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## Your ELi: Looking at the Ballots <sup>[1]</sup>

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**By:**

Alice Dreger, Publisher



Our report today <sup>[2]</sup> on what we learn from looking at the East Lansing City Council ballots is (not too surprisingly) causing some discussions about what it all means. Here is some additional information, beyond the lengthy <sup>[3]</sup> note on sources<sup>[4]</sup> provided in the report itself, that is aimed at eliminating confusion.

**You may have noticed that today's report had three authors** <sup>[5]</sup> Christine Root, Kepler Domurat-Sousa, and myself <sup>[6]</sup> a number unusual for an ELi report. It took three of us because the work involved many questions about how to assemble the data, what was worth reporting, and how we should explain the inevitable uncertainty in ballot counts.

In these discussions, it helped a lot that Chris earned two degrees in Economics from American University and that Kepler is currently studying Physics at the University of Chicago. As people

with serious math skills, the two of them are very good at thinking about numbers *and the limits of data*.

What I brought to the report were questions, writing, and editing that went on through many rounds until we were all satisfied that what we had was the best we could offer. We three concluded there was definitely enough interesting material to bring you an article. Many readers seem to agree.

**For the three of us doing this reporting, a look at photocopies of the actual ballots raised some interesting questions, including:**

- Is this type of ballot with this type of machine the best way to do voting?
- Should a recount be mandated if the difference between a winner and a loser is within a particular small margin?
- What's the best way to do recounts, given that machines and humans may read ballots differently?
- Should East Lansing City Council elections be done via something like ranked voting rather than "first past the post" ("winner takes all") voting, to try to get results closer to what the electorate as a whole wants out of an election?

Those are not questions we engaged in today's data-based report.

**For many readers, the biggest question is "Who really got more votes, Mark Meadows or Erik Altmann?"**

We understand that readers wish we could tell them who *really* had the support of more voters — Altmann or Meadows. But, as we reported, there is irresolvable uncertainty in this case because the vote between them was so close and what we have is not a look back into the brains of voters, but a look at the papers they marked.

One thing we now recognize in reading reader responses is that some readers don't understand that the phrase "margin of error" is a formal term in statistics to refer to uncertainty levels. They think we are saying someone charged with overseeing elections made an error. That's not what we're saying.

As we noted in the article, some ballots were definitely marked ambiguously. How that ambiguity is interpreted determines the "answer" to who got the votes on those ballots. So, a recount *might* have "resolved" the ambiguity more in favor of Altmann than Meadows. Alternatively, it is also possible that a recount could have shown a margin of victory of more than two votes for Meadows, although it still would have been a very small number.

As we explained in the article, the difference between the votes cast for Mark Meadows and the votes cast for Erik Altmann is so small as to be within the range of uncertainty and to make the outcome dependent on which method of counting is used.

By contrast, that's *not* the case with the clear wins of Jessy Gregg and Lisa Babcock. They were so far ahead of Meadows and Altmann, there is no question that a recount would have still given them both clear wins.

The same is true with regard to the losses of John Revitte and Warren Stanfield, who trailed far enough behind Meadows and Altmann that a recount would have done them no good.

But Meadows and Altmann were so close that *different reasonable ways* to count the ballots could get you different outcomes. A recall would provide a second official *interpretation* of what voters intended to mark on their ballots, and we can now say, after looking at the ballots, that that interpretation might have flipped the results.

So, who won the third seat? Mark Meadows. He was declared the winner after the machine count, and because Altmann did not ask for a recount, that count was certified and the outcome stood. That's how the rules here work.

**Today's report also included answers to many data questions that we found worth reporting.**

We covered such questions as: Which combinations of candidates received the most votes? Did some voters choose to vote exclusively for the two incumbents or exclusively for non-incumbents? Who did people choose to vote for if they used only one or two of their available?

You can read the report here <sup>[2]</sup>.

*Love ELi's work digging deep into East Lansing politics and elections? Support our work today with a tax deductible donation so we can keep working for you in 2020.* <sup>[3]</sup>

#### **Related Categories:**

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