—in this case, Barack Obama—and how to fill in the oval next to his name. None of the overvoters made the mistake of marking McCain's name as well as Obama's.
- 2. **Overvoters knew to darken the oval.** Overvoters knew to darken the oval rather than making other types of marks. We saw ballots on which some voters had used check marks and X's, but overvoters generally did not. They filled in the oval as directed.
- 3. **These were not "write-in" overvotes.** The overvotes were not the result of marking the oval next to Obama's name and writing in his name as happened in the 2000 presidential race. The two instances where a voter wrote in Obama's name as well as darkening the oval beside Obama's name did not result in an overvote because the voter did not darken the write-in oval. We know this because the overvote count came out correctly without these.

⁵ Lawrence Norden, Jeremy M. Creelan, David Kimball, & Whitney Quesenbery. "The Machinery of Democracy: Usability of Voting Systems," Voting Rights & Elections Series, Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law.

- 4. Length of the race was confusing. What became clear to us very quickly was that voters were confused by the length of the presidential race, as well as the obscurity of the minor party candidates. While they knew the two major party candidates, they were not prepared for the numerous other candidates. Thirty of the 36 overvoters with multiple selections seemed to believe that the other candidates were running for one or more different races. It is easy to see why they would not have been aware of these candidates. With the exception of Ralph Nader and Bob Barr, the minor party candidates were virtually unknown to even the best-informed voters. As the presidential race was identical on all ballots in the state, this information helps us understand why the state's voting systems had to contend with so many overvoted ballots. This problem, combined with the inadequate overvote protection on the DS 200, was the likely cause of the excessive overvote rates statewide; however, it does not explain the much higher levels in Miami-Dade.
- 5. **Instructions were badly located.** The recommended location for voting instructions on a marksense ballot is the upper left-hand corner as most voters are accustomed to reading from left to right and top to bottom.⁶ Instructions placed in other locations may be overlooked or ignored. On this ballot, the general ballot instructions are at the top of the middle column—where it is easy for them to go unnoticed—at least until after the voter has already marked his selections in the presidential race. At the top of the first column instead is a mostly blank box that contains the bar code and printed precinct designation. This could have been placed in the upper right corner or the lower right corner as a large portion of the third column on the first page was blank. A sample ballot from Volusia's 2008 election is attached to show how ballot instructions were located on other ballots. Note that they are located across the top of the ballot and are very prominent so that it is unlikely that voters will miss them.
- 6. Necessary information for marking the ballot and correcting mistakes was missing. Ballot instructions should contain all the necessary information for marking the ballot and for correcting mistakes.⁷ The Miami-Dade ballot instructions tell the voter if he makes a mistake he should review the instructions for correcting his ballot. What instructions? There are none on the ballot. Were other instructions provided separately? If so, this is a poor idea. Complete instructions should be on the ballot itself—not separated from it. Requiring additional actions by the voter always increases the potential for mistakes. Surely this sentence doesn't mean that the voter should insert a ballot into the scanner that he knows is incorrectly marked. That should never happen. The voter should be plainly told to get another ballot if he or she makes a mistake. It is also a good policy to tell the voter *not* to attempt to correct a mistake because his ballot may not count if he does so. Again, the attached sample ballot from Volusia County's 2008 election contains instructions that are clear and informative. Voters are told that if they make a mistake" do not hesitate to ask for another ballot."

⁶ Based on research by David C. Kimball and Martha Kropf, Ballot Design and Unrecorded Votes on Paper-Based Ballots, 69 *Public Opinion Quarterly 508* (2005), http://www.umsl.edu/~kimballd/kkpoq05.pdf as cited in Lawrence Norden, Jeremy M. Creelan, David Kimball, & Whitney Quesenbery. "The Machinery of Democracy: Usability of Voting Systems," Voting Rights & Elections Series, Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law, p. 17.

⁷ "Ballot instructions should warn about the consequences of casting a spoiled ballot and explain how to correct a spoiled ballot (required by the Help America Vote Act of 2002). Norden et al., "Usability of Voting Systems," p. 20.

The Volusia instructions plainly state the possible negative consequences of attempting to erase or cross out mistakes, that is, the vote might not be counted.

The Miami-Dade ballot instructions also fail to give any guidance on voting for write-in candidates. On the Volusia ballot, we see that voters are given instructions in how to vote for candidates whose names are not printed on the ballot—that they must write in the name and darken the oval as well. (Unfortunately, voters are not told that only votes for persons who have previously qualified as write-in candidates will be counted.)

7. Multiple languages on the same ballot made text denser and print smaller and likely made it more difficult for language-minority voters to locate instructions in their language. The Miami-Dade ballot featured instructions in three languages — English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole. In the past, Miami-Dade has had separate ballots in these languages. This ballot combined all three languages on a single ballot. For non-English-speakers, the result was a ballot where they had to search for the instructions in their own language—if they were aware that the instructions were there. When it is necessary for voters to extract the information that pertains to them from a mass of text that does not apply or that they cannot understand, then there is an even greater potential for instructions to be ignored or missed. The most egregious examples of this are the instructions for each race. The instruction "Vote for One" is repeated in Spanish and Creole—in a single line above the candidates with only a small slash to mark the end of one and the beginning of the next. The result is that the Spanish and Creole instructions are not immediately evident. Again, we contrast the Miami-Dade ballot with the Volusia ballot where the "Vote for One" instruction is in bold and prominent.

Conclusions

We conclude that Miami-Dade's extremely high overvote rate was driven by the confluence of a number of factors: (1) a large number of new voters who were as unfamiliar with the ballot and voting process as they were with the technology and who needed special assistance in order to complete the ballot successfully, (2) a poorly designed ballot that compounded the problem by giving these voters little guidance on how to mark their ballots and what to do about mistakes, and (3) a voting system that provided inadequate protection against such errors. It is also likely that the language differences exacerbated these problems.

Despite the obvious lack of knowledge and experience among the precinct 248 overvoters, it is important to remember that early voters from this precinct did vastly better than their election day counterparts. Even more surprising is the fact that early voters in these precincts had an overvote rate *better* than the overall average for all Miami-Dade voters. Thus, we must conclude that the problems with the poorly designed ballot and inadequate overvote protection were substantially mitigated by circumstances at early voting. What were the differences? We can't say for sure without more research. It is possible that demographic differences between early voters and election day voters (such as age, language proficiency, etc.) accounted for a portion of the difference, but it is likely that the most important difference was the presence of knowledgeable, highly motivated election officials, aided by a large contingent of partisan poll watchers, attorneys, and election protection activists.

Overvote protection is vital to prevent mismarked ballots from being discarded without giving voters a chance to correct their mistakes. When errors are inadvertent, this notice is all that is required. But if voters have mismarked their ballot because they do not understand the ballot or the voting process, then the overvote protection is only the first, but vital, step in the process. It warns that there is a problem, but it cannot solve the problem. At that point, there is no substitute for a human being who can answer the voter's questions about the ballot, the voting process, and the voting system—in the language understood by the voter.

Good overvote protection serves another vital function: it tells election officials when the ballot is generating an excessive number of voter errors. If election officials had been aware during early voting about the deficiencies with the ballot, they could have taken measures to mitigate these problems before election day.

It is chilling to note that Miami-Dade—along with the other Florida counties using the DS 200—actually did far better than they might have. They benefited enormously from the Obama campaign's emphasis on early voting. If the distribution of voters by mode of voting had been the same as in previous elections, the number of lost votes would have skyrocketed. In a close election, it is easy to imagine that these overvotes—which disproportionately affected one of the candidates—could easily have made the difference in the outcome of the election, thus setting up an election dispute similar to the 2000 debacle.

Recommendations

The purpose of forensic investigations into election problems is to allow election officials to take remedial actions to prevent future full-scale election disasters. To this end, we recommend that the Miami-Dade supervisor of elections take the following actions, in addition to those recommended in our full report on the overvote problems with the DS 2008:

- <u>Improve location and layout of ballot instructions.</u> Make sure that instructions are prominently located so that voters do not ignore or miss them. Get an expert in document design to help select a layout for the instructions that will draw the voters' eye to them and emphasize their importance. Look at how instructions were located on ballots in counties with low overvote rates.
- Reassess whether ballots containing multiple languages are effectively serving languageminority voters. The elections office should conduct research to determine if its higher residual vote rates among minority voters are being driven by the placement of all three languages on a single ballot. The elections office should seek the advice of experts in the design of multiple language signage and instructions about alternative designs. This might allow the elections office to develop a design that incorporates all languages on a single ballot without disadvantaging groups of voters. If this is not possible, we believe it will be necessary to have separate ballots for each language group in order to serve these populations, which we realize would be much more expensive.

6

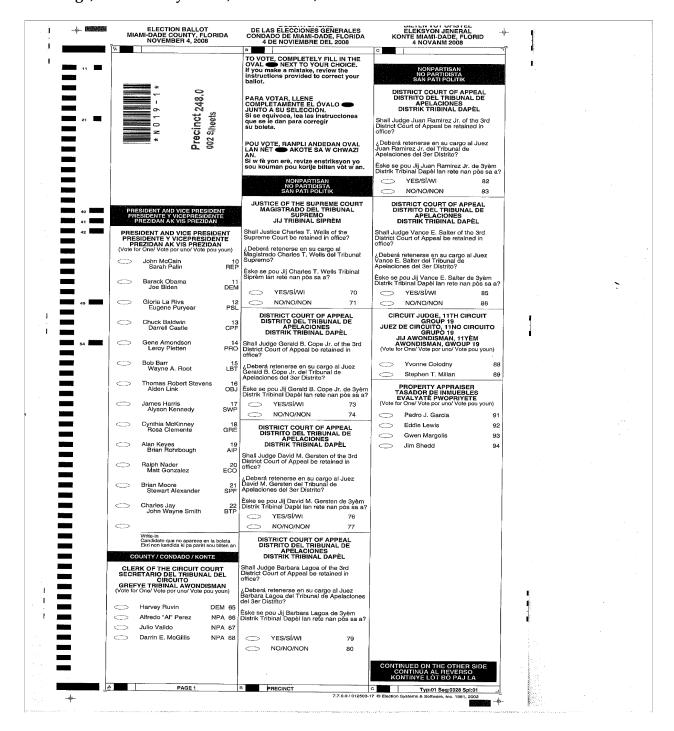
⁸ Mary K. Garber, "Examining Florida's High Invalid Vote Rate in the 2008 Presidential Election: How Voting System Design Flaws Led to Lost Votes," (Deland, FL: FFEC, June 23, 2009), http://www.ffec.org/documents/Invalid_Vote_Report_Revised_23June2009.pdf)

- <u>Give voters all necessary information for filling out the ballot and correcting mistakes.</u> All information necessary for filling out the ballot should be contained in the instructions, including how to vote for a write-in candidate and what to do if the voter makes a mistake. Also, the instructions should alert the voter that his vote may not count if he attempts to correct a mistake rather than getting a new ballot.
- Conduct usability testing on proposed ballot designs prior to their finalization. Testing experts can help elections officials set up and conduct usability tests of ballot designs with target populations to identify problems before they occur. When this isn't feasible, elections officials can ask ballot design experts to review and critique proposed ballot designs.
- Follow the guidelines and standards for usability set out in the EAC's "Voluntary Voting System Standards" and the Brennan Center's report, "The Usability of Voting Systems."

 The Brennan Center's report summarizes research into the design of optical scan ballots and presents a list of usability principles elections officials should follow based on that research.
- Conduct forensic studies to determine causes of disproportionate vote loss for certain precincts or by mode of voting. The Miami-Dade elections office should conduct research to determine precisely what practices, procedures, training, or other circumstances led to such differential rates of overvoting during election day versus early voting. The findings of that research should inform its future poll worker training and voter education programs.
- Make sure that greater resources are devoted to precincts with large numbers of new voters
 and voters with special needs to ensure that these voters are not unnecessarily
 disenfranchised. The difference between the overvote rate among early voters and election
 day voters in this precinct makes it clear that such an effort would be likely to reduce the
 number of voter errors significantly.

Appendix A.

First Page, Election Day Ballot, Precinct 248, Miami-Dade's 2008 General Election



Appendix B.

First Page, Sample Election Day Ballot, Volusia County's 2008 General election

BS 32	,	SAMPLE BALLOT VOLUSIA COUNTY, FLORIDA NOVEMBER 4, 2008	
 Use a black or dark blue bal If you make a mistake, don't 	ipoint or fe thesitate to se name is	ask for a new ballot. If you erate or make oft not printed on the ballot, fill in the oval	
PRESIDENT AND VICE PRE	SIDENT	NONPARTISAN JUDICIAL	NONPARTISAN COUNTY
PRESIDENT AND VICE PRE (Vote for One) Asha HeCala Sarah Palin	REP	JUSTICE OF THE SUPREME COURT Shall Justice Charles T, Wells of the Supreme Court be retained in office? YES	SHERIFF (Viole for One) Ben F. Johnson Kenin N. Vaughn
Garack Obama Joe Biden Girin La Rive Eugene Purpeur	PSL	NO FIFTH DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL Shall Judge Kerry I. Drander of the Fifth District Court of Appeal be retained in	PROPERTY APPRAISER (Vote for One) Bloggen B. Gilrestt, Jr.
Chuck Baldwin Darrell Codie	CPF	CAER CAER	Ruth M. Zimmerman supervision of succritions (Vote for One)
Gene Arondon Larcy Fletten Bob Barr Wayne A. Root	LBT	NO FIFTH DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL Shall Judge C. Nan Lawson of the Fifth	Ann McFall Susan Rose Pyrobon VOLUSIA SOIL AND WATER
Thomas Robert Stevens Alden Unk	oau	District Court of Appeal be retained in office? — YES	CONSERVATION DISTRICT GROUP 1 (Vote for One) Gordon Curris
James Harris Alyson Kennedy Cynthia McKinney	GRE	FIFTH DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL Shall Judge Sichard B. Orbogy of the	Way Preside VOLUSIA SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT GROUP 4
Ross Clemente Atan Keyes Brian Robitbough	AIP	Shall Judge Richard B. Orleger of the Fifth District Court of Appeal be retained in office? YES	(Viole for One) H. Alan Burton Con Kanfer
Raiph Nader Mat Gonzalez Brian Moore	SPF	MO FIFTH DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL Shall Judge William Could Palmer of the	WEST VOLUSIA HOSPITAL AUTHORITY GROUP A, SEAT 1 (Vote for One)
Stewart Alectander Charles Jay John Wayne Smith	OTP	Shall Judge William David Palmer of the Fish District Court of Appeal be retained in office? YES	John D. Adams Tracy Lungsist WEST VOLUSIA
		○NO	HOSPITAL AUTHORITY GROUP A, SEAT 2 (Vote for One)
Witte-In CONGRESSIONAL		FIFTH DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL. Shall Judge Thomas D. Savaya of the Fifth District Court of Appeal be retained.	Tereta K. Apgar
REPRESENTATIVE IN COM- DISTRICT 24 (Vote for One)	GRESS	in offse? YESNO	
Tom Feeney Sugarne M. Koomas	REP		
Gauray Bhola	NPA		
LEGISLATIVE			
STATE SENATOR: DISTRICT 7 (Vote for One)			
Dreiya Lyan Richard Paul Dembinsky	REP NPA		
STATE REPRESENTATI DESTRICT 33 (Vote for One)	WE		
Gandra "Sandy" Adams Robert Acosta Franklin Penez	REP DEM NPA		
		Precincts 412C, 4188	
		VOTE BOTH SIDES OF BALLOT	
		MOT Get SIRGEL	