

In US presidential election: Bush seeks to block counting of Florida votes

Patrick Martin
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The events of the weekend have brought more clearly into focus the reactionary position of the Bush campaign and the Republican Party, who are trying to block the counting of valid ballots in the state of Florida, so as to steal that state's electoral votes and, with them, the presidential election.

The Bush campaign filed suit in federal court on November 11, seeking an injunction against the hand recount of ballots in four large urban counties. The action represented an abrupt reversal of position, since spokesmen for Bush had previously denounced Democratic threats of legal action over voting irregularities in Palm Beach County and other Florida locations, claiming that the Gore campaign would needlessly prolong the completion of the presidential election.

The arguments made by the Bush campaign against the hand recount procedure are hypocritical and self-contradictory:

- The Bush campaign denounced a hand recount as inherently inaccurate; however, the Republicans relied on such a recount in New Mexico, where the tally has tipped the state's electoral votes away from Gore, and they may seek similar counts in other closely contested states, including Wisconsin, Iowa, and Oregon.

- As the Democrats were quick to point out, George W. Bush supported and signed a state election law in Texas in 1997 that declared a hand recount was the “preferred procedure” to a machine recount in the event of an election challenge.

- Former Secretary of State James Baker, Bush's representative in Florida, denounced the state law permitting hand recounts as unconstitutional, although the Republican governor of Florida, Jeb Bush (George W's brother), made use of the procedure during previous election campaigns in the state.

The fundamental issue, which no amount of distortion can disguise, is the democratic right to vote. The Bush campaign and the Republican Party have denounced lawsuits by voters seeking to have their votes counted, while filing their own lawsuit to deprive these voters of their rights.

In the presidential campaign, Bush claimed that the difference between himself and his Democratic opponent was that he trusted “the people” while Gore trusted “government.” But it is the Bush campaign that is asking a federal judge to exclude the votes of a section of Florida's people, in order to manufacture an election victory.

The initial hand recount in Palm Beach County Saturday showed enough of a swing to Gore—19 votes in four precincts—to suggest that a county-wide recount of all 531 precincts would easily erase Bush's statewide lead, which has been cut to only 327 votes. Early Sunday morning the county election authorities decided by a 2-1 vote to go ahead with the full-scale recount.

The Republican lawsuit against the recount in Palm Beach, Volusia, Broward and Miami-Dade counties will be heard before a federal district judge in Miami Monday morning. Legal observers suggested that it was highly unlikely that a federal judge would issue an injunction directing county election officials to ignore state law, which allows a hand recount if requested by one of the candidates. Former Secretary of State Baker hinted that appeals would be filed in the event of unfavorable rulings, first to the US Circuit Court of Appeals and then to the US Supreme Court.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, speaking on a television interview program Sunday morning, suggested that the Republican Party might seek a complete revote in Florida if the federal court rejects the suit against the hand recount in the four counties.

He said this would be necessary because the deadline had already passed for requesting hand recounts in other counties.

Such a revote would be unprecedented in US history. It would be fraught with danger for the Bush campaign, since it is likely that at least some of the 98,000 Floridians who voted for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader on November 7 would switch to Gore in a second ballot.

The recount in Volusia County, which includes Daytona Beach and some suburbs of Orlando, began on Sunday morning. Democrats challenged the vote count there because there was an unexplained drop in Gore's total by 16,000 votes, while 10,000 votes were initially reported for David McReynolds, the Socialist Party candidate. McReynolds was later credited with a total of only nine votes in the county. Press accounts told of precincts being unable to transmit results because of computer problems, bags of ballots left in cars or in public areas, seals broken on ballot boxes, and other instances of improper handling.

While such events would seem to make a full recount mandatory, the Bush campaign followed up its lawsuit with a preemptive action by the state government headed by Jeb Bush. The Florida Secretary of State, a Republican, threatened to disqualify the figures from Volusia if county election officials did not complete their recount of nearly 200,000 ballots by Tuesday.

Additional press reports have surfaced which suggest that the Florida authorities, at the behest of the Republican Party, waged a far broader campaign of voter intimidation and disruption on election day. Affidavits have been filed charging that state troopers set up roadblocks and checkpoints near predominately black voting stations in rural counties, and that black and Caribbean immigrant voters were turned away at the polls in Miami-Dade County, home to the largest Haitian immigrant community in the state.

In Tampa, a black voter filed an affidavit that election officials turned him away from the polls because he did not have a photo ID, while permitting white voters to cast ballots without showing identification. NAACP officials have taken several hundred complaints of harassment of black voters in many parts of the state, and said they planned to file these complaints with the federal Department of Justice, which has jurisdiction under the Voting Rights Act.

Reverend Charles L. White, Jr., director of the southeast region of the NAACP, said, "I think what we are going to uncover is a wider conspiracy to disenfranchise African American voters and other minorities in this state. When you start to put all the pieces together, you start to see a wider systemic problem."

Some 93 percent of black voters in Florida cast their ballots for Gore, according to exit polls. Nationally, the percentage of the black vote going to the Democratic presidential candidate was the largest since Lyndon Johnson's campaign against Barry Goldwater in 1964.

The cynicism of the Republican position is underscored by reports that Bush campaign aides drafted plans before November 7 to challenge a Gore victory in the Electoral College if Bush won a majority in the popular vote. According to a column published in the *New York Daily News*, and confirmed in other publications, Bush aides planned a massive campaign on right-wing talk radio programs to put pressure on members of the Electoral College to switch their votes to Bush.

"We'd have ads, too," an unidentified Bush aide told *News* columnist Michael Kramer, "and I think you can count on the media to fuel the thing big-time. Even papers that supported Gore might turn against him because the will of the people will have been thwarted."

As it happened, the result of the election was the opposite—Gore won the popular vote and presently leads in electoral votes, but would lose the Electoral College if Florida's 25 votes were awarded to Bush.



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