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## Pesky 'undervotes' raise concerns in Dade

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More than 1,000 Miami-Dade residents failed to cast a vote, or had a vote that did not count, in Tuesday's strong-mayor referendum -- a tiny percentage of the overall tally but still worrisome to some voter advocates watching the single-question ballot.

Though the difference wasn't anywhere near enough to swing the election -- unlike November's disputed Sarasota election to replace Rep. Katherine Harris -- the "undervotes" are still a concern, with election-reform advocates leery of touch-screen machines that do not leave paper trails.

"People don't go there and forget what they went for and walk out. I don't buy that," said Sandy Wayland, president of the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition.

Still, what makes these undervotes different and less sensational than others is that Miami-Dade absentee voters on optical-scan paper ballots cast nearly as high a percentage of undervotes.

News of the undervote total was cause for concern in Tallahassee on Wednesday, a day after a Senate committee held a hearing to discuss problems with touch-screen machines, the Sarasota election and the benefits of a paper trail system.

Only 780 -- or less than 1 percent -- of the 110,106 Miami-Dade residents who cast votes on the iVotronic touch-screen machines Tuesday either failed to cast votes or did not have their votes counted. County Mayor Carlos Alvarez's strong-mayor proposal won the referendum by about 20,000 votes.

"We've seen it time and time again: People go in and think if they don't vote, they can't vote the next election," said Kurt Browning, Florida's new secretary of state. "Or these people want to keep their voting record perfect, and so what do they do? They go in, they don't want to vote. They just want to have their activity registered."

Ion Sancho, Leon County's outspoken elections chief, said that at the very least, touch-screen machines pose an electronic literacy test for people who might not be computer-savvy. Sancho also took issue with Browning's explanation, arguing that voting systems with a paper trail at least create a chance to find out what went wrong.

The iVotronic machines used in Miami-Dade have no paper trail.

"It's part of the [state] office's tradition of spinning, hiding the truth or just lying," Sancho said. "These machines scare people. They are tough for some people to use."

Chimed in Sen. Lee Constantine, an Altomonte Springs Republican and chairman of the Senate's Elections Committee: "It's more evidence we need to start moving in another direction."

Miami-Dade election chief Lester Sola and at least one national voting expert took the undervote totals in stride. Sola compared the number to the March 2005 slot-machine referendum, the county's last single-question ballot. In that election, 1.2 percent of the electronic votes registered as undervotes.

"They just don't understand it, and they walk away and leave," Sola said of some voters.

Ted Selker, who chairs a joint project between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Caltech launched to prevent a repeat of the 2000 presidential election fiasco, called anything less than 1 percent "a very good number."

"In our experiments, about one out of 30 choices people make on ballots is actually an unintended vote," he said.

An undervote can occur either on an absentee ballot or on the touch-screen machine. On the absentee ballot, it occurs when a voter does not make a clear choice or votes outside the box; an undervote on the touch screen occurs when no vote is recorded.

In Tuesday's referendum, an elections spokesman said staff members noted that on some undervoted ballots, voters wrote in the margin "I vote yes"; others circled "yes" rather than filling in the ballot. Were there a recount, those votes would count because the intent of the voter was clear.

An undervote isn't easy to accomplish with a touch-screen machine. If someone fails to cast a vote, then hits the vote button, the machine will tell them. If they fail to cast a vote and don't hit the vote button, the machine will not allow the next person to cast a vote, and will eventually sound an alarm to alert poll workers.

The poll worker, who cannot alter any vote, then records the fact that someone was there -- not whether they voted or not -- and hits the vote button again.

Miami-Dade County spent \$24.5 million to equip its 749 precincts with the iVotronic touch-screen system from Election Systems &

Software in 2002 after the disputed 2000 presidential election. But increased pressure from advocates swayed Sola to look into a system that provides a paper trail.

So, two years ago, Sola studied an optical-scan system that would leave a paper trail and determined that, mostly through reduced labor costs, the system would pay for itself in three years. It could cost as much as \$12 million.

But that plan has stalled, in part, because the secretary of state has not yet certified the equipment.

*Miami Herald staff writer Jack Dolan contributed to this report.*

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