

Something rotten in the state of Florida

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While the official recount of the 6 million votes cast in Florida November 7 continues until at least the end of business Thursday, sufficient facts have emerged to suggest vote fraud in the state and raise the possibility of a stolen election. The combination of misplaced votes, ballot box irregularities, possible voter intimidation and Republican control of the state government apparatus add up to a confused and highly suspicious situation.

With only 1,800 votes separating the Democratic and Republican candidates out of a total of 6 million cast, and the national election hanging in the balance, the Florida vote and the circumstances surrounding it have taken on historic significance.

Complaints began to flow in from Palm Beach County in southern Florida as soon as the polls opened Tuesday morning. Voters complained that the organization of the ballot had confused them. The ten presidential candidates, including independents, were listed in two columns. Gore's name was the second one on the left side of the ballot with an arrow pointing to the third hole in the column. Voters, many of them elderly, were worried that they might have voted by mistake for Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan, whose name was on the opposite side of the page, with an arrow pointing to the second hole.

The supervisor of elections for the county, a Democrat, said any confusion was unintentional. Nonetheless, voters continued to call Democratic Party headquarters all day. "This is ridiculous, this ballot. We have senior citizens going crazy," said state Rep. Lois Frankel, a Democrat from West Palm Beach. She arrived at the county elections office about 3 p.m. to register a protest. She was joined by state Sen. Ron Klein, Democrat of Boca Raton, and Democratic Congressman Robert Wexler, also of Boca Raton. Wexler told reporters, "If me and Pat Buchanan are winning precincts in my district, there is something wrong." Frankel commented, "This has national implications."

Republican officials played down the ballot confusion. Director of the state division of elections Clay Roberts commented, "There's nothing wrong with the ballots in Palm Beach County. The ballot is laid out according to state law and the voting system they have."

But the fact remains that Buchanan, an extreme right-winger, received 3,407 votes in Palm Beach, while he won a mere 786 in neighboring Broward County and 561 in Miami-Dade County. His next highest total was 1,000 in Pinellas County. According to the *Palm Beach Post*, Buchanan was credited with "54 [votes] from the Democratic retiree stronghold of Century Village in West Palm Beach and 37 from Kings Point in Delray Beach, another haven of older Democrats." Palm Beach County Commissioner Bert Aronson remarked, "I don't think we have 3,000 Nazis in Palm Beach County."

Reports of missing ballot boxes in Broward County, in southern Florida, surfaced Wednesday. NBC News reported that nine boxes had gone missing. Jane Carroll, Broward's election supervisor, responded angrily. She said nothing was missing. Rather, there were 14 boxes of ballots from the Pembroke Pines area that had taken

longer to relay because of the heavy turnout. She conceded that one box had been mistakenly left at a Pompano Beach polling station. "We can't prevent human mistakes," she said.

Officials of both the Democratic and Republican parties reported that dozens, perhaps thousands, of people had been turned away from the polls. Mitch Caesar of the Broward Democratic Party said his staff had received calls all day from people turned away, and that some precincts ran out of ballots and were unable to obtain more. "Thousands may have been disenfranchised in Broward County today," he said.

Several ballot boxes were reportedly found Wednesday morning at three elementary schools and a gated community in Palm Beach County. One box was found at Nothboro elementary school in West Palm Beach. Another locked ballot box was found at Duncan Middle School and a third at Timber Trace Elementary School. Police investigating said they found no ballots in any of the boxes. Officials said the boxes had been left behind mistakenly or had been used for other purposes.

Monte Friedkin, of the local Democratic Party, told a local television station that there were two more boxes found at the Broken Sound gated community in Boca Raton. Friedkin indicated that the Democrats' lawyer would be filing suit in the state capital because of problems with the election.

A ballot box was also found in a Miami church by a church preschool employee. Miami-Dade County officials said the box was a supply case, and was not stuffed with forgotten ballots. "We have accounted for all voted and un-voted ballots," said John Clouse, supervisor of elections for the county. The pastor of the church, Nebel Buchanan, remained skeptical. About the possibility of additional ballots to those counted, he said, "It's a very interesting scenario." Buchanan described his congregation to CNN as being largely African-American and West Indian, and heavily Democratic. Indeed, the vast majority of the reports of irregularities have come from Democratic areas.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson told the press that he was preparing to travel from Nashville to Florida to hold a rally in North Miami to protest against irregularities in the presidential vote count. "It's not just recount, it's about investigation," Jackson commented. He indicated that the missing ballot boxes and "voter intimidation" kept some minority members from voting, and some others who did vote were not counted.

"People whose votes have not been counted need to have their votes counted and their voices heard," Jackson said. He cautioned against a rush to judgment in Florida. "There is no time limit on justice. The media talks about this like it's a horse race, but this isn't just about Gore and his staff and Bush and his staff. It's about the American people."

Another factor in the situation likely to arouse questions is the chain

of events Tuesday night involving the television networks' call of the Florida election and the reaction of the Bush camp.

After the polls closed at 7 p.m. the networks initially reported that the Florida balloting was too close to call. An hour later they were predicting a Gore victory in that state, as well as in Michigan. At that point, Bush and his family abruptly changed their original plan, to watch the returns from a suite at the Four Seasons Hotel, and chose instead "to run for the cover of the governor's mansion," according to *Salon* magazine. There appeared "to be panic in the camp of Texas Gov. George W. Bush.... As preparations are made to bus the small pool of reporters and cameramen assigned to cover the governor over to the mansion, news comes via cellphone that one of the networks is about to call Pennsylvania for Vice President Al Gore, filling the last third of the Florida, Michigan and Pennsylvania trifecta that is essential to any Gore victory. 'He's in retreat, he's running home,' a senior Democratic official says by phone."

Shortly before 10 p.m. Bush invited reporters and television cameras into the governor's mansion, in an unprecedented move, to protest against the television networks' call in Florida and Pennsylvania. He indicated that he had spoken to Pennsylvania's Gov. Tom Ridge who had assured him that the election was far from over in that state. Bush said nothing about calls to or from Florida. The governor told the press, "I know you had all those projections, but people are still counting votes. I'm going to wait until they count all the votes. I think Americans ought to wait until they count all the votes."

Moments later CNN withdrew its prediction of a Gore victory in Florida, eliciting a large cheer from the crowd of Bush supporters outside the Texas capitol. A short time later ABC, NBC and CBS followed suit, moving the Florida vote into the "too close to call" category. The networks never changed their call on the Pennsylvania vote, which turned out not to be close.

It would be interesting to know what Bush learned about the Florida situation between 8 and 10 p.m. Had he found out something that convinced him that victory in that state was more likely than it seemed? This is a matter worth pursuing.

At 2:18 a.m. Wednesday morning the television networks declared Bush the victor in Florida, and Al Gore was on the phone by 2:30 to congratulate the Texas governor. The vice president was preparing to make a public concession speech about an hour later when television newscasts indicated he was only trailing Bush by a few hundred votes, not the 50,000 reported earlier. Instead Gore made a second call to Bush withdrawing his concession. "Circumstances have changed," he reportedly told his opponent. "Do what you have to do," Bush responded.

The unprecedented and bizarre character of the Florida vote raises troubling questions. There is no reason to believe that the crowd of right-wing extremists who, in the impeachment conspiracy against Clinton, mounted a complicated operation to remove a twice-elected president would shy away from rigging an election in the state of Florida, presided over by Jeb Bush, the presidential candidate's brother. This would not be the first time in American history that an election had been fixed.

Several things about Florida are worth noting. Its public officials have the reputation for being among the most corrupt in the country. Earlier this year the press noted that four former Florida legislators were facing, serving or appealing federal prison sentences, including the former Speaker of the House.

The state has also been a longtime center of the drug trade and right-wing political conspiracies, much of the latter centering on the Cuban

exile community—90 percent of whom voted for Bush in Tuesday's election. The Cuban rightists have a particular score to settle with the Clinton-Gore administration: the decision to remove Elian Gonzales, the Cuban child found at sea, from his Miami relatives and return him to Cuba. A comment from the extreme-right Judicial Watch, one of the groups that has played a vanguard role in the anti-Clinton witch-hunt over the past half a dozen years, is worth noting in this context. It reads: "If George W. Bush wins Florida—as the pundits expect—and this captures the Presidency, he will, ironically, owe his victory to Elian Gonzalez."

The vote totals for the US Senate and presidential races in Florida are intriguing. At last count Bill Nelson, Democratic candidate for the Senate and victor in the race, had 2,981,667 votes. His opponent, former House impeachment manager Rep. Bill McCollum, had 2,698,770—a difference of 280,000 votes. Gore received 2,907,351 votes. The difference between Gore's total and Nelson's is explained by the vote for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, approximately 96,000. It is odd, however, that George W. Bush collected 2,909,135 votes, 200,000 more than McCollum, with whom he campaigned. Were there that many Republican voters who made a distinction between the presidential candidate and the impeachment manager?

Representatives of both the Democratic and Republican parties have flown to Florida to observe the final canvass. Former Secretary of State Warren Christopher heads the Democratic team, former Secretary of State James Baker the Republican camp. The Democrats have also dispatched a trio of lawyers, including party counsel Joe Sandler, to Florida. The outcome could depend on several thousand overseas absentee ballots, many of them from military personnel. The ballots have until November 17 to arrive at local election offices in Florida. Fifty-four percent of such ballots were cast for the Republicans in 1996. Gore spokesman Mark Fabiani, speaking on CNN, commented: "It's all in the hands of whoever counts the votes in Florida."

If George W. Bush is declared the victor in Florida, he will be the next US president. If he has not only lost the national popular vote, but gained office on the basis of a suspicious triumph in Florida, his administration will be that much more delegitimized in the eyes of the American people.



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