

A close race doesn't *automatically* trigger a recount

One mechanism of elections, examined in depth — the specific, state-defined margins that trigger an automatic recount versus a requested one.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How This Guide Works

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to election administration and mechanics — the procedural layer beneath the outcome, examined the same way regardless of which party or candidate it involves. Each specimen goes deep on one mechanism, with official records, court citations, and peer-reviewed or nonpartisan scholarship listed in full on the references page.

INCOGNATI CIVICS – ELECTIONS

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Recount Trigger Misunderstanding

Recensio Automata

Governing precedent / case 2000 **Status** Thresholds vary by state, most in the 0.5% or smaller range

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

FLORIDA'S 2000 PRESIDENTIAL RECOUNT

*Florida's initial 2000 count showed a margin under **0.5%**, triggering an automatic machine recount under state law. A margin that thin also opened the door to a manual recount request, which led to five weeks of litigation ending in *Bush v. Gore*. Most states set their automatic-recount threshold far tighter than the public assumes — typically well under half a percentage point — and a wider margin generally requires the trailing candidate to formally request and often pay for a recount.*

THE HOOK

“Close race” is a subjective, headline-friendly description that doesn't map onto the specific numeric thresholds state law actually uses to trigger a recount.

THE MECHANISM

Each state sets its own automatic-recount margin by statute, usually a fraction of a percentage point; races outside that threshold can still be recounted, but only if requested (and often paid for) by a campaign, not automatically.

Field mark: before assuming a close result will trigger a recount, check the specific margin against that state's statutory automatic-recount threshold — most are far narrower than casual usage of “close” implies.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

PRIMARY SOURCE · SUPREME COURT

Bush v. Gore, 531 U.S. 98 (2000).

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/531/98/>

The case that ended Florida's 2000 recount process.

REFERENCE SOURCE

National Conference of State Legislatures, "Automatic Recount Provisions by State."

<https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/automatic-recount-provisions-by-state>

State-by-state table of automatic recount margin thresholds.

REFERENCE SOURCE

FairVote, "Recount Rules and Trigger Thresholds."

<https://fairvote.org/>

Nonpartisan election-reform organization's summary of recount trigger mechanics; search site for current recount-rules resource.

Reading This Mechanism: A Gut Check

four questions before a headline changes what you think happened at the polls

1 Find the exact margin

Get the precise percentage, not just “close” — the threshold that matters is numeric and specific.

2 Check that state's threshold

Automatic recount margins vary by state and are usually far tighter than casual usage assumes.

3 Know requested vs. automatic

A wider margin can still be recounted, but only if a campaign formally requests (and often pays for) it.

4 Read the state election code

It states the exact trigger — no need to guess from the closeness of the headline number.

INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 4 of the Elections section within Incognati Civics. The full queue of twelve specimens is listed on the cover. This section joins "How Federal Laws Actually Get Created" within Civics, with local government, official data reporting, and institutional communications planned beyond it. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.

Civics Field Edition · Elections · Specimen No. 4

All specimens independently sourced