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Undervote Rate Plummets in Minority Precincts After New Mexico Changes to All Paper Ballots

February 26, 2007. A new report, based on official 2004 and 2006 New Mexico election data, shows a dramatic difference in undervotes in Native American and Hispanic precincts, depending on whether they voted on paper ballots or on Direct Record Electronic (DRE – often known as touch screen) voting machines.

The report explains: "Undervotes represent ballots on which no vote was registered for a specific contest. Undervote rates higher than 0.5% in the major contest on a ballot, especially in presidential elections, suggest that votes may not have been counted, either through a mistake of the voter or a mistake in tabulation."

The report shows that in predominantly Native American and predominantly Hispanic precincts, undervote rates were abnormally high (7.61% and 6.33% respectively) in the 2004 presidential race, when the votes were cast on DREs.

In 2006, after the state changed to all optically scanned paper ballots, the undervote rates for Governor in those same precincts plummeted by 85% in Native American areas and by 69% in predominantly Hispanic precincts.

In Anglo precincts, undervote rates of ballots cast on DREs were about the same level as the rates for paper ballots – 2.22% and 1.75% respectively.

"We were looking for any impact the change to paper ballots may have had on New Mexico's historically high undervote rate. When we found the dramatic drop in Native American precincts, we were shocked," said Theron Horton, Project Manager for Election Defense Alliance. "Something was going on with the DREs in those precincts in 2004."

"When Warren Stewart, Policy Director of VoteTrustUSA, and I did the analysis of New Mexico's 2004 vote data two years ago, we found high undervote rates in the minority precincts," said Ellen Theisen, President of Vote-PAD, Inc. and former Executive Director of VotersUnite.Org. "But we didn't do a complete comparison of paper ballot undervotes to the DRE undervotes in that election. When I heard of Theron's work, I performed the comparison, and found that it's the paper ballots that made the difference in the minority precincts."

Read the two-page report here:

(http://www.votersunite.org/info/NM_UVbyBallotTypeandEthnicity.pdf)

Download the data here: (<http://www.votersunite.org/info/2006NMSelectedData.xls>.)

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