

US media seize on partial Florida vote recount to bolster Bush

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One of the media groups reviewing uncounted ballots in the disputed US presidential vote in Florida issued a partial report at the end of February covering 10,664 ballots in Miami-Dade County. Anyone who hadn't followed the 2000 election crisis closely, or had forgotten the details of the five-week standoff after election day, might well have concluded from the widely published reports on this recount that the cloud of illegitimacy surrounding the Bush presidency had been definitively dispelled.

The headline in the *Los Angeles Times*, "Recounts in Miami-Dade Find Bush a Winner," was fairly typical. *USA Today*, with one of the largest circulations of any US paper, reported, "Recount Study: Gore Still Loses." Bush himself told reporters, "Hopefully all the focus on the past is over with. It's time to move forward." Republican spokesmen suggested the report proved they were right to call Gore a "sore loser," who should simply have conceded the election within 24 hours.

Bush's victory claim rested on a margin of a few hundred votes out of nearly six million cast in the state of Florida, while Democratic candidate Gore was the winner of the popular vote nationally. However, the Miami-Dade recount announced last week, under the auspices of a consortium made up of *USA Today*, the *Miami Herald* and the Knight Ridder newspaper chain and conducted by the BDO Seidman accounting firm, resulted in a net gain of only 49 votes for Gore. The *Miami Herald/USA Today* consortium, and the various national media that echoed it, argued that this "proved" that Bush was the winner in Florida because Gore's additional votes in Miami-Dade, when combined with the votes the Democratic candidate gained in recounts carried out during the post-election impasse by election officials in Broward, Palm Beach and Volusia counties, still left Bush with a lead of 140 votes.

Only a handful of commentators and newspapers explained that the Miami-Dade recount result did not mean what most of the reports suggested. First of all, the 10,664 ballots reviewed in this county represent only about one-sixth of the statewide total of 60,000 "undervotes," i.e., ballots that did not register a vote for president in the initial machine tabulation. The Florida Supreme Court had ordered a manual recount of these undervotes in all of the state's counties, but it was halted by the US Supreme Court on December 12. The Miami-Dade result is

a partial finding announced even though tens of thousands of other ballots are still being reviewed by BDO Seidman.

Furthermore, another media consortium, including CNN, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*, is reviewing all 180,000 excluded votes statewide, a total that also includes more than 120,000 "overvotes"—ballots that recorded a preference for more than one candidate. This project, organized by the National Opinion Research Council, a group affiliated with the University of Chicago, has reviewed about one-third of the total and is expected to release its own results some time in April.

There are many indications that a full recount in all 67 Florida counties would show that Gore carried the state, possibly by a comfortable margin. A review of excluded ballots in Palm Beach County indicated a gain for Gore of 682 votes. The *Orlando Sentinel* found a gain for Gore of 25 votes in Osceola County. There have also been reports of net gains for Gore in other counties, including Hillsborough, Gadsden and Lake. The incomplete reports indicate the Gore would have had more votes than Bush if the manual recount in all counties had been allowed to proceed.

Of particular interest is the recount in Duval County, in the northeast part of the state. Bush carried the county, but it is also where Jacksonville, a city of 720,000 people, including a large number of black voters, is located. Nearly 27,000 ballots were rejected in the machine tabulation in Duval County, and more than 40 percent of these were in predominantly black neighborhoods in Jacksonville. This huge number of discarded votes, amounting to 9 percent of the total countywide, was nearly three times the number discarded in the 1996 presidential vote.

Some 22,000 of the 27,000 ballots discarded in Duval County were "overvotes," and, as in Palm Beach County, confusing ballot instructions were a major factor. A sample ballot displayed in local newspapers prior to the election was designed differently than the actual ballot used on election day. Presidential candidates were listed on one page on the sample ballot, but across two pages on the actual ballot. The sample ballot carried the instruction "vote every page," but the actual ballot said, "vote appropriate pages." These conflicting instructions undoubtedly led many voters to cast ballots for

more than one presidential candidate.

There are many other issues that will not be dealt with by the statewide recount of discarded ballots, although they cast doubt on the claim that Bush carried the state and legitimately occupies the presidency. These include the well-known butterfly ballot in Palm Beach County, which led to more than 3,700 unintended votes for neo-fascistic candidate Pat Buchanan in precincts largely populated by Jewish retirees. In Seminole County, Republican operatives were allowed to illegally add required information that had been left off of 10,000 absentee ballot applications. Antiquated election machinery is also concentrated in the poorest counties, with far larger numbers of Democratic voters.

There were also scores, if not hundreds, of allegations of intimidation and harassment of black voters throughout Florida. Some of these were connected to the purge of the voter rolls ordered by Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Secretary of State Katherine Harris in the months leading up to the November election. The Republican Administration in Florida, headed by the brother of the Republican presidential candidate, instructed local election officials to remove 64,000 voters from the rolls on the ground that they were felons.

Florida is one of eleven US states that deny felons the right to vote for their entire lives, even after they have served their sentences. Some 525,000 voters in Florida are disenfranchised in this fashion, almost 10 percent of the number who actually cast ballots in the last election. Twenty-four percent of Florida's black men of voting age, including tens of thousands who have completed their sentences and are no longer even under parole supervision, remain disenfranchised.

The Republican authorities apparently didn't consider this figure of disenfranchised voters high enough, however. They anticipated a higher than usual turnout of black voters in Florida, which was considered to be a make-or-break state for the Republican ticket. There is evidence that the Republicans sought, in the only major Southern state that pre-election polls showed they might lose, to reduce the black voter turnout by dubious, if not illegal, means.

According to a story broken by Britain's *Guardian* newspaper last November and barely mentioned in the US media, some 54 percent of those purged from the rolls were African-Americans. Most of the others were also Democratic voters, and only a small number of the 64,000 were actually felons. Thus tens of thousands of legal Democratic voters were prevented from casting a ballot.

Many duly registered black voters complained, on election day and subsequently, that they were told their names were not on the list of eligible voters. Some who stood up for their right to vote were allowed to cast ballots. But a far larger number were discouraged and did not vote.

Thus, even in the unlikely event that an accurate statewide review of excluded ballots failed to show that Gore won more votes than Bush among those actually cast on election day,

there would remain convincing evidence that the election was hijacked through the disenfranchisement of thousands of voters.

When all the recounts have been completed, however, the most important fact about this election will remain unchanged: it was decided on the basis of an open attack on the right to vote and the principle of popular sovereignty.

When Gore refused to concede and called for recounts, the Republicans went into action immediately to prevent the tallying of ballots that had actually been cast. They went into court, mobilized a mob to halt the counting in Miami-Dade County, prepared through their control of the Florida legislature to appoint their own slate of Republican electors if need be, and finally turned to the right-wing majority on the Supreme Court.

The Court majority's ruling was the most naked expression of this hostility to democratic rights. Ignoring its own dogma of states' rights in order to intervene where there was clearly no federal issue posed, the one-vote majority denounced the Florida Supreme Court for daring to cite the principle of popular sovereignty and the right of voters to have their votes counted. The right-wing justices closed down the court-ordered recount in Florida on the grounds that there is no constitutionally guaranteed right of the people to vote for the president of the United States. This decision makes clear that, whatever the actual vote in Florida, the Bush presidency is the product of an assault by the highest bodies of the state on fundamental democratic rights.

The Democrats, even though they were the losers as the result of this assault, were unwilling and unable to resist it. The Gore campaign refused to expose the widespread disenfranchisement in Florida. The Democratic leadership refused to lay bare the role of the Supreme Court, and have worked since Gore's concession and the inauguration of Bush to paper over the historic issues and prop up the illegitimate occupant of the White House.

The role of the major media has been the same. Fawning over the Bush administration since its installation in January, the leading newspapers and broadcast networks seized on the partial result in Miami-Dade County to come to the aid of the man selected by the Supreme Court to be president.

In this regard, the timing of the announcement of the Miami-Dade recount must be noted. The reports were published on February 26, the day before Bush's nationally televised address to Congress. Even though there had been other reviews and there would be more until the task was completed, this specific result was used to claim that Bush had "won" Florida, and had the effect of bolstering his legitimacy just before his debut speech.



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