

ASA Member Don A. Dillman Analyzes Palm Beach County Florida Ballot

Several people have asked for my opinion on whether the format of the November 7, 2000, general election ballot in Palm Beach County, Florida, resulted in more people voting for Buchanan than had intended to do so. This statement is in response to those requests.

I cannot say with certainty whether the format of this ballot affected a certain number of people who thus voted by mistake for Pat Buchanan, while intending to vote for another candidate. That would require knowledge of what specific people did in the voting booth Tuesday, which I don't have. However, based on my experiences and past research concerning how the visual format of questionnaires affects respondents to surveys, I believe it is likely that certain visual features of the ballot resulted in some individuals who wished to vote for Gore inadvertently punching the second hole in the column, thus resulting in a vote for Buchanan. These visual attributes may also have resulted in double punches as people attempted to correct their error. However, I do not think that voters who intended to vote for Bush were similarly affected.

I believe this outcome occurred because of the joint effects of several undesirable features of the Palm Beach County ballot, rather than a single attribute. These factors include: (1) the listing of some candidates for President on the left-hand page of the ballot, while others were listed in a separate group on the right-hand page; (2) use of a single column of circles between the pages to register one's vote, regardless of which page contained the candidate's name; (3) the lack of familiarity some people may have had with how to answer a punch ballot printed in this format; (4) the likelihood that most people knew which candidate they wanted to vote for prior to seeing any of the choices on the ballot; (5) the location of the presidential choices on the first pages of the ballot; and (6) the visual process people typically follow when registering preferences on a survey questionnaire or election ballot when it is unnecessary to read all choices (names of presidential candidates, for example) before registering one's vote.

In order to mark their ballot, it was necessary for people to insert their paper ballot underneath the booklet that showed the ballot choices. They were then required to use a stick-pin answering device to punch through a circle on the ballot to make a hole in the paper ballot.

When people open and/or begin to read material printed in a booklet format, they tend to look first at the left-hand page and focus their attention there. Because this is a ballot in which most people expect to vote on most or all of the choices, it is also likely that they would expect to answer the questions in order. It is therefore likely that many voters began reading the left-hand page without first looking at the second page and seeing what material was printed there. Thus, they may have been unaware that some of the candidates for president were listed on the opposite page.

Most people who completed the ballot knew who they wanted to vote for prior to reading the list of names. Thus, rather than attempting to read all of the answer possibilities before marking their choice, they simply looked for the name of the candidate for whom they wished to vote. The

typical procedure would be to start at the top of the list and read downwards until the preferred candidate was found.

After reading the first candidate's name (Bush) on the left-hand page, people who wanted to vote for him should have been guided to the answer column by the number and an arrow. That circle was also the first (or top) circle in the answer column. It therefore seems quite unlikely that the voter would by-pass the first circle and mark the second circle, thereby voting for Buchanan, by mistake.

In contrast, people who wanted to vote for Gore, and had just seen Bush's name, would be expected to go straight down the page as they searched for Gore's name. After finding it, people are likely to have moved their fingers and thumb that held the stick-pin punching device to the appropriate punching location. It is likely that in the process of doing this some people (particularly those who are right-handed) did not see the number and arrow pointing to the appropriate answer circle because it was obscured by their hand. They may have also concluded that the second hole in the column was the correct one to punch, simply because Gore was the second candidate on the page. Thus, both the locational feature (being second) and mechanics of answering seem likely to have worked together in a way that led some people to inadvertently punch the second hole (Buchanan choice) rather than the third hole (Gore choice).

The possibility that some circles in the column of possible answers applied to Buchanan (on the next page) is unlikely to have occurred to some respondents. It is most unusual for any ballot or questionnaire to list choices to the first page to the right of the names, while choices to the second page are listed to the left of the names, and in addition to have all of them listed in a single column. Therefore, I would expect that some respondents had no idea that any of the choices in the answer column applied to the next page instead of to the candidates on page one. This problem was accentuated by the presidential preference being listed on the first page of the ballot, before the respondent had figured out, through experience, exactly how the ballot worked.

It does seem likely that some respondents who marked the second circle would have noticed that it was not aligned with the Gore box in the same way as the first circle was aligned with the Bush box. However, among those who noticed the different alignment this feature may have been discounted, because of their having to link together physically separate components (the actual paper ballot and the booklet listing candidate names) and the association of the second circle in the column with the second candidate (Gore) choice.

I would also expect that some ballots were double punched (Gore and Buchanan) as voters started to punch the second circle, realized they were making an error, and attempted to recover from it.

Despite the visual and mechanical problems that individually and jointly increase the likelihood that Gore preference voters unintentionally and unknowingly voted for Buchanan, the nature of the problem is such that it would not affect most voters. Most people are able to "figure-out" how to answer questions when they are presented in a visually inappropriate way, as was done in this situation. However, I am also confident that some Gore-preference voters would have made the

error described above. At the same time, and for the reasons described above, Bush-preference voters were not likely to make the same mistake.

*NOTE: Don A. Dillman is the Thomas S. Foley Distinguished Professor of Government and Public Policy at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. The opinions expressed here are his own and should not be attributed to his employer, Washington State University, or to the American Association for Public Opinion Research, for which he now serves as Vice-President and President-Elect. Background on the theory and research that lead to the interpretations reported here are published in Chapter 3 of Dillman, Don A. 2000 *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, New York: John Wiley; and Jenkins, Cleo R. and Don A. Dillman 1997 "Towards a Theory of Self-Administered Questionnaire Design," Chapter 7 of Lyberg, Lars, et al., *Survey Measurement and Process Quality*, (pp.165-196,) New York: Wiley Interscience.*

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