



# An Analysis of Mexico's Recounted Ballots

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## Introduction

The outcome of Mexico's July 2 presidential election has yet to be determined. On Saturday, August 5, the Federal Electoral Tribunal (or TRIFE, as it is called in Mexico) ordered a partial recount of 11,839 ballot boxes, about 9 percent of the total of 130,778. With the information from this recount, which will begin on Wednesday, August 9, TRIFE must make a determination as to whether there is a winner, whether a wider recount is necessary, or if the election should be annulled.

Two tallies of the votes have been conducted: the preliminary, or PREP count, which began when the polls closed on Sunday July 2, and was completed by 8 p.m. on Monday July 3. The second, or "final" count, began on Wednesday, July 5 and was completed by 3 p.m. on July 6. The second count put Felipe Calderon, the PAN candidate, ahead by 243,934 votes or 0.58 percentage points, over Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the PBT candidate. This margin had narrowed from the first count, where the lead was 402,708 votes, or 1.04 percentage points, as first announced by the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE).<sup>1</sup>

Of the total number of 130,778 ballot boxes, 97.8 percent were not opened for recount during the second tally. However, approximately 2.2 percent were reopened and recounted. An analysis of this recounted sample, described below, raises a number of questions about the electoral process, most importantly about its transparency. **It is hoped that the larger partial recount now ordered by the TRIFE will be conducted and reported in a much more transparent and timely manner. The public – as well as the TRIFE – should be able to see exactly how many votes, in what locations – and where possible, for what reasons – were changed by the recount. This information should be announced without delay, for each ballot box location, as the recount is done.**

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<sup>1</sup> This first announcement did not include some 2.6 million votes that were set aside for irregularities, as well as other votes (see [http://www.cepr.net/pressreleases/2006\\_07\\_05.htm](http://www.cepr.net/pressreleases/2006_07_05.htm)).

## Information on the Recounted Ballots

Information on the recounted ballots from the second tally has not been transparent or easily forthcoming. Although the second, or “final” count, which included the recounted ballots, was completed on July 6, information on the recounted ballots was not announced by the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) until July 20. On that date, the IFE did not simply post the results of the recounted ballot boxes – i.e. the “final” count and recount of the ballot boxes that had been recounted – but rather posted on its web site the locations of the ballot boxes where recounts had taken place. It was thus possible to compare the preliminary (PREP) and final counts for those ballot box locations, and determine the difference that the recount had made.

However, although there were 2,873 ballot boxes where recounts took place, only 2,534 had available data for the two top candidates for both the PREP and second count.<sup>2</sup> On July 25, the Center for Economic and Policy Research calculated, by comparing the first and second tallies for these 2,534 ballot boxes, that the recount had reduced Lopez Obrador’s vote count by 14,253 votes, or 5.1 percent of his total for these ballot boxes; and Calderon’s vote was reduced by 12,445 votes, or 3.8 percent. The IFE apparently calculated almost exactly the same numbers, although it did not post them on its web site (the IFE’s results were reported by the Mexican newspaper *La Reforma*<sup>3</sup>).

Finally, on July 28, the IFE issued a one-page release<sup>4</sup> that showed the changes in vote totals for presidential candidates as a result of the recount. However, in this release, the number of recounted ballot boxes is listed as 2,864 instead of 2,873. The document also indicates that 172 ballot boxes of the original 2,873 were not actually opened, and that 163 ballot boxes that were not in the original 2,873 were opened. The overall result was similar: Lopez Obrador lost 14,350 votes and Calderon lost 12,854. But, the document raises several questions:

1. This was the first document posted by the IFE on its web site showing the total changes in the candidates’ vote count for recounted ballot boxes. Why did this not appear until a month after the recount?
2. Why did it take a month to get an accurate count of the number and location of ballot boxes that were opened for recount on July 5? (This is assuming that the final number, which now has an additional 163 ballot boxes added and 172 subtracted, is accurate.)
3. Which, and how many, of the 2,864 ballot boxes were actually used to calculate the change in the candidates’ votes? (This is not indicated in the July 28 document, and as noted above, not all ballot boxes had recorded totals for the PREP count.)

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<sup>2</sup> This was not announced by the IFE when it posted the locations of the recounted ballot boxes.

<sup>3</sup> Irizar, Guadalupe, *La Reforma*, July 20, 2006: “...Aunque favorece a Felipe”

<sup>4</sup> The full release can be found at: <http://www-site.ife.org.mx/portal/site/ife/menuitem.2bfaab21a511fe80d14648eb100000f7/?vgnextoid=759c8cf5ed7bc010VgnVC M1000002c01000aRCRD>.

## Analysis Of the Recounted Ballots

On the basis of the IFE's latest information, there are 2,520 ballot boxes that were re-opened and recounted for which there is information on both PREP and second count databases on the total number of votes and number of votes for each top candidate. However, the changes in the vote totals (-12,854 for Calderon and -14,350 for Lopez Obrador) were driven by just 116 boxes, or 4.05 percent, of the recounted ballot boxes. These were ballot boxes where most of the votes were "removed" by the recount. That is, they were either thrown out, or possibly allocated to other ballot boxes. (From the information provided by the IFE, there is no way of knowing what exactly happened to these votes).

Table 1 divides the recounted ballot boxes into two groups. Group A consists of 2,404 ballot boxes, or 84 percent of the recounted total, that showed very little change as a result of the recount. Group B consists of the 116 ballot boxes where most of the votes were removed in the recount. As can be seen from the table, Group A lost an average of only 0.4 percent of its votes, and Group B lost an average of 63 percent.

**TABLE 1**  
**Recounted Ballot Boxes by Group (from count completed on July 6)**

	Ballot boxes	(% of total vote)		Average % loss in votes	Difference in vote margin*
		PAN	PBT		
GROUP A	2404	38.3%	32.0%	0.4%	-3078
GROUP B	116	29.6%	37.7%	62.8%	4594
TOTAL	2520	37.9%	32.3%	6.9%	1516

\*A negative sign means a net loss for Calderon (the PAN candidate)

Source: IFE and authors' calculations

Table 1 also shows that the ballot boxes that lost most of their votes (Group B) were more pro-Lopez Obrador: He received 37.7 percent of the votes in Group B, as opposed to 32 percent in Group A. Calderon got only 29.6 percent of the votes in Group B, as compared to 38.3 percent in Group A.

Also, in the 116 ballot boxes that made up Group B, Calderon gained a net 4,594 votes from the recount relative to Lopez Obrador; in Group A, he had a net loss of 3,078 votes.

What was the cause of the removal of votes in these 116 ballot boxes? The IFE did not publish any explanation, but from looking at the data it appears that these were mostly ballot boxes that greatly exceeded the proscribed limit of 750 votes.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This limit is specified in Article 192 of Mexico's Electoral Code (Codigo Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales – COFIPE).

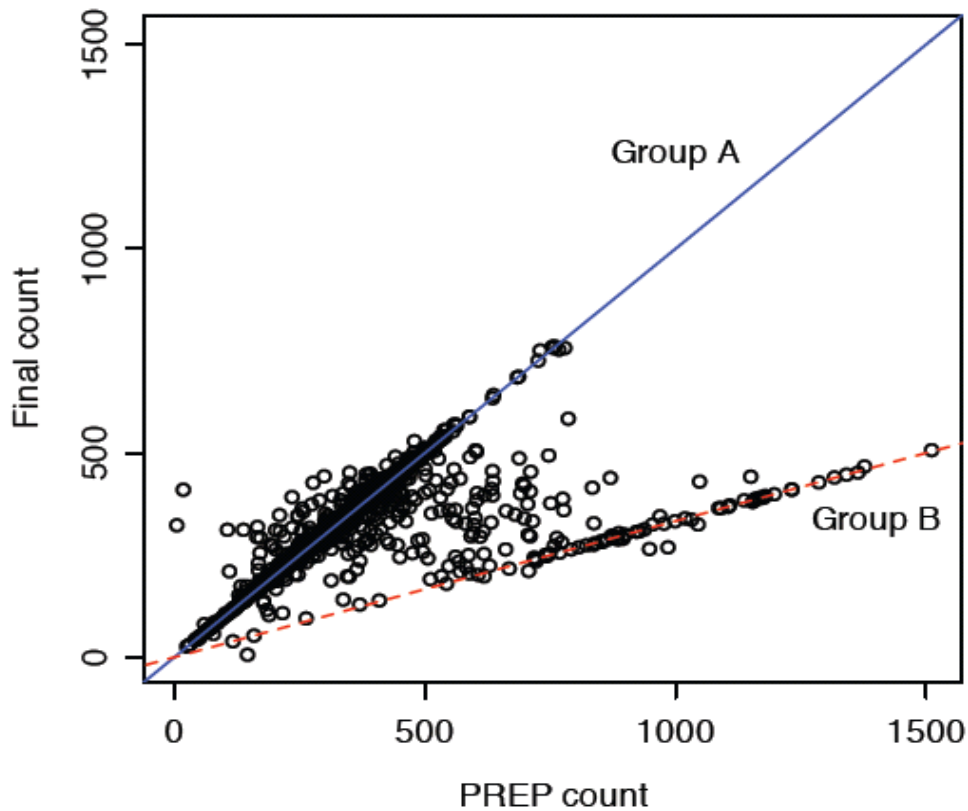
**FIGURE 1. Plot chart of number of votes in preliminary (PREP) count versus final count**

Figure 1 shows the total number of votes for the recounted ballot boxes in the second count, plotted against the first (PREP) count. Most of the ballot boxes fall on or very near to the top (solid) line, which has a slope of one – i.e., the vote totals were not affected by the recount. That is Group A. The lowest (dashed) line shows group B, where an average of 63 percent of the votes were removed during the recount.

There are several things worth noting here. First, as the graph illustrates, about half of the Group B ballot boxes were boxes are beyond 750-vote limit. As noted above, there is no way of knowing from the information released by the IFE what caused these totals to exceed the limit.

Second, the Group B ballot boxes, regardless of their total number of votes, mostly seem to lose the same percentage of their votes – about two-thirds – in the recount. This can be seen by the tight clustering of the points along the Group B line. About 62 percent of the ballot boxes in Group B lost between 62 and 70 percent of their votes. Presumably there is some reason for this, but it has not yet been publicized.

Third, not all ballot boxes with significantly more than 750 votes were opened for the recount. If we take the dividing line at 760 votes,<sup>6</sup> there is a large difference in the composition of the ballot boxes that were opened versus those that were not opened. For these 97 ballot boxes where the number of

<sup>6</sup> Each ballot box location is allocated 10 extra ballots for mistakes and for the IFE representatives.

total votes exceeds 760, the 63 that were opened had an average of 27 percent of votes going to Calderon, whereas he had an average of 35 percent in those that were not opened. This raises the possibility that the recount gave Lopez Obrador a net loss of votes because of the way in which the “over voted” ballot boxes, which lost most of their votes during the recount, were selected to be opened.

Finally, the IFE's latest document<sup>7</sup> shows a decline in the total of null votes for the recounted ballots equal to 17,129 votes. This is quite large – about 2 percent of the presidential votes in this recounted sample. As with the other vote totals in the sample, we do not know from the information released how or why there was a net change of so many null votes. But this is potentially very important, especially if some of these null votes were cancelled in the recount because they became valid votes. In this election, the total null votes were more than three times the size of the vote difference between the two leading candidates. (Null votes are a common arena for systematic errors and/or cheating, as ballots where the voter's intent may be clear can be mis-recorded as null).

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<sup>7</sup> Cited above, <http://www-site.ife.org.mx/portal/site/ife/menuitem.2bfaab21a511fe80d14648eb100000f7/?vgnextoid=759c8cf5ed7bc010VgnVCM1000002c01000aRCRD>

## Implications for the Larger Recount

It is possible that the anomalies noted above have reasonable explanations. However, what is most difficult to explain is the lack of transparency in the process and the inordinate amount of time that the IFE has taken to publicize information – still very incomplete – on the recount that has taken place. After more than a month, and after the TRIFE has reached a decision regarding how many more ballot boxes will be subject to recount, there are still important unanswered questions about this first sample of recounted ballot boxes. It is not known just how the vote totals were changed by the recount, since all we really know is that a small number of the recounted ballot boxes with too many votes had most of their votes “removed,” but we don’t know where most of those votes ended up or even how many were discarded altogether.

Although the 2.2 percent of ballot boxes that were subject to recount do not constitute a randomly selected sample, they are nevertheless a large sample that could have provided crucial information to the public, to elected officials, and to the Federal Electoral Tribunal in its decision on what ballot boxes need to be recounted. **Since the Tribunal will presumably make its further decisions on the basis of the forthcoming larger recount, it is very important that the problems with the first recounted sample not be repeated. Specifically, the electoral authorities should without unnecessary delay:**

1. **Present a full list of the locations and designations of the ballot boxes now subject to recount, along with the latest final vote totals for these ballot boxes**
2. **List the reason(s), for each ballot box, that it was selected to be re-opened and recounted**
3. **Publish the full results of the recount as *each ballot box is completed*, including:**
  - **how the vote totals for each candidate, and null votes, have changed from the previous count**
  - **how many votes (if any) for each recounted ballot box were reallocated to other ballot box**