

Mystery of 'disappearing' ballots solved after Portland election recount

By Jeff Mill

Updated 5:02 pm, Wednesday, November 15, 2017



Photo: Cassandra Day / Hearst Connecticut Media

Image 1 of 2

Portland Democrat Benjamin R. Srb out-pollied Republican Timothy Lavoy by 19 votes in the competition for a seat on the Board of Selectmen and a similarly close race for the Board of Education prompted a recount ... more

PORTLAND — Election officials believe they have determined why a number of votes were subtracted from the total during Friday's election recount.

The automatic recount was triggered when Democrat Benjamin R. Srb out polled Republican Timothy Lavoy by 19 votes in the competition for a seat on the Board of Selectmen and a similarly close race for the Board of Education.

The recount confirmed Srb's victory, and added one vote to his total.

But a number of votes, some 69 in all, and disproportionately occurring on ballots for Republican candidates, "disappeared" in the recount, according to Town Clerk Ryan J. Curley.

The results did not change the outcome of any of the races, moderator Sue Anderson-Woronoff said Tuesday and again Wednesday. But the "disappearance" of those votes nagged at Anderson, her assistant Kelly Mainetti and registrars of voters Pauline Neumann and Athena Neville.

On Tuesday, the four officials gathered in the clerk's office, which also includes the desks of Neumann and Neville, to go over the results yet again in an effort to resolve the mystery.

As they did, Curley said, "We can't leave it like this."

"We never had this happen," Anderson said as she reviewed the data.

For the past 10 years, the town has used electronic tabulators in its voting. Residents filled in ovals on the ballot with a special pen and then submitted the completed ballot to an optical scanner, which reads the results.

However, there are write-ins, over votes and the occasional odd marks on a ballot, which can cause the machines to send such ballots to different trays in the machines. Over voting happens when a resident votes for more people than are allowed in a particular contest.

If the voter were still present when the machine rejects a ballot, election officials would allow the voter to destroy the ballot and revote, Anderson said. In the case of write-in and ballots with unexplained markings, those ballots are hand counted, Anderson said.

In last week's voting, there were 15 ballots in which residents wrote in the name of a candidate. "There were 17 other ballots that were questionable," Anderson said.

In one instance, a resident drew a large circle around the names of several candidates without inking in the oval as required, Neumann said Tuesday. Those ballots are also counted by hand to see if election officials “can determine the voter’s intent,” she said.

Anderson said as officials did the recount, they did not immediately realize the write-in ballots were counted by both the tabulator and then by the hand counters, and so they were double counted. When they realized that, officials reduced the number of double-counted ballots by half, resolving the issue.

Write-ins disproportionately occurred on people voting Republican, Anderson said Wednesday. She speculated that was mostly because Democrats might have been more satisfied with incumbent First Selectwoman Susan S. Bransfield, who is a Democrat.

However, “Just because you write in a name doesn’t mean it’s going to count,” Curley said Wednesday afternoon.

Gone are the days when residents could write in the name of, for instance, a cartoon character for an elected position and have that vote. The state now compiles a list of approved write-in candidates, Curley said.

“If you’re not on that list by 4 p.m. Oct. 24,” then a write-in vote for any other candidate will not count, Curley said.

The election officials also were concerned that perhaps there was a fault with the tabulator, which is now 10 years old. The machines are serviced by a New Hampshire company, Curley said.

In a conversation with company officials, Anderson said she was told “some machines are more sensitive than others.”

”That raises some concerns” as well, Anderson said.

At one point, Portland officials thought about doing another recount after the Thanksgiving holiday. At first, officials in the Secretary of the State’s office suggested that was acceptable.

But Wednesday, an official in the SOTS office “said they were completely satisfied with the results of the recanvass,” Anderson was told.

“We were extremely relieved,” she said, explaining, “We want to do the best job we can.”

Anderson said officials will now focus on discussing “how could we do it better the next time,” which will be the annual budget referendum in May.

“This has been a learning experience for all of us,” Anderson said.

Speaking about Anderson, Curley said, "We're lucky to have someone who is so committed to making sure this was done and done right."