Voting glitches like St. Lucie's miscount not uncommon, expert says

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ST. LUCIE COUNTY — Local officials and a political expert say voting issues — like the one that caused 6,330 county ballots not to be totalled Tuesday — happen frequently and there are checks in place to catch errors before the votes are finalized.

Supervisor of Elections Gertrude Walker said she has never had a glitch like this in the past and the office is taking a new measure to make sure it does not happen again.

Walker said the office has 15 computer memory cards that keep separate vote totals. When those tabulate, they show green arrows. But when a computer server rebooted Wednesday morning, five red arrows showed that 6,330 ballots were not in Tuesday’s totals. The office plans to reboot the server before the end of counting at the next election.

“We have set in place a new procedure to make sure it never happens again,” Walker said.

In 30 years in office, Walker said she has never had a glitch like this. Area officials could not recall a similar problem.

In 1990, faulty ballots forced a recount in two local elections, though the error was blamed on the company that provided the ballots.
St. Lucie County Republican Chairman Reece Parrish said he met with Walker and her staff on Thursday to discuss the matter. Parrish said he is still investigating the missed ballots.

“I think it’s premature to say anything else,” Parrish said. “Ms. Walker was cooperative.”

Parrish said he has not had any major problems with Walker’s methods in the past.

“My confidence in her is good,” he said.

St. Lucie County Democratic Chair Celeste Bush said Walker has done a good job over the years.

“These things happen, I guess,” Bush said. “At least they have redundancies and checkpoints.”

Kevin Wagner, assistant professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University, said he was not surprised to see a miscount, though the total missed votes was unusually high.

“It’s not rare,” Wagner said. “In fact, it’s fairly common. We have a word in political science for it. We call it ballot spoilage. What it means is that for some reason or another a certain percent of the vote either gets miscounted, undercounted, the chads aren’t right, the machine doesn’t read it right. It’s a fairly common thing in the history of the U.S. electoral process that a small percentage of the vote gets mishandled in some way or another whether it’s the fault of the voters or the counters.”

Wagner said electoral problems typically are viewed as administrative and not partisan, which is important because in general, people do not lose faith in the system if the problem is seen as administrative.

“This stuff happens all the time,” he said. “The thing is nobody paid a great deal of attention to it until 2000 when the (George W.) Bush/(Al) Gore (2000
presidential) election put sort of a microscope on our electoral system and people started asking questions about what happens to these votes.”

In all, people have been happy with Walker’s performance. She ran unopposed in 2008. Wagner said the system St. Lucie County uses where bubbles are filled in and then scanned into a system is among the most effective.

“It’s just a fluke that happened,” Walker said.