

On-the-spot report from Florida

Ft. Lauderdale residents voice their opinions about the US election crisis

David Walsh

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South Florida is like other parts of the US, except sunnier. It's composed of different worlds. The wealthy exist in their separate universe. You can glimpse it through fences and hedges. It's green and cool, decorated with fountains and dotted with palm trees and tropical plants. For everybody else, this could be anywhere in America. There are the same fast-food restaurants, gas stations, used car lots, supermarkets, liquor stores. And as is too often the case, the same ugliness, the same waste.

Broward County is no exception. Broward is one of the counties at the center of the current political crisis. A manual recount of the votes cast in the November 7 election is currently going on at the county's Emergency Operations Center in Plantation, Florida.

Ft. Lauderdale, Broward's largest city, is famous for its beaches. The ocean front is impressive, and the downtown has many new and expensive-looking buildings.

A few miles away from the seashore in the northwestern part of the city, a solidly working class area, people are concerned about the outcome of the election. There is a generalized suspicion that something illicit is going on, that George W. Bush and his brother, Florida governor Jeb Bush, are trying to pull a fast one. People here are worried about low wages, health care, Social Security. Almost everyone I spoke to voted for the Democratic Party. They believe that the Democrats care about them and their social concerns. To a certain extent when workers and retired people speak about the Democrats, they are not describing the actual party, but the sort of mass organization that should exist, one that fights for decent jobs and equality and the rights of the less fortunate.

The visit to Ft. Lauderdale brought out two aspects of the present situation in a striking fashion. First, this is an argument against the cynics and the political abstentionists of the so-called left. Large numbers of working class Americans regard the act of casting a ballot in a general election with the utmost seriousness. For blacks in the South it is a particularly significant activity, insofar as it was a right that had to be struggled for less than half a century ago. Second, at the same time, one gets a sense of the indifference, if not outright hostility of official America to that democratic right. Whether it is the antiquated or non-standardized equipment, the relatively short hours that the polls are open, the red tape, the open acts of intimidation—it is clear that a concerted effort is being made to keep working people from the polls.

I spoke to some Ft. Lauderdale residents outside a Winn-Dixie supermarket on Sunrise Boulevard.

Reillie Wilson, roofer

David Walsh: Do you think anything suspicious is going on?

Not exactly, but in a way it's kind of up in the air. We never had this long before to decide an election. Sometimes you think that something has been going on all the time, and we're just now getting close to it. I think there is an effort not to count some votes, because people vote regardless,

but there was a miscalculation of the vote. I think it was deliberate.

DW: Mr. Bush runs this state, and the other Mr. Bush is his brother. Do you think there's anything suspicious about that?

Possibly. There's a little something in there somewhere, but I don't want to lay hands on anybody. Like I said, it's a little salt and pepper because we've been turning over these elections pretty good and particularly this year when 90 percent of the people went out to vote...

DW: Did people wait in long lines? Did you wait yourself?

For about 45 minutes to an hour. There were long lines. This was at 31st Avenue and 6th Street, Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in Ft. Lauderdale.

DW: People were making a big effort to vote, and they feel concerned that their votes might not be counted?

In a way, they're concerned. People can't really lay their hands on what's going on, they don't really know. I'd say if it keeps pulling like it is, they're going to just lay back and say, well, whatever count they come up with, just let it go. Because the president himself wouldn't like to take office when he has to go to court to prove that he is the president. I feel in another week or so, people will start to let it go, and say, we can live with it for four years, we've lived through hell and high water so far, so...

I'm a roofer, a contractor. Bush never knew what poverty was, never knew what welfare was, so he has his own line or way of thinking, because if you're born with a silver spoon in your mouth, you have a tendency to overlook the needy and the Medicare and all that. In his family, if they needed a doctor, they mostly had their own private doctor, so you have to have someone who really looks under the leaf, instead of just walking over it, or sweeping it away.

A retired investigator for the Broward County School Board

I think everybody that voted should have their vote counted. Some did not have their votes counted, some were blocked from voting. Let me tell you about an incident that happened when I was at the poll. I vote in every election. I've been doing that for fifty years. But for some reason ... I'm a Democrat, when I was trying to punch the ballot, it was very difficult to punch. A person with less strength than I have, like the lady next to me, probably wanted to vote for someone and her vote was probably not counted, because she was unable to punch the ballot.

I think all the votes should be recounted. The machine has a tendency to miss a vote if it's not punched all the way. If it were my vote, I'd want it to be counted, so a hand count will tell you if an attempt has been made to punch it.

I was never satisfied with Governor Bush here in Florida. There were incidents in Texas that I think George W. Bush should have reacted to more, he did not, as far as the executions go. I think he should have at least waited until they had all the information. I remember a case where there was some information that possibly would have given the individual

that was put to death another chance to get to court. They needed a stay from the governor, which they didn't get. Everybody should have a chance, especially when you're talking about the death penalty. You don't want to send someone to his death who's not guilty. So you make sure you have all your facts in perspective before you go through with the death penalty.

A supermarket employee

Let me tell you what they did to me. I registered to vote in September and I didn't get my card and I went down to the voters registrar place, and they didn't even have my name on the books. It was in Miami. I didn't get a chance to vote. I would have voted for Gore if I'd had a chance.

DW: Do you think there was a deliberate effort to stop some people from voting?

Yes, I do. Bush's brother is the damn governor of Florida, you know something's going on.

Mrs. Brown, retired

I think Gore was going to win in the first place.

DW: So you think somebody is trying to steal the election?

Yes.

DW: Who would that be?

I don't know who it is, but somebody is tampering with it. I think Gore won more votes than Bush. I'm retired.

DW: What's important to you?

Health care, poverty and the Social Security benefits. I'm not afraid of Bush, but I can remember the olden days when things were tough, and truly to say, it's not going to come to that again, even if Bush did get in to be president. Because the black people are not going to let it happen, they're not going to let it happen. I prefer Gore's program, on Social Security, on helping the elderly.

A woman originally from the West Indies

DW: Do you think there was anything suspicious about the elections?

Yes.

DW: Do you think there were people who were not allowed to vote?

Yes.

DW: Do you know people in that situation?

A few, but no names is better.

DW: What happened to them?

When they got to the poll, they told them the poll was closed, and it wasn't.

DW: What do you think of Bush?

I'm not a judge of character, but for some reason, I don't like him much.

DW: Do you think he speaks for the rich?

Yes, he does.

DW: Who speaks for the rest of the population?

I have no idea.

DW: Do you think there should be a recount of the votes?

Yes, don't you think so?

DW: I think so.

Exactly. And I think that decision by Harris, I think it's not in the best interest of the people, because for some reason I have a feeling that she belongs with Bush. That's the reason she did what she did. That's all I got to say, because I have to catch a bus.

Eva Stimpson

My opinion of it is they should count everything all over again. Every vote in every state. Everything. They should hand count it and if it doesn't get a result, whoever won the popular vote should become president. The heck with the electoral college. Whoever has the popular vote, should be president.

Shamikia Norman, housekeeper



Shamikia Norman

The only thing I think is if Bush was sure he won the first time he would let all the votes be counted. Because if you win once, you'll win twice. The way that they're going, throwing out most of the votes down in Miami and most of them are blacks, yes. There's a lot going on with this. Because the lady, Mrs. Harris, who says she's not going to count the votes, she has a job. When that man get into office, she'll get a job. You know, everybody who's against counting the votes, against the hand count in Palm Beach, they tend to be people who are up for jobs with him [Bush]. And some of them already got money, and they're Republicans anyway.

There weren't long lines when I voted. It was pretty much fair.

For the most part I think Bush is for the rich. He's not going to be doing anything to help my needs. In fact, he might slow down a lot of the things I need rather than improve them. I work for a lady that has money, and she feels the same way. He's going to give her the things she needs, you know. I do housekeeping.

Edwin Nesbitt

I think there's some funny business going on. This is the first time this has ever happened in the twelve years I've been voting anyway. Another thing too, they had both candidates so close together, it got me thinking, 'I hope I did vote for the right one.' I voted in Ft. Lauderdale. I think we should do it all over again. Just redo it. I think it would be best for us to go ahead and re-elect again. Just go and punch the cards all over again.

Bush represents the rich. I'm a lawn man, I cut lawns. I think people had problems voting. When a lot of people got off of work, they couldn't even vote. That's what I was told by a lot friends. They said they couldn't even get in the polls, they'd shut them.

DW: This is a country whose politicians talk about democracy 24 hours a day, but they can't even make the effort to allow people to vote.

Another thing too, Bush's brother is sitting in the high chair here, something has to be going wrong. Because like I said, in the last twelve years, we never had this problem, and all of a sudden we have this problem.

DW: In the most general sense, why do you think there is such a difficulty with this election? Why is there such a division?

They want the chair, they want to be president, so they want to buy it or whatever they can do, or cheat to get it. I think they're trying to steal the election. I'm sure a lot of people feel the same way. Like I said, it never happened before, and you have two brothers sitting there like that, it seems a little crooked. First they wanted a recount, now they're saying he doesn't want a recount. In the beginning when Bush knew he lost it, he wanted a recount. Now he don't want a recount, because he figures he's ahead 300 votes.

DW: What are the social issues that concern you?

Social Security and poverty too. You know, you got to have jobs and we need a minimum wage hike, it doesn't need to stay down this low. You can't live off that. Most jobs are paying \$5.50 an hour, you can't live on that.

DW: The media and the politicians tell us what a booming economy it is, but for tens of millions of people it's not that way.

I agree with that, I'm one of them. I work a night job myself, and it's getting rougher every day.

Doris DeBerry, fast-food restaurant manager and office worker



Doris DeBerry

It's a joke. There might be something suspicious, but it's a joke. The way they have everybody come out and vote, and then the votes they have that they didn't have time to get, they don't want to count them. People voted, they should count them. They're afraid of the outcome.

DW: Do you think there was any effort to stop people from voting?

Not down in south Florida, they couldn't get away with it here. But up in the northern counties there was. For instance it was close to the end of voting time, they let a white lady come around the back, but they turned three people away, up in some of the small counties, around Bradenton. Something similar to the bad old days, not as bad, but something similar.

I didn't vote for Bush, I'll leave it at that. He speaks for the rich, exactly.

The outcome of this election will help me decide whether I'm going to get up at 6:15 in the morning to be there at 7 o'clock in order to vote, to be in Palm Beach County in order to go to work. See if it makes any sense or not, see if it's worth it. They didn't expect this kind of a turnout at the polls. They figured it would be like it usually is.

People made a big effort, they got up early, they waited on lines. Was it worth it? We'll see.

I'm one of those people with two jobs. I'm a manager at Wendy's, and I work at a credit agency.

Tommy Bolden, Ft. Lauderdale city worker

It seems a bit unfair. People not having the right to vote, or have their votes counted. Even if they make errors or they don't understand something, I think the right to vote is part of the Constitution. I think they should go out of their way to make sure everybody gets a fair chance. It's leaning to something where we're going to get like other countries. It gets to a point where people who want power will do anything possible to get the power they want.

It's the right side against the left side. I think eventually it's going to be a little more than that, as years go by, because each side is going to get more and more aggressive. Eventually people are going to get tired of it. Like any other country, Democrats are going to get tired of the Republicans, Republicans are going to get tired of the Democrats, there's going to be some kind of an uprising. I don't know what you want to call it. Eventually, there's going to be a big conflict.

Bush speaks for the rich. Gore is more for the rich and the poor, that's my opinion. I think Gore speaks for both sides. I can't say whether it's his choice or not, but that's the way the system is designed. The Democrats are for the rich and the poor, or the people without so many advantages, and the Republicans are just for the rich, or whoever feels like they have some type of edge in life.

DW: Is there any politician who speaks for you, who represents you?

As being black?

DW: Being from the working class, being whatever you are.

Sometimes I think the Democrats do. Seventy percent of the time. Sometimes when you're black, you feel like you don't have a voice. But I think actually the Republicans did us a favor. They're waking people up. I

think that's going to make a big change. I think it's a good thing it happened this way. It made me more aware, it made my friends more aware, that we have to start complaining, demanding our rights. As blacks, we took things for granted, we took what people gave us.

DW: I don't think its black and white, I think it's rich and everybody else in this country. A tiny number of people at the top who have everything.

And they want it to stay that way. They want it all.

A roofing worker on disability

Something's not going on right, you can see that on TV too. There's some kind of fraud up in there. I think so. I really don't think it's right. Give it to the man who's going to help people. I was doing roofing, but I'm on disability, that's why I want somebody in there who won't mess us up. Because I'm disabled.

If Bush gets in, the poor people will go down. That's it.

Rosa Mary O'Neil, waitress

Everything suspicious has been going on all the while. That's what I think, don't you?

DW: Yes, but I'm asking your opinion.

You've got to witness with me if you're talking to me, I don't want you to stand there and not say anything. This thing has been going on all along. You've got to count this, and count that. Nothing like that has ever happened since I've been in the world. I'm a young woman though. Don't you think something suspicious is going on?

DW: Yes, I do. I think there's an attempt to steal the election.

I think somebody has ripped my man off, my Democrat. I don't want to judge people, like Bush, because when you're in the church and you read the Bible, you're not supposed to judge people. You really don't know.

But before this is over, a lot of people are going to get killed.

I would like to get more money, being a waitress, we don't make that much money. After 37 years, you know how much we get paid for that? \$2.15 an hour, plus tips. And that's bad. I hope money will be there when I retire in a couple of years, because I'm getting ready to retire and stay home and play games with my honey, if you know what I mean.

George Butler, limousine driver

It's kind of funny that Jeb Bush and George Bush are brothers. The same state he's governor of has a problem. There's got to be something going on. Why not Wyoming? Why Florida?

The election has been stolen, the Democrats are trying to get it back. They need to count all the votes, re-vote. Let Clinton stay in office for one more year, till next November, till tempers have calmed down, then re-vote again. All of Florida should vote again.

I'd say they should have kept the polls open until the lines were empty. They didn't, they closed the polls. I thought it was illegal. If you work, what are you supposed to do?

A middle-aged woman

I'm disappointed, I've never experienced anything like this before. We used to vote and we got our president, and now we don't know who our president is going to be.

Rosalinde, a Haitian

You had Haitians in Miami who went to the voting places, who were asked questions. How many times have you voted? Have you voted already? They were kept away or intimidated. Bush is no good.



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