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Florida's Worst Election Offenders

A County-by-County Analysis of the Florida Election Administration in the 2012 Election

By Anna Chu, Joshua Field, and Charles Posner   December 2013

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Introduction and summary

Voting is our nation's most vital and widely used civic action. It is a critical way for citizens to communicate with leaders and indicate their will for the direction of the country. But while voting is of the utmost importance to the health of our democracy, state voting laws and county-based election administration vary greatly across the nation and can create barriers to voting and dramatically impact a citizen's voting experience.

The voter registration process, for example, is not the same in every state. While federal law sets standards for voter registration,[1] some states go above and beyond the federal statutory requirements and make it easier for residents to register by offering procedures such as online registration and same-day registration. Other states, however, implement registration restrictions that actually make it harder for citizens to take this first step in the voting process.

The voting experience and voting process also vary by county. Because the administration of elections is largely delegated to officials in the more than 3,000 counties or wards in the United States, a citizen's voting experience can vary even within a state. From the ease of voter registration, to the maintenance of voter lists, to the number of voting machines, many county-based factors affect voters' overall experience and their access to the ballot box.

Citizens often focus on voting's end result: casting a ballot in favor of a candidate or an issue. What they often fail to identify, however, are the many points within the voting process where state and local election laws and election administrators have a large impact on a voter's overall experience. This report isolates several different factors that illustrate the variation in voter experience from county to county. By evaluating the differences in voting statistics at a county level, we can better understand the voting administration practices that work and encourage state and local officials to consider how they can improve the voting experience for their citizens.

Voting in Florida

Florida was one of the states that received scrutiny for the voting barriers that its electorate faced throughout the 2012 general election.[2] Leading up to the election year, Florida received a great deal of attention for passing restrictive voting laws that made it more difficult for citizens to register to vote and cast their ballots. In 2011, Gov. Rick Scott (R-FL) signed H.B. 1355, which made it significantly more difficult for citizens to vote by reducing early voting days, creating additional hurdles for voters who moved counties before the election, and heavily restricting third-party voter registrations.[3] Gov. Scott also embarked on a highly controversial and error-ridden purge of voters from the state's voter registration list.[4]

In addition to facing restrictive voting laws and a controversial voter purge, Florida voters had to deal with long lines at the polls on Election Day. Voters in 35 precincts in Lee County were still in line waiting to vote three hours after polling locations had officially closed.[5] Meanwhile, reports from Miami-Dade County indicated that some voters in the county had to wait in line for seven hours to vote on Election Day.[6] One study found that Florida voters faced the longest lines to vote in the nation.[7]

Many counties in Florida also experienced election administration issues. In Hillsborough County, for example, poor administration appears to have erroneously forced some of the county's voters to vote provisionally;[8] after all the votes were tabulated in the county, more than 2,100 provisional ballots were tossed out.[9] In Palm Beach County, a printing debacle delayed the completion of counting absentee ballots until four days after the election.[10]

Because of Florida's history of election problems and the multitude of problems that voters encountered during the 2012 general election, we went deeper to gain a better understanding of what happened in the state during the election. We examined concrete data that reflected voters' experiences in the voting system and their ability to participate in the democratic process. Since many election decisions are delegated to county administrators, we wanted to examine how voting experiences varied from county to county and identify the counties that stood out for poor election administration.

After comparing Florida counties with voting-age populations greater than one quarter of the mean Florida county citizen voting-age population, we found a wide deviation in the factors that define the voting experience from one county to another. This report identifies where some Florida counties are strong and others are weak and raises the question of why it is harder for a voter in Columbia County to participate in the democratic process than it is for a voter in St. Johns County.

Factors examined in the report

This report examines nine factors that reflect voters' voting experiences and their ability to participate in the democratic process. We compared the performance of the most populous Florida counties by calculating the mean level of performance for each of the nine factors below and determining how far from the mean each county scored.[11] The result is an objective ranking of Florida's worst-offending counties for election administration.

The factors examined in this report are:

• Voter turnout
• Overall voter registration rate
• Voter registration rate for African Americans
• Voter registration rate for Hispanics
• Rate of registered voters removed from voting lists
• Waiting time
• Provisional ballots cast
• Provisional ballots rejected
• Absentee ballots rejected

In addition to the overall worst-offender rankings, we identified the worst-performing counties within each factor to explore why certain counties may have performed better than others. The result is an in-depth analysis of the voting problems that plague Florida counties and make it harder for citizens to exercise their right to participate in our democracy.

Overall rankings

While all Florida counties had to contend in 2012 with restrictive election laws passed at the state level, six of the counties that we evaluated stood out for failing to ensure that residents could freely and effectively cast votes: Columbia, Putnam, Bay, Alachua, Hillsborough, and Duval. Nearly 2 million voting-age citizens live in these six worst counties.

Columbia County in northern Florida was the worst-performing county overall and frequently ranked among the state's worst counties on a variety of factors. Of the Florida counties examined, Columbia had the worst voter turnout of its citizen voting-age population, 53.5 percent. This corresponds to the fact that Columbia also had the lowest percentage of registered voters as a ratio of its voting-age population, the second-lowest percentage of eligible African American voter registration, and the third-lowest percentage of eligible Hispanic voter registration. It also had one of the highest percentages of absentee ballots rejected—nearly two times more than the average Florida county.

Putnam County had the second-lowest percentage of overall voter registration, the third-lowest level of voter turnout, and was the third-most active county in removing voters from voter rolls. Bay County also fared poorly on numerous factors, but it was the worst offender with regard to the percentage of absentee ballots it rejected, rejecting more than two times the state average of absentee ballots. Alachua County removed a greater percentage of its registered voters than any other county other than Hillsborough—nearly two times the state average—and issued the third-highest percentage of provisional ballots in Florida.

Hillsborough County had one of the worst average waiting times in the state. According to a report from Advancement Project, polls in Hillsborough had to stay open an average of one hour past closing time.[12] Hillsborough also had the second-highest percentage of provisional ballots cast in Florida—more than twice the state average.[13] This is concerning, considering that nearly 42 percent of the provisional ballots cast in the county—more than 2,100 votes—were rejected and not counted.[14]
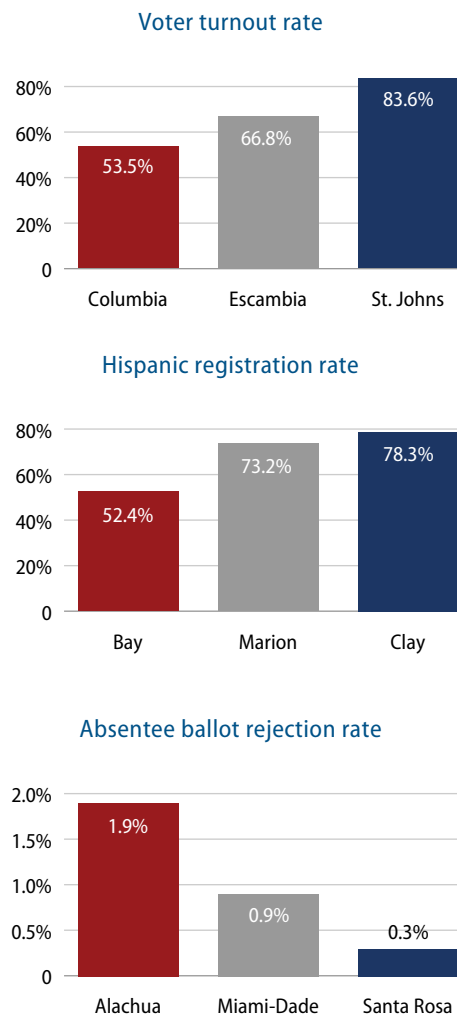
Duval County had the highest percentage of provisional ballots cast in the state.[15] This is also troubling because not all provisional ballots are actually counted. In fact, Duval rejected more than 34 percent—or more than 2,300—of the provisional ballots cast in the county.[16] Although election officials point to the restrictive H.B. 1355 as the reason why Duval County had so many provisional ballots, every county in the state had to contend with the same law.[17] The rate of provisional ballots used in Duval, however, is almost four times higher than the state average.

The six counties highlighted above stand out for their poor election administration because they performed dramatically worse than other Florida counties. According to our analysis—which calculates each county's standard deviation from the state mean for each of the nine factors—the sixth-worst county, Hillsborough, performed 60 percent worse than the seventh-worst county, Highlands. But while it is worth noting these extreme cases, all of the bottom-ranking counties deserve scrutiny for making it harder for people to participate in the democratic process.

To better understand what makes voting different from one county to another, compare highlights from three of the factors we analyzed demonstrating how the good-, the bad-, and the average-performing counties fared in Figure 1.

The table below ranks the Florida counties that we analyzed from the overall worst to the overall best-performing counties in election administration, according to the nine examined voting factors. Columbia County ranked as the overall worst offender, Marion County established the mean election administration performance, and St. Johns County performed the best.

Voter turnout rate

Columbia 53.5%	Escambia 66.8%	St. Johns 83.6%

Hispanic registration rate

Bay 52.4%	Marion 73.2%	Clay 78.3%

Absentee ballot rejection rate

Alachua 1.9%	Miami-Dade 0.9%	Santa Rosa 0.3%

* All figures are calculated as a percentage of citizen voting-age population, or CVAP, except for absentee ballots rejected, which is calculated as the percentage of all absentee ballots issued.

TABLE 1

Florida's worst election offenders: Overall rankings based on nine factors

Rankings: 1 = worst-performing county

Rank	County	Rank	County
1	Columbia (worst)	21	St. Lucie
2	Putnam	22	Charlotte
3	Bay	23	Osceola
4	Alachua	24	Pinellas
5	Duval	25	Leon
6	Hillsborough	26	Indian River
7	Highlands	27	Brevard
8	Volusia	28	Seminole
9	Lee	29	Nassau
10	Sumter	30	Manatee
11	Monroe	31	Hernando
12	Orange	32	Citrus
13	Escambia	33	Lake
14	Polk	34	Sarasota
15	Collier	35	Broward
16	Okaloosa	36	Pasco
17	Palm Beach	37	Flagler
18	Marion (average)	38	Santa Rosa
19	Miami-Dade	39	Clay
20	Martin	40	St. Johns (best)

Source: Center for American Progress analysis based on data from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, U.S. Census Bureau, and Advancement Project. See the methodology for more details.

FIGURE 2

Mapping Florida's Election Administration performance: The good, the bad, and the average
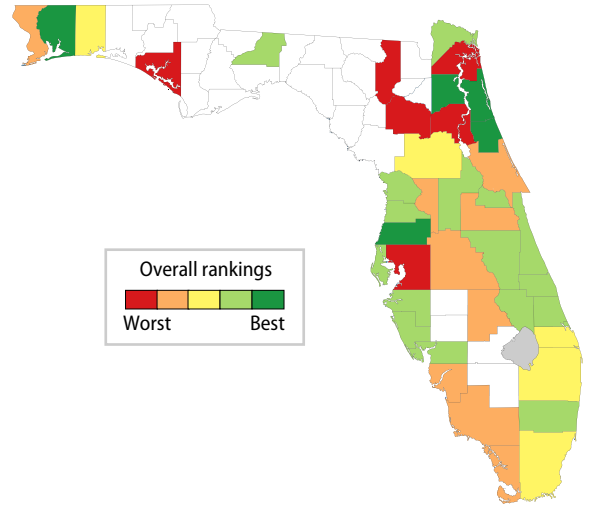
Overall rankings

Worst — Best

Source: Center for American Progress analysis based on data from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, U.S. Census Bureau, and Advancement Project. See methodology for more details

Voter turnout

Voter turnout is an important measure of the health of our democracy and the ability and desire of citizens to participate in the democratic process. The United States has a history of low voter turnout rates. Only about 59 percent of the citizen voting-age population voted in 2012,[18] ranking it one of the worst countries when compared to similar democracies.[19] The reasons for the low voter turnout vary but often have to do with various barriers, such as voter registration restrictions, that make it more difficult to vote.[20]

In comparison to the national voter turnout rate, Florida's overall voter turnout rate of 63.2 percent is above average.[21] A closer examination shows, however, that voter turnout varied greatly among the state's counties. While counties such as St. Johns saw more than 80 percent of the citizen voting-age population vote in the 2012 general election, Columbia, Highlands, Polk, and Putnam counties had turnout rates of less than 60 percent. The low voter turnout rates in these counties raise questions about whether those residents have proper access to the democratic process.

The table below ranks Florida counties according to their voter turnout rates.

Voter turnout: Rate of total votes cast among citizen voting-age population

Rankings: 1 = worst-performing county

County	Voter turnout rate	Rank	County	Voter turnout rate	Rank
Alachua	64.7%	14	Martin	71.2%	35
Bay	64.3%	12	Miami-Dade	66.0%	19
Brevard	69.1%	26	Monroe	71.0%	34
Broward	68.6%	25	Nassau	73.7%	38
Charlotte	65.0%	15	Okaloosa	70.6%	31
Citrus	64.1%	11	Orange	62.7%	9
Clay	72.1%	37	Osceola	65.1%	16
Collier	71.3%	36	Palm Beach	67.7%	23
Columbia	53.5%	1	Pasco	62.1%	8
Duval	66.7%	21	Pinellas	65.6%	17
Escambia	66.8%	22	Polk	59.4%	4
Flagler	71.0%	33	Putnam	57.6%	3
Hernando	60.4%	5	Santa Rosa	69.7%	28
Highlands	57.3%	2	Sarasota	69.8%	29
Hillsborough	65.9%	18	Seminole	69.8%	30
Indian River	69.5%	27	St. Johns	83.6%	40
Lake	68.1%	24	St. Lucie	64.4%	13
Lee	60.6%	6	Sumter	77.0%	39
Leon	70.9%	32	Volusia	61.1%	7
Manatee	66.4%	20			
Marion	63.9%	10			

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau and U. S. Election Assistance Commission. See the methodology and endnotes for more details.

Voter registration

Another measure of how easily citizens can access the democratic process is voter registration. In Florida, as in virtually every state, registration is the first step citizens must take to exercise their right to vote.

Registering to vote in Florida is no easy feat, however, as those registering to vote in the state must go through a technologically dated system. Prospective voters must fill out a paper-based form and either mail or hand deliver the completed form to an appropriate office. If a registered voter moves, changes political parties, or changes his or her name, he or she must submit a replacement paper-based application.[22] Floridians must also be registered for at least 29 days before they can vote in an election.

In addition to this dated and inefficient registration system, Florida implemented harsh laws that impeded Floridians' ability to vote. For much of 2012, H.B. 1355 imposed egregious restrictions upon third-party voter registration efforts. It imposed strict standards that made it harder for any "third party voter registration organization"—such as the nonpartisan League of Women Voters, the NAACP, and the Boy Scouts—to undertake broad-based voter registration efforts.[23] Because of the restrictive law, some nonpartisan organizations ceased their voter registration drives in Florida while they challenged the law in court.[24] It was not until the beginning of last summer that a court temporarily blocked enforcement of the law, and in August 2012, the state finally settled the lawsuit and agreed to not enforce community voter registration restrictions.[25] This left third-party organizations mere months to register voters before the general election.[26]

Although many different factors affect voter registration rates, the barriers to voting that Florida set up likely stunted the state's registration rates. Indeed, voter registration rates in Florida decreased from 2010 to 2012. In 2010, more than 12.5 million people were registered to vote in Florida—nearly 96 percent of the citizen voting-age population.[27] In 2012, however, that number fell 8 percentage points to 88 percent, or 11.9 million people.[28]

Although all Florida counties had to contend with restrictive voter registration laws set by the state, the data indicate that there was a wide discrepancy in how these policies played out across the counties. In Miami-Dade County, for instance, despite the restrictive state laws on voter registration, 97 percent of the citizen voting-age population was registered to vote in 2012,[29] compared to Columbia County's registration rate of less than 70 percent of the citizen voting-age population.[30]

Voter registration rates for people of color also differed widely across the state. While more than 98 percent of eligible African American voters in Flagler County were registered to vote,[31] only 42 percent of eligible African American voting-age citizens in Sumter County were registered to vote[32]—the lowest rate out of all the Florida counties we evaluated. Because 94 percent of Sumter's overall voting-age population was registered,[33] we have to wonder why African American registration rates were so poor in comparison. Columbia County was the only other Florida county that we evaluated to have an African American registration rate of less than 60 percent.[34]

Sumter County also has the dubious distinction of having the worst registration rate for Hispanic voting-age citizens—39 percent.[35] Escambia and Columbia counties were the only other Florida counties that we evaluated to have a Hispanic citizen registration rate of less than 50 percent.[36] Compare these poor-performing counties to Miami-Dade County, where 90 percent of eligible Hispanic voters were registered to vote.[37] These low registration rates raise serious questions about the barriers to registering that people of color in those counties may face.

The table below ranks Florida counties based on overall voter registration rates, African American voter registration rates, and Hispanic voter registration rates.

TABLE 3

Voter turnout: Rate of total votes cast among citizen voting-age population

Rankings: 1 = worst-performing county

County	Overall registration rate, 2012	Rank, overall	African American registration rate, 2012	Rank, African American	Hispanic registration rate, 2012	Rank, Hispanic
Alachua	87.4%	8	80.5%	8	72.1%	22
Bay	89.3%	14	82.3%	10	52.4%	5
Brevard	91.2%	24	90.1%	27	72.0%	21
Broward	102.6%	38	104.2%	40	89.9%	38
Charlotte	87.6%	10	80.0%	7	55.4%	7
Citrus	84.8%	5	84.3%	15	53.6%	6
Clay	98.4%	37	102.3%	39	78.3%	34
Collier	85.6%	6	83.0%	13	66.2%	12
Columbia	69.6%	1	57.9%	2	48.3%	3
Duval	89.6%	16	91.3%	29	66.3%	13
Escambia	87.9%	12	86.1%	21	41.7%	2
Flagler	97.2%	36	98.6%	38	74.3%	28
Hernando	92.1%	27	89.0%	24	73.6%	26
Highlands	82.4%	3	85.6%	19	74.4%	29
Hillsborough	89.7%	17	92.4%	31	70.4%	20
Indian River	90.1%	19	78.1%	5	68.7%	17
Lake	90.1%	20	92.3%	30	75.4%	30
Lee	87.9%	11	80.6%	9	73.4%	25
Leon	90.4%	21	88.5%	23	66.6%	15
Manatee	90.0%	18	85.0%	18	60.3%	9
Marion	87.6%	9	83.0%	12	73.2%	24
Martin	91.0%	22	74.9%	4	57.8%	8
Miami-Dade	97.1%	35	95.9%	33	90.0%	39
Monroe	92.7%	28	67.8%	3	61.3%	10
Nassau	92.9%	29	84.8%	17	51.9%	4
Okaloosa	95.3%	32	86.6%	22	66.4%	14
Orange	91.6%	25	89.8%	26	87.9%	37
Osceola	96.7%	33	96.6%	36	100.9%	40
Palm Beach	97.0%	34	96.4%	35	79.4%	35
Pasco	89.4%	15	95.8%	32	75.8%	31

County	Overall registration rate, 2012	Rank, overall	African American registration rate, 2012	Rank, African American	Hispanic registration rate, 2012	Rank, Hispanic
Pinellas	88.6%	13	85.9%	20	66.2%	11
Polk	83.3%	4	82.8%	11	77.3%	32
Putnam	79.2%	2	78.7%	6	69.9%	18
Santa Rosa	105.4%	39	84.6%	16	67.1%	16
Sarasota	92.9%	30	89.7%	25	70.4%	19
Seminole	91.6%	26	90.9%	28	81.6%	36
St. Johns	110.1%	40	97.0%	37	73.9%	27
St. Lucie	91.1%	23	96.0%	34	77.9%	33
Sumter	93.5%	31	42.4%	1	39.4%	1
Volusia	86.2%	7	83.2%	14	72.7%	23

Note: Due to the fact that Census figures for citizen voting-age population are estimates with a margin of error and that the most up-to-date citizen voting-age population, or CVAP, estimates are from 2011, not 2012, some registration rates appear as more than 100 percent. See the methodology section for more details.

Voter list maintenance

To vote in Florida, a citizen must be listed on a state's voter registration lists, also called voter rolls. Counties regularly conduct maintenance of the voting lists, "remov[ing] duplicate names and people who have moved, died, or are otherwise ineligible."[38]

In Florida, however, Gov. Scott attempted to conduct a highly controversial and error-ridden statewide purge of voters before the 2012 general election that went beyond traditional county-based list maintenance.

Gov. Scott's purge process was deeply flawed. The state's elections office sent county officials a list of suspected ineligible voters that contained ambiguous data and named numerous individuals whose eligibility could not be determined one way or another—or who were indeed citizens.[39] Gov. Scott's action is reflective of a 2008 Brennan Center for Justice study finding that every purge list it reviewed was flawed.[40] In some instances, purges were done based on error-ridden lists; in others, local election officials performed voter purges without any oversight or notice.[41]

Many county elections supervisors, in fact, declined to move forward with Gov. Scott's statewide purge because they did not trust the accuracy of the list.[42] The U.S. Department of Justice argued that Gov. Scott's purge violated the Voting Rights Act and the National Voter Registration Act and ordered Florida to stop the purge, while several groups also sued the state, arguing that the "voter purge was discriminatory because it singled out mostly immigrants."[43] The state and the groups eventually reached an agreement wherein Florida agreed "to inform the 2,625 people on the list who are eligible to vote that their voting rights had been fully restored."[44]

Although the state stopped the controversial purge process, counties still conducted regular maintenance of the voting lists. While this process is legal and necessary in some scenarios, some Florida counties stood out for the high rate of voters they removed from the voting lists. Hillsborough County had the highest rate of voters removed from its voting lists compared to registered voters of the counties that we evaluated; it removed voters off its rolls more than twice as often as the average county. Alachua, Putnam, and Monroe counties also had comparatively high

removal rates. Removing voters off the voter rolls should not be taken lightly, and these large discrepancies raise questions as to why some counties removed voters at a rate so much higher than the state average.

The table below ranks Florida counties based on the percentage of voters removed from voter rolls.

TABLE 4
Voter list maintenance: Rate of voters removed among registered voters

Rankings: 1 = worst-performing county

County	Number of voters removed, 2012	Voter removal rate, 2012	Rank	County	Number of voters removed, 2012	Voter removal rate, 2012	Rank
Alachua	982	0.60%	2	Martin	246	0.24%	30
Bay	496	0.44%	7	Miami-Dade	5,844	0.44%	6
Brevard	943	0.25%	29	Monroe	267	0.52%	4
Broward	4,077	0.36%	12	Nassau	171	0.33%	19
Charlotte	170	0.15%	40	Okaloosa	290	0.23%	31
Citrus	262	0.27%	27	Orange	2,249	0.33%	21
Clay	424	0.32%	22	Osceola	619	0.38%	11
Collier	630	0.35%	15	Palm Beach	2,869	0.33%	20
Columbia	101	0.28%	25	Pasco	609	0.20%	34
Duval	2,730	0.49%	5	Pinellas	1,995	0.32%	23
Escambia	838	0.42%	9	Polk	922	0.26%	28
Flagler	247	0.35%	13	Putnam	237	0.54%	3
Hernando	257	0.21%	32	Santa Rosa	243	0.21%	33
Highlands	207	0.33%	18	Sarasota	517	0.19%	35
Hillsborough	4,938	0.66%	1	Seminole	499	0.18%	37
Indian River	295	0.32%	24	St. Johns	247	0.16%	38
Lake	540	0.27%	26	St. Lucie	746	0.42%	8
Lee	721	0.19%	36	Sumter	281	0.38%	10
Leon	662	0.35%	16	Volusia	1,177	0.35%	14
Manatee	328	0.16%	39				
Marion	765	0.34%	17				

Source: U.S. Election Assistance Commission. See the methodology and endnotes for more details.

Waiting time

Another barrier to voting is long waiting times at the polls. On average, Florida voters faced the longest waiting times in the country in 2012.[45] According to a Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or MIT, study, voters in Florida had to wait an average of 45 minutes.[46]

Long lines at the polls are detrimental to the voting process; they discourage voters from casting ballots, which impacts election results. Studies suggest that this occurred in Florida. According to a report by Associate Professor Theodore Allen of Ohio State University, long lines in Florida discouraged at least 201,000 Florida voters from casting ballots on Election Day in 2012.[47] Other findings revealed that 49,000 people in Central Florida alone were discouraged from voting on Election Day because of long lines.[48] Of those 49,000 discouraged voters, an estimated 30,000 would have voted for President Barack Obama, and only about 19,000 would have voted for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney,[49] increasing the president's margin of victory by 11,000 votes in Florida.[50]

Although Florida voters faced the longest waiting times in the nation, many voters in counties across the state faced far longer lines than the state average. According to an Advancement Project report, Lee, St. Lucie, Orange, Palm Beach, Volusia, Miami-Dade, Hillsborough, and Brevard counties all had average wait times of longer than an hour.[51] According to the report, on average, precincts in Lee closed 115 minutes after the polls officially closed, meaning voters waited in line well after the polling location was supposed to close.[52] News outlets confirmed that voters were still waiting in line to vote at 10:00 p.m. at 35 precincts in Lee County.[53] Meanwhile, reports from Miami-Dade County indicated that some voters in the county had to wait seven hours in line to vote on Election Day.[54]

A number of reasons have been offered for why the lines in Florida were so long. There is some indication that the shortened early voting schedule may have resulted in longer lines at the polls.[55] Some news reports also suggest that long ballots played a role. The ballot in Miami-Dade, for example, was 10 to 12 pages long. *The Miami Herald* reported:

> *In some cases, exasperated voters took the ballots and filled them out before getting to the booths—voting at tables or on their laps. Poll worker Dave Patlak, 57, a retired Coast Guard officer, said a "booth bottleneck" stalled voting at the Normandy Shores Golf Club, so voters started reading and completing their ballots while standing in line.*[56]

In addition to shortened early voting days and lengthy ballots, there is evidence that some county election officials were not adequately prepared to handle the high voter turnout, did not allocate resources properly, or may simply be incompetent at their jobs.

Although *The Miami Herald* reported that election officials in Miami-Dade County believed they had enough ballot scanners, voting booths, and poll workers to deal with the crowds,[57] a lack of resources seemed to pose a problem in the county. "At Centennial Middle School in Cutler Bay, 1,786 voters cast ballots at a site with just five scanner machines—one of the highest voter-to-machine ratios in the county, records show."[58] Meanwhile, "at the Country Walk Park Recreation Center, 1,892 voters flooded a site with 32 booths and seven ballot scanners, causing waits as long as seven hours."[59]

Poor planning and incompetent management appeared to plague Lee County, where some voters had to wait in line for five hours to vote.[60] County Election Supervisor Sharon Harrington claimed that no one could have prepared for the issues that led to long lines on Election Day, blaming long ballots and a shortage of ballot scanners for some of the problems.[61] The county election office, however, had actually returned more than $1 million to the county in 2010 and 2011— money that the office could have used to buy extra scanners. Harrington also failed to use 50 extra ballot scanners that the county had on Election Day.[62] Lastly, Harrington could have sought permission from the state for ways to consolidate the ballot, but she did not even know there was an option to do so.[63]

In contrast to Miami-Dade County election officials and Lee County Election Supervisor Harrington, the election officials in Collier County planned ahead for the election.[64] In anticipation of long ballots, the county purchased extra ballot scanners to contend with the long ballots, dispatching more ballot scanners in 2012 than it did in any other election.[65] Collier County even sought permission from the state to consolidate its ballot.[66] Thus, while voters in Lee had to face, on average, a 115-minute wait at the polls, voters in Collier faced, on average, only an 8-minute wait at the polls.[67]

Although multiple factors affect waiting times at the polls, the stories of Lee County and Collier County illustrate how good and bad election administration can impact the voting process and voting experience.

The table below shows the average waiting times at the polls on Election Day in Florida for the counties for which data were collected.

Waiting times: Average number of minutes after polls closed that last vote was cast

Rankings: 1 = worst-performing county

County	Average number of minutes after polls closed, 2012	Rank	County	Average number of minutes after polls closed, 2012	Rank
Alachua	34	17	Marion	27	18
Bay	-	-	Martin	0	26
Brevard	63	8	Miami-Dade	73	6
Broward	25	19	Monroe	-	-
Charlotte	0	26	Nassau	0	26
Citrus	0	26	Okaloosa	-	-
Clay	13	23	Orange	86	3
Collier	8	25	Osceola	37	14
Columbia	-	-	Palm Beach	84	4
Duval	35	15	Pasco	41	11
Escambia	11	24	Pinellas	40	13
Flagler	-	-	Polk	35	15
Hernando	-	-	Putnam	-	-
Highlands	-	-	Santa Rosa	-	-
Hillsborough	72	7	Sarasota	-	-
Indian River	18	22	Seminole	25	19
Lake	20	21	St. Johns	0	26
Lee	115	1	St. Lucie	96	2
Leon	41	11	Sumter	46	10
Manatee	53	9	Volusia	75	5

Note: The lack of comprehensive tracking of waiting times at the polls frustrates attempts to improve the voting process for citizens. In the face of poor data collection on this issue, Advancement Project used precinct polling location closing times as a proxy for waiting times at the polls. The Advancement Project report authors noted in their report that they were forced to use different factors from one county to another to determine waiting times because there is no uniform system – on either the federal- or state-level – for wait time reporting. See Herron and Smith, "Congestion at the Polls: A Study of Florida Precincts in the 2012 General Election." Among counties in which waiting-time data were not available, this factor was omitted from the overall rankings. See the methodology section for more details.
Source: Advancement Project. See the methodology and endnotes for more details.

Provisional ballots

Provisional ballots are another measure of how voters participate on Election Day. The option to cast a provisional ballot came after the 2000 election, when Congress passed the Help America Vote Act, or HAVA, to serve as a fail-safe mechanism to ensure that voters who show up at the polls may cast a provisional ballot if they claim to be eligible and registered to vote.[68] If voters show up to the polls but their names are not on the voter rolls, for instance, they can still cast a provisional ballot.[69] Provisional ballots are then counted after election officials verify that the voter is registered and eligible to vote.[70]

Although the use of provisional ballots is better than denying a voter the ability to cast any ballot, it has mixed results in practice. Sometimes, poll workers fail to offer any provisional ballots to voters, and other times, counties apply varying methods for counting provisional ballots.[71] Counties that issue and/or reject more provisional ballots than the state average should be scrutinized to determine why their election administration yielded such anomalies.

Table 6 shows the rate of the use of provisional ballots across Florida, as well as the rates at which provisional ballots were rejected. The data illustrate abnormally high use of provisional ballots in several counties, especially in Duval and Hillsborough counties, and a high rejection rate of provisional ballots in Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties.

High use of provisional ballots

Duval County stands out for having an extremely high rate of issuing provisional ballots—nearly four times greater than the state average. This is especially troubling because nearly 35 percent of provisional ballots—more than 2,300 votes—were not counted in Duval.[72] Duval County Supervisor of Elections Jerry Holland and other county election officials blamed the increase in the use of provisional ballots on a change in the law that requires "voters who moved to a new county and did not change their address before voting to use a provisional ballot."[73]

Indeed, the use of provisional ballots in Duval County itself did increase by 1,500 from 2008 to 2012.[74] But this factor does not fully explain why Duval voters had to cast provisional ballots nearly four times more often than the average state voter.

Hillsborough County also performed poorly on this measure, with the second-highest rate of using provisional ballots. Hillsborough used provisional ballots almost two and a half times more often than the state average and rejected provisional ballots at a higher rate than Duval. Hillsborough threw out nearly 42 percent of the provisional ballots cast—more than 2,100 votes.[75]

Reports from nonpartisan election-protection groups indicate that poor election administration may account for some of the extensive use of provisional ballots in Hillsborough County. The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, which conducted an extensive election-protection effort in Hillsborough, "received reports of numerous poll workers incorrectly handing out provisional ballots to voters looking to update their addresses at their new polling place."[76] These poll workers were not following the correct procedure. Instead, "for anyone who has moved within the county, they should have been allowed to update the address and vote on a standard ballot."[77]

Misdirection from poll workers also led to a large number of issued provisional ballots in Hillsborough County. Florida requires voters in the wrong precinct to vote provisionally; reports indicated that at least several-dozen morning voters were unintentionally directed to the wrong precinct and were required to vote provisionally rather than cast a normal ballot.[78]

High rejection rate for provisional ballots

Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties had the highest rejection rates for provisional ballots in Florida in 2012.

Voters in Palm Beach County cast 2,056 provisional ballots on Election Day,[79] but the county rejected 1,477 of those ballots—more than 70 percent of all provisional ballots cast in the county and twice the state average.[80] This is especially troubling news for many voters in Palm Beach County, considering that voters there faced some of the longest lines in the state to cast their votes.

Meanwhile, in Miami-Dade County, voters cast 2,828 provisional ballots only to have the county toss out nearly 65 percent of them.[81] In total, the county rejected 1,828 of the provisional ballots cast.[82] Similar to Palm Beach County, this is especially troubling because voters in Miami-Dade also faced some of the longest lines in the state.

While there are valid reasons to reject provisional ballots, the high rates at which Palm Beach and Miami-Dade rejected provisional ballots raise questions as to why those counties found provisional ballots to be invalid much more frequently than other counties.

TABLE 6
Provisional ballots: Rates of provisional ballots cast and rejected

Rankings: 1 = worst-performing county

County	Percent of 2012 Election Day votes cast provisionally	Rank, provisional ballots cast	Rejection rate of 2012 provisional ballots cast	Rank, provisional ballots rejected
Alachua	2.18%	3	43.9%	13
Bay	1.57%	6	39.1%	16
Brevard	0.64%	31	53.2%	8
Broward	0.87%	22	61.4%	4
Charlotte	0.28%	38	49.3%	9
Citrus	0.95%	21	6.3%	40
Clay	1.17%	16	22.7%	36
Collier	1.18%	15	44.7%	12
Columbia	0.53%	36	38.8%	17
Duval	4.32%	1	34.6%	25
Escambia	0.76%	26	33.1%	26
Flagler	1.04%	19	28.2%	30
Hernando	0.60%	32	24.6%	34
Highlands	1.80%	5	36.2%	22
Hillsborough	2.47%	2	41.6%	14
Indian River	1.38%	11	22.5%	37
Lake	0.43%	37	39.8%	15
Lee	1.07%	17	38.2%	19
Leon	1.56%	7	38.0%	20

County	Percent of 2012 Election Day votes cast provisionally	Rank, provisional ballots cast	Rejection rate of 2012 provisional ballots cast	Rank, provisional ballots rejected
Manatee	0.59%	33	32.5%	28
Marion	0.17%	40	56.5%	7
Martin	1.03%	20	59.8%	5
Miami-Dade	0.70%	30	64.6%	2
Monroe	0.70%	29	16.7%	38
Nassau	1.42%	10	27.7%	31
Okaloosa	0.70%	28	59.2%	6
Orange	1.51%	8	46.4%	10
Osceola	1.25%	12	62.4%	3
Palm Beach	0.58%	35	71.8%	1
Pasco	0.76%	25	8.5%	39
Pinellas	0.86%	23	34.7%	24
Polk	1.20%	14	44.8%	11
Putnam	1.07%	18	31.6%	29
Santa Rosa	0.74%	27	33.0%	27
Sarasota	1.21%	13	35.2%	23
Seminole	1.90%	4	22.8%	35
St. Johns	0.85%	24	37.5%	21
St. Lucie	1.43%	9	25.6%	33
Sumter	0.23%	39	26.3%	32
Volusia	0.59%	34	38.7%	18

Source: U.S. Election Assistance Commission data. See the methodology and endnotes for more details.

Absentee ballots rejected

As more and more voters cast absentee ballots instead of ballots at the polls, absentee ballots are an important measure of how voters are able to participate in the democratic process. Although much of the focus on Election Day may be on long lines at the polls, nearly 40 percent of Florida voters cast absentee ballots on Election Day in 2012 instead of heading to the polls.[83]

Florida, however, has harsh standards for considering absentee ballots. Under Florida law, absentee ballots must be individually "canvassed" by a board to ensure that every signature matches a voter's signature on file to meet state law requirements.[84] H.B. 1355 also requires that absentee ballots be considered invalid if the voter's signature on the ballot does not match the signature on record,[85] and courts are limited from considering any evidence other than the signature in determining the validity of an absentee ballot.[86] As the *Herald-Tribune* notes, this will affect "voters who suffer from arthritis, strokes and other ailments that affect their handwriting. Those who fail to update their signatures in time would be out of luck."[87]

Table 7 ranks Florida counties by the rate of absentee ballots rejected in 2012. Bay County leads the field in rejecting absentee ballots, as it rejected absentee ballots more than twice as often as the state average.[88] Although the total number of absentee ballots rejected is small, the deviation from the state average raises questions about why examiners in Bay County found problems with the absentee ballots cast far more frequently than other counties' examiners did. Similarly, Okaloosa, Seminole, and Columbia counties all rejected absentee ballots at a rate more than twice the state average.

Processing absentee ballots

In addition to the harsh review standards, Florida law makes the processing of absentee ballots difficult. Election supervisors may begin processing ballots only 15 days prior to Election Day;[89] in some cases, counties will have already received tens of thousands of absentee ballots by this date.

Some election supervisors experienced delays with the mailing and delivery of absentee ballots and were not prepared for the large number of voters seeking to cast "in-person absentee" ballots at the supervisor's office instead of casting a regular ballot at an early voting or Election Day location.[90] This created a heavy load for election supervisors to handle.

Although we could not find a data source quantifying the delays in processing absentee ballots in Florida, Palm Beach County merits attention for the poor administration of its absentee ballots during the 2012 election. During the election, the county's ballot printer sent out around 60,000 absentee ballots with a typo that could not be read by the county's tabulation machines.[91] Because of this mistake, county workers had to copy about 35,000 of the votes by hand onto new ballots.[92] After the county realized the problem, the county did not send out the remaining absentee ballots or inform the voters who were waiting for them about the problem.[93] According to *The Palm Beach Post*, "At least 77 voters in Palm Beach County who requested absentee ballots had to wait weeks for them or still haven't received them."[94]

What's more, the problems in Palm Beach County did not stop on Election Day, instead continuing for days after the election. Although the election had already been called for President Obama, Palm Beach County was still sorting through its debacle with absentee ballots and did not finish counting votes until four days after the election.[95]

TABLE 7
Absentee ballots: Rate of absentee ballots rejected

Rankings: 1 = worst-performing county

County	Absentee ballot rejection rate, 2012	Rank	County	Absentee ballot rejection rate, 2012	Rank
Alachua	1.93%	5	Martin	0.46%	31
Bay	2.19%	1	Miami-Dade	0.94%	20
Brevard	0.21%	38	Monroe	1.46%	9
Broward	1.30%	12	Nassau	0.76%	23
Charlotte	1.01%	18	Okaloosa	2.09%	2
Citrus	0.24%	36	Orange	1.05%	16
Clay	0.37%	33	Osceola	1.64%	6
Collier	1.51%	8	Palm Beach	1.10%	15
Columbia	1.98%	4	Pasco	0.67%	27
Duval	1.29%	13	Pinellas	0.26%	35
Escambia	0.69%	26	Polk	0.45%	32
Flagler	0.60%	29	Putnam	1.43%	11
Hernando	0.96%	19	Santa Rosa	0.29%	34
Highlands	0.73%	25	Sarasota	0.75%	24
Hillsborough	0.93%	21	Seminole	2.05%	3
Indian River	0.77%	22	St. Johns	1.52%	7
Lake	1.12%	14	St. Lucie	0.01%	40
Lee	1.02%	17	Sumter	0.60%	28
Leon	0.11%	39	Volusia	1.44%	10
Manatee	0.22%	37			
Marion	0.58%	30			

Source: U.S. Election Assistance Commission data. See the methodology and endnotes for more details.

Conclusion

Voting is one of the most basic, fundamental rights we have in our democracy. It gives us our democratic voice, provides legitimacy to our leaders, and is a right that many around the world fight to have. As shown in this report, however, the ability of citizens to access the polls and exercise their right to vote varies widely across Florida. While residents of St. Johns County appear to enjoy relatively good access to voting, residents in Columbia County face multiple barriers. In addition to restrictive state laws that make it harder for people to vote, poor election administration is also disenfranchising the people of Florida.

The people of Florida deserve better. By understanding what makes one county's election administration weaker than another's, we can identify the practices and procedures to avoid and make suggestions about how to improve the voting experience for all citizens. This report should be used as a tool to provide insight into the factors that distinguish one county's election administration from another's and encourage local election officials to take responsibility for shortcomings and find solutions to help ensure that our most basic democratic action is freely taken.

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Acknowledgements

Methodology

Sources

This report relies primarily on two governmental data sources. The bulk of the voting data comes from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, or EAC, which collects information on voter registration, provisional and absentee ballots, voter list maintenance, and more through its Election Administration and Voting Survey.

For the voting populations, the U.S. Census Bureau provides county-level data on the citizen voting-age population, or CVAP, which is commonly used to determine the number of eligible voters in a given location. This was used to calculate voter turnout rates and rates of registered voters. It should be noted that the most recent CVAP data available were 2011 estimates, while the information on registered voters is from 2012. That, in combination with the margin of error built into the CVAP calculations and the fact that CVAP is an estimate, contributes to why several counties appear to have a higher number of registered voters than the population eligible to vote.

The source for waiting times comes from an Advancement Project report that observed precincts around the state in the 2012 elections and calculated the average time it took after polls closed in each county for the last vote to be cast. While this figure does not represent the average waiting time over the course of the whole day, it does serve as a reasonable approximation of how backlogged counties were in accommodating voters. Advancement Project did not have waiting-time data for every county that this report analyzed. These counties were not penalized in the final rankings for the lack of data.

Selecting the factors

The report itself goes into detail about why each of the factors was chosen to be included in the county rankings and their significance to voting accessibility. Broadly, we selected the factors so as to capture the full voting process—from the widest view of voting accessibility down to the narrow experiences and challenges

some voters face. It should be noted, however, that the data points used to determine the rankings in this report are limited by the county-based data that the EAC chooses to solicit and ultimately make available. This statistically based analysis should be used as a starting point to investigate why one county's performance in a given data category is different than Florida's statistical mean for that data point. To get a holistic view of what happened on Election Day, these rankings should be compared to anecdotal evidence regarding problems that occurred on the ground while Floridians were casting their votes.

Rates of registered voters and overall voter turnout provide a wide picture of how each county fares on the basic measures. These include its citizenry's interest in voting, its ability to register, and its ability to get to the polls. The county rankings include the registration rates among African American and Hispanic populations as separate factors for a more detailed picture of how communities of color within each county may also be affected, perhaps differently than the overall population.

The remaining factors offer a sharper analysis of some of the common problems that complicate, infringe upon, or obstruct the right to vote. These factors include voter list maintenance, long wait times, high rates of provisional ballots cast and rejected, and absentee ballots rejected. Of course, in individual cases, actions such as rejecting provisional or absentee ballots or purging voter registrations are justifiable, necessary, and consistent with the law. As we explain below, however, the rankings are determined not by the simple number of these instances but by deviation from the state average—in which outliers are more likely to be indicative of systemic county-based problems.

Determining Which Counties to Include in Our Analysis

Counties with smaller populations have smaller sample sizes that are more likely to be abnormally influenced by statistically unrelated anomalies. The method by which the rankings were calculated—standard deviations from the mean—would have improperly magnified the significance of these data outliers. In order to have a more consistent data set, we made a methodological decision to exclude counties that had citizen voting-age populations less than one quarter of the mean Florida County citizen voting-age population. This excludes counties that have a citizen voting-age population of fewer than around 48,500. Excluding the smallest counties best achieved our goal of providing an accurate picture of voting administration successes and failures across Florida.

Ranking the counties

The 40 counties that we analyzed were ranked according to how much better or worse the county fared on each of the nine factors when compared to the state average. Statistically, this was done by first calculating the standard deviation, represented by S, for each factor, using the formula below:

$$S = \sqrt{\frac{\sum(X - \overline{X})^2}{N}}$$

In this way, outlier counties with factors with larger standard deviations are not penalized as much as outlier counties with factors with smaller ones. Then, county t-values were calculated for each individual factor, using the formula below:

$$T_x = \frac{X - \overline{X}}{S}$$

This determines, for each factor, the number of standard deviations away from the mean each county was. Counties that performed worse than the state mean received negative t-values, and those that performed better received positive t-values. Finally, the t-values were averaged across the nine factors—or if a county was missing data for a single factor, across the number of factors for which it had data—to produce a single number of how much better or worse the county performed than the state average. The county with the smallest number, or the county that on average was the farthest number of standard deviations below the state average, was the worst.

A statistical look

Our ranking method is a statistically competent approach to not only identify the worst performing counties as a whole but also to provide insight into how counties performed within each factor. Other efforts, such as The Pew Charitable Trusts's Election Performance Index,[96] have done an excellent job using factors similar to those we evaluated to rank election administration performance at the state level. By evaluating these factors on a county level, we have demonstrated that a voting experience can also vary greatly at the local level. We recognize, however, that numbers are not everything.

While the data used to calculate these rankings are limited to data that are collected and made available by the EAC and other groups, anecdotal evidence would provide additional insight into the problems that Floridians faced on Election Day. These data, however, are not systematically collected, and it is hard to adjust for factors such as population and media saturation.

We hope that our county-based statistical look at election administration in Florida can be used as a foundation for those on the ground in Florida counties to consider ways to improve their performance and begin conversations about what can be done to ensure that all citizens can exercise their right to vote as freely as possible.

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