

The American Election Process

Part 4 - Florida votes Trouble in Election year 2000

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Did George W. Bush really beat Al Gore in 2000? The question was widely debated by all sides after the election. How was it possible that in spite of the fact that Al Gore got more votes than George W. Bush, he did not become president? Moreover, what happened in Florida during the vote counting? In this article, we are going to take a closer look at just that.

Florida votes

Not since the 1960s had a presidential election been as close as the one in 2000. Up until Florida, Bush had won 29 states and 246 electoral votes, and Gore had 19 states and 249 electoral votes. Both candidates were about 25 votes short of the critical number of 270. A win in Florida would have given each candidate the 25 electoral votes needed to win the president post (Balz, Washington Post, Nov 8, 2000).

Because of the close race, Florida became most important, and both candidates knew that as soon as the result was presented the race would be decided. Therefore, when the announcement came that Bush had won the state, the Democrats started to prepare Al Gore's concession speech (showing his support of Bush). However, something happened. Soon some other numbers were reported in favor of Al Gore. After a long time of confusion, an official and final result was made, and Bush was announced the winner of Florida. When all the precincts had reported in, Bush was leading but the numbers kept shifting. According to Bush campaign chairman Don Evans the margin was 1200 votes (this means that Bush won Florida by only 1200 votes), while the CNN claimed it was only 224.

The election law in Florida calls for a recount if the winner's margin is less than 0.5% and the result did not reach that margin. Al Gore's people contacted the Florida Supreme Court and the court ruled in favor for a recount of the votes, which meant that it was still possible for Al Gore to win the race. The recount started December 9 but was stopped after just a few hours. George W Bush had filed for an appeal at the U.S Supreme Court, arguing that a recount would cause "irreparable harm" to him. The U.S Supreme Court ruled, with a 5-4 split among the justices in his favor, and the decision made by the Florida Supreme Court was overturned. Justice Antonin Scalia gave this explanation during a statement; "Count first and rule upon legality afterward is not a recipe for producing election results that have the public acceptance democratic stability requires" (Balz, Washington Post, Dec 10, 2000). The result was final. George W. Bush had won Florida and therefore had the necessary 270 electoral votes to be elected president.

Problematic voting-system

The reason for all this uncertainty seemed to be voting and counting problems. The discussion revolved around ballot design, voter error and voting machines not working as predicted. The problem surfaced in Florida, and if some of the invalid votes had been counted, it might have changed the outcome of the election. It was clear that several hundred people wanted to cast a vote for either one of the candidates but failed to do so in a correct way.

One problem was that some voting machines disregarded ballots as invalid even though they might have been considered valid if they would have been counted by hand. In addition to that, thousands of ballots in Florida were invalidated because they had too many marks. An example of an incorrectly marked ballot is when a voter correctly marked a candidate but also wrote down the candidate's name. A study made at the University of Chicago showed that if these ballots had been included during the recount, Gore would have won by a margin of less than 200 votes (CNN.com, Florida Recount Study).

Another problem that the Florida voters had to face was strangely designed ballots. In heavily democratic Palm Beach County, the voter had to use the so-called "Butterfly" Ballot. The design made several voters so confused that they didn't know how to use the ballot at all. The Florida Recount study performed by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) shows that over 5000 voters made a mark for Al Gore and at the same time one for the Reform Party nominee Pat Buchanan. These two candidates are on opposite sides of the political scale, and it is very unlikely that the intention would have been to vote for them at the same time. An addition 1600 voters marked their ballots for Bush and Buchanan. If these disregarded ballots had been taken into count, the study shows that Al Gore could have had another thousand votes (CNN.com, Florida Recount Study).

The "Caterpillar" ballot was another design failure. These ballots were used in eighteen other counties in Florida, and the Florida Recount study shows that more 15,000 voters using this ballot did not mark it correctly. On the Caterpillar ballot, the six or seven largest parties' nominees were listed in one column and the minor parties' candidates at the top of a second one on the same page. This design confused voters into believing that the second column represented a new race, and therefore voters' made two marks instead of one. If this mistake had been eliminated and these votes had been valid, Al Gore would have gotten thousands of additional votes.

However, during a recount, these ballots would have been declared invalid under any interpretation of the law, and therefore would not have changed the outcome of the election. Therefore, the conclusion made by the Florida Recount study was that a recount would not have given Al Gore the necessary extra votes. George W. Bush would still have won.

Conclusion

This is the question which arose after the election: was Bush elected with the help of mistakes in the voting system and a doubtful ruling by the court, or did he win fairly and was he the one most Americans wanted as president?

The election result shows, in absolute numbers, that a majority of Americans wanted Al Gore for president, but Bush won more states which gave him the number of electoral votes needed to win the presidency. Therefore, during the election of 2000 the rare thing happened that the nominated president did not have the majority of voters behind him.

PRESIDENT	Electoral Votes	States Won	Vote %	Votes
BUSH	271	30	48%	50,456,169
GORE	266	21	48%	50,996,116

Source: CNN - <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/>

The other 4% went to the Green Party candidate Ralph Nader and other third parties. Even though Nader did not reach 5%, which is the threshold for eligibility for federal funds for the election in 2004, he appears to have won enough votes in states such as Florida, Oregon, Arkansas and Wisconsin to affect the outcome in those states (Balz, Washington Post, Nov 8, 2000).

Several studies show that a recount would not have led to a different outcome. A different and more understandable design in ballots might have, but that should have been changed before the election started. It also is easy to forget that this was one of the closest races in history, and before the Florida count, either one of the major candidates could have won. On the other hand, no one can deny that the problems in Florida had an influence on people's views and beliefs in the U.S voting system. Instead of asking if the right candidate won, maybe the question should be; how can we prevent these problems from happening again?

Suggested reading:

Balz, Dan, Election Hangs on Florida Recount, *Washington Post*, November 8, 2000; Page A01

Baltz, Dan, Divided U.S Supreme Court Orders Freeze on Fla. Count, *Washington Post*, December 10, 2000; Page A01

CNN.com, Florida recount study: Bush still wins
<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2001/florida.ballots/stories/main.html>

CNN.com
<http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2000/>

Glossary

Ballot

A ballot is the form which voters use to mark which candidate they prefer.

Capitalism

This is an economic system with minimal governmental regulation. The individual can produce, exchange, and own goods, garments, or services. Another definition could be that the basic premise of capitalism is that markets are efficient and should function without interference from the government.

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Caucus

A caucus is a group of people with common goals or characteristics. In a political sense, a caucus is a meeting where voters come together to choose nominees to represent their political party in a general election.

Congress

The congress is made up of U.S Senate and the House of Representatives. The Congress has, among other issues, has the power to make Federal laws but the president has to sign them. In very rare cases, the President can veto these laws and the congress, with a super-majority, can override him.

Conservatism

This is a political philosophy where the national government does not interfere in the economy and regulate social life. In this philosophy, the state and local governments have the power to make decisions. Another definition could be that conservatism is a political philosophy or attitude emphasizing respect for traditional institutions, distrust of government activism, and opposition to sudden change in the established order.

Constitution

This is the structure and fundamental principles of a government. It is usually in written form, and in the USA, all other laws, regulations, and executive actions must be consistent with it.

Counties

The largest administrative division of most states in the United States.

Democracy

Democracy is a form of government where people vote on different issues and the majority decide the outcome.

Electoral College

Each state has a number of electoral votes equal to the number of members each state sends to the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. Together these electoral votes constitute the Electoral College.

Electors

People pledged to a certain candidate who during the Electoral College vote for that candidate to become the next president.

Federalism

In this political system, powers are divided and shared between national, state, and local levels.

Liberalism

Liberalism is a political view that emphasizes individuals' freedom of actions. Modern day liberalism rests on the positive use of government to promote individual rights and equality.

Majority party

This party has the majority of seats in the House of Representatives or the Senate.

Minority party

This party has the minority of seats in the House of Representatives or the Senate.

Mission

A mission is the series of steps you will take to achieve your vision.

National convention

A national convention is a meeting of party delegates that is held every four years. The delegates are elected in state primaries and caucuses, and the conventions' primary purpose is to nominate the presidential and vice-presidential candidates.

Republic

This is a form of democracy in which representatives who are chosen by the people make decisions.

Platform

In a political context, a platform presents a party's views and standpoints in fundamental issues.

Precinct

A small area within a larger area. It could be, for example, a city or an island within a state.

Primary

In a primary election, party members choose their delegates through election. They go to the poll and indicate their top choice for nominee.

Privatizing

Privatizing implies reducing the governments' influence by selling out different government own infrastructure such as telephone, energy or the road net, to the private sector.

Socialism

This is a philosophy where the governmental authority should be used to make equal socioeconomic outcomes in terms of education, welfare, and health.

Two-party system

A political system where nearly all elected office is held by the candidates from the two parties with the highest numbers of voters.