

The US election

Florida citizens denounce Republican efforts to disenfranchise voters

Jerry White
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Dozens of angry citizens testified Wednesday at a public hearing before the Florida state legislature about Election Day intimidation on the part of polling officials, as well as confusing ballots and malfunctioning machines. The common theme was that they, and thousands of other voters—particularly in neighborhoods with large populations of minorities, poor people and senior citizens—had been disenfranchised.

The testimony underscored the scale of intimidation and fraud employed by the Republican-controlled state apparatus to obtain a victory for Bush. Workers, retirees, college students and local poll workers demanded that all votes cast on November 7 be counted, and accused the Republicans of attempting to suppress the democratic rights of the people.

Witnesses testified before a joint committee of eight Republicans and six Democrats, originally set up to investigate voter irregularities, which convened in the state capital of Tallahassee. Many voters denounced the Republican majority in the state legislature for threatening to call a special session to name their own slate of electors for George W. Bush. Republican lawmakers, who outnumber Democrats 77 to 43 in the state House and 25 to 15 in the Senate, may vote Thursday to begin a special session as early as next Tuesday.

Florida Governor Jeb Bush, the brother of the Republican presidential candidate, earlier said it would be “an act of courage” for the legislators to go into special session and that he would sign legislation naming a separate slate of electors.

“If there is uncertainty, the legislature has clearly delegated authority from the US Constitution to seek the electors. I admire them for, at least on a contingency basis, accepting that responsibility and duty,” Bush told reporters Wednesday. In an interview with CNN, former Republican White House Chief of Staff Boyden Grey called the state legislators’ move an “insurance policy.”

During testimony on Wednesday one woman voter said, “What you are doing is totally contradictory to the will of the people. I believe I speak for the people when I say: Take time to count the votes, do not steal our votes. Don’t take the unconstitutional act of taking away our votes.” A black woman from Riviera Beach pointedly asked: “What right do you have to determine the will of the people in the absence of a complete count of the vote?” The Republicans on the committee exchanged smirks during the testimony of this and other voters.

When voters arrived Wednesday morning to testify they discovered to their surprise that the Republicans had changed the agenda from one to investigate voter irregularities to one paving the way for the selection of a slate of pro-Bush electors. On Tuesday, the name of the

panel was changed from “Legislative Oversight Committee on Electoral Certification, Accuracy and Fairness” to “Select Joint Committee on the Manner of the Appointment of Presidential Electors.” As one speaker pointed out, a November 24 letter from the Florida legislature said the hearing would investigate the alleged “failure to count overseas military ballots and inconsistent standards in counties”—both “partisan Republican issues,” she said. When recounts in Broward County were cutting into Bush’s lead, “You needed those issues,” she said, “now you don’t.”

The panel then imposed a rule to only allow testimony pertaining to the constitutional issue of declaring electors. But the workers defied the Republicans’ efforts to discourage and intimidate them and insisted on testifying. One black woman said, “You might try to cut me off or even drag me out of here, but I’m going say what I’m going to say.”

Elizabeth Campbell, a 19-year-old college student who said she had driven more than seven hours to attend the hearing, continued in this defiant tone: “You’re not going to stop me from speaking.” The young white woman, who identified herself as a registered Republican, said she lived in a predominantly black neighborhood in Palm Beach County. “I have observed that in most of the counties the majority of people that have been disenfranchised have either lived in a Jewish community or an African-American community. If you are here asking us why we don’t want you to make the choice for president for us, that’s because we have been disenfranchised in minority communities, which are protected by civil rights laws enacted in 1965.”

Ms. Campbell, who said she had spent long hours registering black voters in the county, told the legislators, “By doing what you are doing, it’s like saying: ‘Florida didn’t have the right to vote, but let’s make that vote for them.’ Voting is the only voice that we have in our community. I will not stop here or in Washington until I get heard and the thousands of voters in our area are heard.”

A number of poll workers testified that they had been swamped by the voter turnout and when they called Tallahassee to check on the registration of voters who did not appear on local lists, the telephone lines were busy for three hours or more. Many polls, particularly in minority and poor areas, did not have computers to automatically access voter registration lists and in many cases registered voters were turned away from the polls.

Other Palm Beach residents testified about the confusing “butterfly” ballot that led many to mistakenly vote for Reform Party candidate Patrick Buchanan. They denounced efforts to depict voters in the area as ignorant or senile, and some suggested that the confusing ballots

were a deliberate effort to take votes away from Gore. The *Palm Beach Post* reported November 12 that voters in black precincts were 130 times more likely to have their votes discarded—either because the machine did not record a vote for president or because holes for two presidential candidates were punched—than those in white precincts.

Olga Gideon, an elderly black woman, said, “The consensus is that people down here were dumb. I graduated from Tuskegee Institute and then went on to get further degrees at teachers college and elsewhere. I don't think I'm illiterate or made a mistake. There was something wrong with that ballot.”

Michael Ryan, a vote count observer in Palm Beach, said if the 3,400 ballots that were mostly miscast for Buchanan were added to 5,000 that were rejected because they were punched for both Buchanan and Gore, there would be more than 8,000 additional votes for the Democratic candidate.

Hope Ellis said, “I'm a children's librarian, 43 years old, with a university degree. I'm not senile now, haven't played bingo in 20 years. I've lived in five states and I have never seen a ballot like that in my life. I was totally confused. And when I asked the pollster for help and indicated that I wanted to vote for Al Gore, she immediately turned ugly. I know she saw me punch Buchanan and she did not say a word. I want my vote to count.”

An elderly black woman from Miami, Eula Fraser, said, “I can't say I'm a constitutional expert. I do not know how to interpret the Constitution. It has been so long since I studied it. However, I do know there is a constitutional right that protects me and other citizens of the state of Florida, and gives us the right for our voices to be heard. We elected you as our representatives, and I'm here today to say that I want you to think about what you are doing. We are asking you do the right thing and make sure that you don't do what is going to make us angry, because you are all coming back home.”

One middle-aged man, who identified himself as an engineer and a registered Republican who voted for Gore, said, “People went to the polls to vote. Now many of the votes are not being counted because politicians are interfering with the process. The bottom line is there are citizens out there whose votes are not being counted. I left the polling booth thinking that my vote would be counted—it may not have been. Tens of thousands from Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties might not have been counted. I demand the right to have my vote counted. I don't know why you are denying that right.”

Looking at the Republicans on the panel, one voter said, “In 1933-45 in Germany, no laws were broken, but many atrocities and injustices occurred. The individual voices of the people and the collective voices of communities were eliminated. I implore you to remember all the individuals who wish to have their voices heard.”

Elizabeth Ramsey described herself as a “soccer mom” and Cub Scout leader who was testifying on behalf of her small children. “A year ago,” she began, “I had no idea about *Crossfire* and *Hardball* [two nationally broadcast cable news programs] or any of that. But I watch this as an angry citizen and it disturbs me that the legislature is stepping in. My mom told me the legislature would never intervene. Now here I stand. I wasn't a political junkie before but this whole election process has been a huge eye-opener. My eyes are very wide open now.”

Also on Wednesday, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed a series of federal lawsuits charging that the Voting Rights Law of 1965 had been violated because of “voter irregularities and possible voter fraud.” The NAACP said its lawsuits would show “polling sites were moved without timely notice

or no notice; voters were disenfranchised by some polls closing early; some polling places had no bilingual ballots and Haitian voters were denied assistance from translators; there was a disproportionate purging of votes in predominantly Black precincts in several counties, including Duval and in West Palm Beach; charges of voter intimidation in Broward and Hillsboro counties and inadequate training of poll workers.”

A statewide campaign by the NAACP and other organizations, encouraged in part by opposition to Governor Jeb Bush's decision last year to eliminate affirmative action, signed up nearly 60,000 new black voters between February and October of this year alone. Exit polls on election day showed blacks' share of the turnout in Florida jumped to 16 percent, compared to 10 percent in the last presidential election.

In the hours after the polls closed on November 7, the NAACP and other civil rights groups charged that blacks were intimidated by police sweeps and roadblocks in black precincts in Tampa, outside of Tallahassee and in other minority areas. They also noted that several ballot boxes in predominantly black precincts had not been picked up by voting officials and that registration cards for students at some black colleges did not arrive until the afternoon of Election Day.

Several days after the election the NAACP held a public hearing in Miami where 20 witnesses testified about potential civil rights violations. These included middle-class white voters who testified that they saw polling officials challenging black voters and demanding they produce photo identification, although none was demanded of white voters. The NAACP and other groups sent hundreds of sworn statements to the Justice Department and called for a federal investigation.

On Wednesday, NAACP President Kweisi Mfume criticized the Justice Department for refusing to act on substantive charges of civil rights violations. “Given the Justice Department's silence,” he said, “we have filed suits to seek legal remedies that will determine what happened during this election.”

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