

On-the-spot report from Florida

US election crisis reveals deep feelings about fairness and democratic rights

David Walsh

17 November 2000

The Florida Supreme Court gave the go-ahead Thursday evening to the hand recount of votes cast in the November 7 presidential election in Palm Beach and Broward counties. The vote recount had already begun in Broward. Palm Beach County canvassing board members, who had been awaiting the high court ruling, began their manual recount at 6 p.m. Thursday. The count, which will take some six days in Palm Beach, had been suspended following a legal opinion issued by Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris.

Democratic Party lawyers have asked a state judge in Tallahassee, Florida's capital, to have amended vote totals from the counties undertaking the manual recounts accepted by state officials. Secretary of State Katherine Harris has stated that the only votes that remain to be counted are the absentee ballots that are due by midnight Friday.

Attorneys for Republican Texas Governor George W. Bush are asking a federal appeals court in Atlanta to shut down the entire process, calling manual recounts inaccurate and prone to mischief. They are obviously fearful that any fair and accurate count will give victory to the Democratic candidate, Vice President Al Gore.

In Palm Beach County, Thursday was again a day of waiting on the courts. The canvassing board reconvened at 1 p.m. outside the Emergency Operations Center and reaffirmed its decision to hold off on the counting of votes. Only board member Carol Roberts, 64, proposed that the recount should begin. Roberts, a mother of six and grandmother of six, has become the bete noire of the right wing. She has received death threats and has a police guard wherever she goes. The physical threats against her have followed logically from the smear campaign launched by Republican lawyers and officials. Little of this has made its way into the national media.

At the time of the board's reconvening, perhaps a hundred or so Democratic Party supporters turned up to lobby for a resumption of the vote. Later a crowd of perhaps three hundred Bush supporters took over the street in front of the Emergency Operations Center. They waved American flags and expressed their support for Katherine Harris and her efforts to prevent a recount.

I spoke to some of those who turned up to urge the board to resume its counting of ballots. The interviews are posted below. There is a great deal of confusion and many illusions in the Democrats, but it is indisputable that many people have been deeply affected by this election crisis. You encounter this everywhere. In a café, a couple of business types come in and the worker behind the counter makes a comment hostile to Bush. One of the two asks, "You're against Bush?" The counterman replies, "Well, I'm a working man..." The woman selling hot dogs at a stand is asked her opinion about the election standoff. "I wish it was over," she says. "It will cost the state a lot of money." But lest you get the wrong impression, she hastens to add, "But I think it should be fair."

Fairness is a word you hear a great deal in Florida. Basic rights, democracy, the will of the people are other common words and phrases. To those at the top of the society, including the Democratic Party officialdom, these are holiday phrases, and means to chloroform public opinion. To ordinary people, they mean a great deal. The right to vote, the assurance that your vote will be counted, in a country where the size of your income means just about everything, is no small matter. This commitment and belief in democratic rights will inevitably propel masses of people into conflict with the entire political establishment.

These are some of the conversations I held with Floridians on Thursday.

Sean Becker, a striker at Overnite Transportation, Teamsters Local 390

SB: I want to keep the Bush dynasty out of power. I've been on strike at Overnite for 13 months. Dick Cheney is on the board of directors of Union Pacific, which owns Overnite.

I think Bush and Cheney should have been disqualified for their DUIs. You can't even get a job driving a truck with a DUI. Bush and Cheney could not even get jobs at Overnite.

I believe the election was rigged. How could Patrick Buchanan get that many votes out of a predominantly elderly Jewish district? I live in Ft. Lauderdale. I'm a member of Teamsters Local 390.

If Bush wins the election, the Republican Party has a militia and they have declared war on the working man. It means tax cuts for people who make more than a million, it means no new social benefits, no social programs. The Bushes and the Republicans have taken everything away from us. I want Social Security, I want public transportation, I want roads, I want infrastructure. The Bushes want to take everything and give it to the rich. And this isn't fair.

David Walsh: Do you think Gore's program is much better?

SB: Anything's better than the Republicans.

DW: What about the working class building its own party?

SB: They did that in the thirties and they were all arrested. My great grandfather was a member of the Socialist Party in the 1930s, and that was done before. The government cracked down on them, they had witch-hunts.

DW: I think this election will have a radicalizing effect. Have you discussed this election with people you know? What's their attitude?

SB: Everybody that doesn't work, that's a criminal, that thinks they have a deal in the works whereby they're going to make a million dollars in the stock market, supports Bush. Everybody who works for a living supports Gore. When we had a workers' movement in this country, in the 1950s, under McCarthyism, everybody was rounded up. If you were a member of the Socialist Party or the Communist Party, a government agent could walk into your job and have you terminated. My great grandfather was in New Jersey. Also I have great grandparents who were Pennsylvania

farmers. They were members of the Farmer-Labor Party, but that was destroyed too.

Janice Evans, the Florida Consumer Action Network

JE: My own attitude is that the county authorities and the state government should make certain that there was a clean election on November 7. We want to make sure that every vote is counted. We don't want anyone disenfranchised. No one should have been intimidated. And indeed we believe that every voter and every citizen in America will demand this.

DW: When you refer to a "clean" election and "intimidation", you obviously feel there was a problem.

JE: I'm referring to many things I have not experienced personally, but we have contacted people who have built up the documentation that is representative of some of the problems. One problem is in Dade County [Miami]. The ballot is in Spanish, but many folks were allowed to have someone go into the voting booth to interpret. When Haitians tried to bring interpreters into the booths, because the ballot is not in Creole or French, they were denied that. Historically, the Haitian community votes Democratic. The Hispanic community in Dade County votes Republican. We feel this was a great error and intimidation. These folks have been here in the country, they have earned the right to vote, they are documented, and certainly we ought to make certain that these types of things do not happen again.

There have been other instances of this type of profiling also. There was the inability for many in Tallahassee, which is a diverse community, state government, students—many younger voters were disenfranchised, many from the black community were delayed because of roadblocks set up by the highway patrol, roadblocks that were not advertised ahead of time, as per law.

I do feel there was a concerted effort to block people from voting. That is my personal opinion.

I also believe there should be a manual count, that's Florida law.

Peggy Kearsney

PK: I think justice is being thwarted. I don't understand when a candidate says that he trusts the people to make a decision, and there's a problem counting the ballots, when officials even on election day know there's a problem, and he undertakes all this judicial action to stop a recount. Obviously, there's a problem, they should work together for a solution. The Secretary of State [Katherine Harris], when she said she wouldn't accept counties with problems to recount and submit those new totals, she was taking away home rule for the people. Whether it's here in Palm Beach County, whether it's Miami-Dade, whichever county asked, there are too many people saying we have inconsistencies and problems here, please give us more time, she said "no." We're thinking, we don't have the right to rule ourselves, let alone have our vote be recorded for the presidential election. They're making the election process a laughing stock if they keep this up.

DW: Why do you feel so strongly about this issue?

PK: Because people have fought and died and people are still dying around the world for the right to vote. We've had that right, and too many of our citizens take it for granted, and now it's come down to this crunch time and the media added a lot election night, the fires were fueled. The media has played a pivotal role in this whole election process. It's sad that we don't get more issues out to the forefront, that people hear sound bites instead of talking about the real issues. This is one of the first real issues that people have been talking about, the right to have their vote counted.

The Republicans are afraid that they really aren't going to be the victors in the end. I don't believe this argument that it will take too much time. There are other states that will certify their election much later in the month and still make it to the electoral college deadline. There's enough time here. Wouldn't both campaigns want to know what the real numbers are?

DW: Obviously not.

PK: It's a ploy, they're fearful, this is their leverage. The Secretary of State has the right to be partisan, but not when it comes to her duty as a public servant.

DW: What about the continuity of tactics used during the impeachment crisis?

PK: We're not talking about the real issues and the real crisis in America. With all the growth in this country, people are working minimum wage jobs, they're having to work two and three. Not enough was publicized about the fact that Governor Bush wanted to take the minimum wage down to \$3.35 an hour for certain categories of labor, which he has in Texas. People don't have health care, people have a health care crisis. People are still hungry, they're on the street, we haven't solved the social problems. We're trying to solve too many of the corporate ills. Let's take care of the people, the people want to vote. The people want to have their voices heard. Let's talk about the issues, and have a real debate in this country, and not this other tactical crap.

DW: Do you think Gore addressed these social issues during this campaign?

PK: Not fully, but he addressed them a lot more than Bush. I believe there is a real message out there, on health care, on workers' rights, on a slew of proposals. We didn't talk enough about those issues. They talked about the morality issues, they tried to tie it into the impeachment. In my view impeachment was a smoke screen so you don't have to talk about other issues. The same tactics. They're afraid of a real debate because their stands on the issues are not going to hold up; they're not popular.

If Mr. Bush becomes president, he has to understand that he does not have a mandate, that the majority of people voted against him. More people voted for a liberal or more liberal candidates, whether it was for Nader or for Gore than voted for him. He has to understand this, but I don't think he does understand this. His smugness last night in trying to deny the olive branch from Gore was one of those things that people should just be incensed about. He's acting as if it was his God-given right to be president. That's not how it should be. This is America, and people should still have freedoms, that's what we tell each other anyway. I'm from the Tampa area. I was out of the area, my mother kept me up to date about the irregularities. I didn't hear until yesterday that there were problems in Seminole and Bay counties.

DW: Was there a concerted effort to block people from voting?

PK: I don't know that to be true, but if you go by the smell test, something smells. Did things happen to thwart people from voting? Absolutely. Were people's rights infringed upon? Absolutely.

Vilia Singer

VS: I had first-hand experience with the voting problems. I was one of the people during election day who handed out flyers in two different precincts. We knew that there was a big problem. It was confusing, the butterfly ballot. It was not only an error made by old people, like a lot of people are saying. It's not true. I know friends of mine, middle-aged, and young girls, they made the same mistake, because this machine is antiquated, anybody could miss this, and we are very unhappy about this problem. I live in Boca Raton.

Ellen Weiss, 25 years at Kingsbrook Jewish Medical Center in Brooklyn, member of Local 1199, hospital workers union

EW: I definitely know of people who had this difficulty. It was very confusing. The boxes were not arranged properly. And some people may have punched two holes, and they did not want Buchanan, they wanted Gore. I think it's very illegal that Bush may get in. They should hand-count every vote. This is a democracy.

DW: Were people particularly offended that their votes might have gone to Buchanan?

EW: That's an understatement. He got on television and admitted that he had not expected so many votes. I live in Boynton Beach, in a

development called Platina.

Fred, originally from Barbados

I think it's ironic that we live in a country that lectures the whole world on democracy, yet there are some people here who are reluctant to have every citizen's vote count. It's a sham. It's clear that there were a lot of people who intended to vote whose votes were not counted. I live in Broward County. It crosses racial lines, it crosses age lines. There are people who are really frustrated because they feel their vote has not been counted.

There were questions in a lot of parts of Florida. Then there was the night the vote was coming in, when they had already called it for Gore, then for Bush, there were several ballot boxes in Broward County that had not been counted that contained tens of thousands of votes. After the votes were added from Broward and Dade, the total narrowed to two hundred votes. Clearly something went wrong.

A Palm Beach County school board worker

I think every vote should be counted. That's the whole problem. They're not counting the votes in Palm Beach County like they should. They're afraid of it because they'll lose.

It depends on who you talk to. I don't know if there was an effort to stop people from voting, but I think that when there were people who were confused by the ballot, they should be allowed to revote.

The issues that concern me? Low wages, everything concerns me. I could talk for an hour about it. These issues are not discussed.

Beverly Curphey

BC: The central issue is that nearly 30,000 people have been disenfranchised by this vote, or the lack of this count. They have had Katherine Harris, who is in Bush's pocket, who is being paid directly by Bush. Her edict is there shall not be a count, we shall not go forward. However, Bob Butterworth, the attorney general, says absolutely we should go forward. This board should be serving the people of Palm Beach County. They should be counting the votes as we speak, and then if something comes down and they're not valid, so be it. But what we need for the people of Palm Beach County is fairness in the voting place.

We need every American who tried to cast their vote in a responsible way to be heard, and if they are not heard, if we are eliminating 30,000 Palm Beach County voters, that means 30,000 people who thought they voted have been disenfranchised and are not having representation, and that, in turn, does not speak for the will of the people. That's the main concern. It's not a Democratic issue, or Republican issue, or Green issue, this is about the will of the people. As far as spreading from Palm Beach County, this could happen in any other place in the United States, and it's about the will of the people. And that's what we need, the will of the people to be heard.

DW: What would a Bush victory mean?

School board worker: How about setting labor back a hundred years. Republicans don't do anything for working people or working families.

DW: What about the pressure that's been put on the Palm Beach County canvassing board?

BC: I think they've buckled under, yes, I do. To the full scope of pressure. Except they have not buckled under to the people. They are not listening to their constituents, they're listening to the powers that be. I also think they need to listen to the will of the people. That's the bottom line. If you voted, you should not be disenfranchised.

Dara Krugman

DK: The W. [in George W. Bush] doesn't stand for women when he takes away our right to choose. It doesn't stand for winner when it's not a democracy and not everybody speaks, or has the right to speak. It stands for weasel, when he steals away the democracy of America. Every voice is important, every vote counts, whoever wins, every vote counts. Those 19,000 votes should count. It's an issue of fairness. In New Mexico they hand counted the vote. In Texas they passed a law allowing hand counts in

1997. He doesn't practice what he preaches. In Florida it's not fair?

As a Floridian I'm outraged by Jeb Bush, the governor, who puts on his letterhead as governor that he endorses his brother. Jeb Bush should not get involved as governor. All of the people of Florida do not feel the way he does.

DW: Do you think there are suspicious elements about the vote itself?

DK: One of the Baptist churches in Miami did not have its ballots counted. They're in with the FBI now. People were denied the right to vote. One person I know had to bring his deed to say that he was a resident of the county. It's ridiculous. I'm just concerned about the fairness issue. I think our country was founded on people dying for the right to vote. I'm from Ft. Lauderdale. People are concerned. When you take away people's rights ... it's more than just the right to vote, it deals with substantive rights. American citizens have the right to know whether George Bush was elected fairly. There shouldn't be any question marks.

Bush has a vested interest in the oil industry, Cheney too. I think it would be a very scary four years. And I am in that one percent that Bush is going to give a tax break to. I'm an investor.

DW: What if the stock market goes?

DK: I think we'll have problems. I think I'll be a bag lady. In any case, a person who speaks her mind.

Maria Kocher, pilot, United Airlines

MK: I agree with you that Gore doesn't represent much of an alternative. I agree that behind Bush are very right-wing people. He's promised these people all sorts of things.

That's why we can't let it happen; we just cannot let it happen. It's just a matter of fairness. We're not going to be intimidated. A 12-year-old girl was screaming at a lady, "If you're too stupid to read, you shouldn't be allowed to vote." It's not a prerequisite, in fact, that you should be able to read in order to vote, if that was even an issue. My niece almost made the same mistake.

It's gone beyond the ballot now. It almost seems like a sinister plot to overthrow our rights. All we want is a fair vote, a fair count. We're not even asking for a revote, which, in all fairness, because of the ballot.... A friend of mine, a policeman, a Bush supporter, told me that a man driving people from Century Village told people to vote number two for Gore. I don't know if he was intentionally trying to mislead people or not.

Because what's messed up in all this, we've forgotten those people who took time off from work or school to vote for the man they wanted, whoever it might be, they were misled. Now we've forgotten them. The media needs to get this out to all America. Because if they do this here, they'll do it everywhere. They can't just ram this down our throats.

My husband and I are airline pilots. We make quite a lot of money, we'd actually be better off financially if we voted for Bush, but we're also union people. My father was a master sergeant in the army, my grandparents were immigrants from Italy. I'm talking about a country that's diverse, and to try and take away our rights, our basic right to vote.... It's abominable. I'm baffled, as you can hear in my voice. I'm sorry if I'm not being real clear. I'm appalled.

We're not talking about five voters, but 19,000 voters who were disenfranchised. The media keeps throwing this number around that last year the same number were thrown out. That's not true. Four years ago 14,000 were thrown out, this time 30,000.

I fly for United. We've gone through struggles there. We voted down a contract. I think that when you throw money at people it's too big of a carrot. Give me rights in my workplace, give me guarantees that I won't lose my job. With Bush maybe moving into the White House, our jobs aren't even secure, and it's not only my job, it's a lot of jobs. I can't believe that he's in, and I agree with you one hundred percent that the media is biased, because of their very large salaries, and because they're all owned by networks, big corporations that contribute a large amount of money to the Republicans. We're not getting a fair deal. No matter who says we're

getting a fair deal, we're not.

DW: Do you think that Gore represented a real alternative?

MK: I really was disappointed that he was going for the center. I wish he had been more forceful on a woman's right to choose. I've been called a baby-killer here. I wish Gore had been much stronger. I'm certainly against the death penalty, although he hasn't taken a stand. In fact, he supports the death penalty.

DW: I don't believe the Democratic Party will fight the right wing. Look at the impeachment crisis.

MK: That was another fraud. [Bill] McCollum lost handily, [James] Rogan lost handily. I'm strongly committed to fighting against the right wing in this country. What is the right wing? They're not at all fair, it's so bizarre. I'm happy to meet you. I bet you we have more agreements than disagreements. And I'm going to fight. We're talking about crooks.



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