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Records: Too many votes in 37% of Detroit's precincts

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State Elections Director Chris Thomas explains a state audit of 20 precincts in Detroit where ballot boxes contained fewer votes than counted in the election poll book. Chad Livengood, The Detroit News

Voting machines in more than one-third of all Detroit precincts registered more votes than they should have during last month's presidential election, according to Wayne County records prepared at the request of The Detroit News.

Detailed reports from the office of Wayne County Clerk Cathy Garrett show optical scanners at 248 of the city's 662 precincts, or 37 percent, tabulated more ballots than the number of voters tallied by workers in the poll books. Voting irregularities in Detroit have [spurred plans for an](#)

[audit](#) by Michigan Secretary of State Ruth Johnson's office, Elections Director Chris Thomas said Monday.

The Detroit precincts are among those that couldn't be counted during a statewide presidential recount that began last week and ended Friday following a decision by the Michigan Supreme Court.

Democrat Hillary Clinton overwhelmingly prevailed in Detroit and Wayne County. But Republican President-elect Donald Trump won Michigan by 10,704 votes or 47.5 percent to 47.3 percent.

Overall, state records show 10.6 percent of the precincts in the 22 counties that began the retabulation process couldn't be recounted because of state law that bars recounts for unbalanced precincts or ones with broken seals.

The problems were the worst in Detroit, where discrepancies meant officials couldn't recount votes in 392 precincts, or nearly 60 percent. And two-thirds of those precincts had too many votes.

"There's always going to be small problems to some degree, but we didn't expect the degree of problem we saw in Detroit. This isn't normal," said Krista Haroutunian, chairwoman of the Wayne County Board of Canvassers.

State officials are planning to examine about 20 Detroit precincts where ballot boxes opened during the recount had fewer ballots than poll workers had recorded on Election Day.

"We're assuming there were (human) errors, and we will have discussions with Detroit election officials and staff in addition to reviewing the ballots," Thomas said.

The Detroit News last week was first to [report that more than half of Detroit would be ineligible](#) for the recount because of the irregularities. The results were based on county reports obtained by The News.

The new report, compiled by Wayne County elections officials, sheds light on the extent of the problems and shows a systematic tendency toward counting more votes than the previous Wayne County report, which didn't specify if precincts had over-counted or under-counted ballots.

Republican state senators last week called for an investigation in Wayne County, including one precinct where a Detroit ballot box contained only 50 of the 306 ballots listed in a poll book, according to an observer for Trump.

City officials have told state officials that ballots in that precinct were never taken out of a locked bin below the voting machine tabulator on Election Day, said Secretary of State spokesman Fred Woodhams.

“That’s what we’ve been told, and we’ll be wanting to verify it,” Woodhams said. “At any rate, this should not have happened.”

The state is not calling the audit an investigation, “but based on what we find, it could lead to more,” he said.

City Clerk Janice Winfrey and Elections Director Daniel Baxter did not return multiple messages.

Audit ‘good place to start’

State Sen. Patrick Colbeck, R-Canton, called the planned audit “a good place to start” that could help determine whether Detroit elections workers “followed the correct procedures” or “fraudulent procedures” on Election Day.

Whether a poll book mismatch suggests there are too few or too many ballots in any given precinct, “it’s concerning,” said Colbeck, who spearheaded the request for probe. “It’s supposed to reconcile to zero.”

It’s unclear how many votes were added in Detroit. That’s because county officials have not tabulated how much the ballots were off in precincts with discrepancies of at least five votes.

Of the data available, though, machines tallied at least 388 more ballots, according to a Detroit News analysis of the records. That’s 0.16 percent of the 248,000 ballots cast in the city that voted for Clinton 95 percent to 3 percent over Trump.

Haroutunian said she didn’t know what to make of the trend toward over-counting because there was no explanation from Detroit poll workers. The city had another 34 precincts that were out of balance, but they included explanations for the discrepancies.

Under state law, those precincts could be recounted because there were explanations. The law states that original results stand in precincts that can’t be recounted.

Washtenaw County Elections Director Ed Golembiewski said discrepancies tend to “even themselves out” — there are usually about as many precincts whose machines report more votes than fewer votes. But he said the large number of precincts with over-votes in Detroit isn’t necessarily significant.

“It’s usually human error,” Golembiewski said. “I have not seen anyone intentionally try to run an extra ballot. You aren’t going to rig an election three ballots at a time. You’re going to need a far more systematic and thorough approach than a couple of people here and there stuffing three extra ballots.”

In Washtenaw County, 23 of 150 precincts, about 15 percent, could not be recounted. Other counties with high percentages of uncountable precincts include Branch (27 percent); Cass (24 percent); Wayne (24 percent) and Ionia (24 percent).

Who's responsible for errors?

Last week, Baxter told The News 87 optical scanners broke on Election Day. He said many jammed when voters tried repeatedly to stuff single ballots into scanners, which can result in erroneous vote counts if poll workers don't adjust counters.

Former Detroit mayoral candidate Tom Barrow, who has challenged the city's elections process for years, said blaming workers is a cop-out. According to city protocol, all precincts are supposed to be balanced when the ballot boxes are sealed at the end of the night, he said.

"The city is responsible. Janice Winfrey is responsible," Barrow said. "This didn't happen because of crazy, dyslexic senior citizens who are working as poll workers, like they want to portray this. That's people who are trying to deny responsibility."

He has asserted on social media that Winfrey cost Clinton the election in Michigan.

Others said there could be benign explanations.

Detroit's ballot was two pages because it included dozens of candidates for the local Board of Education. The number of pages can cause machines to jam and lead them to count too many ballots, said Genesee County Clerk John Gleason.

"Usually, if there's a problem, it tends to be more voters than votes," he said. "But when we're off, we should be very, very close, like one ballot."

Genesee County, which like Wayne County is heavily Democratic, couldn't recount 14 of the 142 precincts it had started before the court scuttled the process. Gleason took office in 2013 and said he had to "ride herd" over city clerks to ensure they reconciled precincts.

"Nothing is perfect. You have paper. You have humidity. You have people hanging onto ballots," Gleason said.

"So there's reasons, but there should be no excuses."

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Detroit's mismatched votes

Here is a breakdown of the irregularities in Detroit's 662 precincts:

■ **236** precincts in balance — equal numbers of voters counted by workers and machines

■**248** precincts with too many votes and no explanation (77 were 1 over; 62 were 2 over, 37 were 3 over, 20 were 4 over, 52 were 5 or more over).

■**144** precincts with too few votes and no explanation (81 were 1 under, 29 were 2 under; 19 were 3 under; 7 were 4 under; 8 were 5 or more under)

■**34** precincts out of balance but with an explanation

Source: Wayne County Clerk's Office

<http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2016/12/12/records-many-votes-detroits-precincts/95363314/>