

Another Florida election debacle, and its political lessons

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On Tuesday, September 10, voters in the state of Florida went to the polls in the first statewide balloting since the disputed presidential contest of 2000. Several million people cast ballots to determine the Democratic and Republican candidates for the November 5 general election, with most of the attention focused on the Democratic gubernatorial contest.

Former US Attorney General Janet Reno, millionaire lawyer Bill McBride and state legislator Daryl Jones were the three Democrats on the ballot seeking the nomination to challenge incumbent Florida Governor Jeb Bush, the president's brother.

Despite assurances from the Republican-controlled state government and Democratic-controlled local governments in south Florida that there would be no repetition of the 2000 election, when hundreds of thousands were denied the right to vote, the result of the primary election was another debacle.

Preliminary results of the vote-counting showed McBride with 601,008 votes, or 44.5 percent, and Reno with 592,812 votes, or 43.9 percent. Jones, a black state senator from Miami, had 156,358 votes, or 11.6 percent. But the initial returns were immediately challenged by the Reno campaign, amid reports of widespread failures of new voting machines in Miami-Dade and Broward counties, the south Florida region which was Reno's political base.

Voters reported that many polling places were not open at 7 a.m., as required by state law. Local election officials—Democrats in both counties—blamed a poor turnout among the elderly volunteers who staff the precincts. They also cited problems in the operation of the new computer-based touchscreen systems adopted by most of the state's major urban counties. After the 2000 election, the state of Florida outlawed the punchcard ballots that had resulted in hundreds of thousands of overvotes and undervotes.

In many precincts the county employees assigned to the job were unable to boot up the computers used to run the touchscreens and tabulate the votes. In others, the systems were mis-programmed, counting Republican ballots as

Democratic, or vice versa. The *Miami Herald* cited the example of one precinct in the city that reported a total vote of zero for the entire day.

McBride was leading Reno by 8,196 votes in the official canvass, just above the margin of 0.5 percent—6,751 votes—which would automatically force a statewide recount of voting machine totals. Reno requested the statewide recount immediately, citing reports of thousands of uncounted ballots in Miami-Dade and Broward counties, where she was winning 70 percent of the vote. The Republican-controlled state election commission denied the request.

Local officials in Miami-Dade found more than 1,818 previously uncounted ballots in only four precincts, and were expected to locate thousands more in 81 other precincts being checked before the September 17 deadline for filing amended vote totals. Reno's aides also raised concerns about the results reported from 249 precincts in Broward County, where vote totals were unexpectedly low, suggesting that there was a problem in downloading data from the machines.

These new figures could bring Reno within the margin required to force a statewide recount, or even put her narrowly ahead. Alan Greer, Reno's attorney, said that if the state election commission continued to refuse a recount under those circumstances, "I think they would be courting political suicide. I think this state would rise up in almost bloody revolution if she is treated that way."

There are several political observations to make about this sequence of events, which revives memories of the month-long political crisis that culminated in the US Supreme Court intervention to suppress the vote-counting in Florida and award the presidency to George W. Bush.

Reno's own candidacy embodies the decomposition of Democratic Party liberalism. It is extraordinary that a political figure whose record as attorney general included ordering the assault on the Branch Davidian complex in Waco, Texas, in which 80 people died, many of them small children, should be considered the "left" alternative among

the Democrats, with her principal voting base among minority, gay and elderly voters in south Florida.

The Clinton administration had the worst record on civil liberties of any recent American government except its successor, with Reno steadfastly supporting the expansion of federal wiretapping and surveillance powers. She also facilitated the right-wing conspiracy against the president who appointed her to head the Justice Department, most importantly when she agreed to allow Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr to expand his investigation of Whitewater to include Clinton's sexual affair with Monica Lewinsky.

But Reno was considered too closely identified with the Clinton administration and liberal policies in relation to civil rights and gay rights for the Democratic Party establishment in Florida. When she returned to her home state—where she had been state's attorney in Miami-Dade County—to run for governor, the state party cast about for an alternative, eventually settling on McBride, managing partner of the state's biggest law firm and a longtime behind-the-scenes power in Democratic Party politics.

While Reno had led by a wide margin in opinion polls earlier this year, McBride had the support of most state Democratic politicians, the state AFL-CIO and most Florida newspapers, and outspent Reno by a wide margin. He emphasized his service as a Vietnam War veteran, focusing on more conservative and rural areas in north and central Florida. By primary day, McBride was believed slightly ahead, with the outcome depending mainly on turnout in heavily populated south Florida.

In the wake of the September 10 fiasco, McBride claimed victory, and publicly declined to embrace the slogan "count every vote," issued by the Democratic campaign in 2000 during the conflict over the presidential election. It was "time to get on with the election," he said, although he added, "We've had those problems before, where people appeared to be trying to take something that they didn't deserve. I'm not like that."

Asked if this was a criticism of Bush, and if he was suggesting that Bush had not won Florida, McBride dismissed the question, saying, "I'm not going there. It's not part of our election."

This exchange only underscores why the Democrats could not mount any serious opposition to the Republican theft of the 2000 election. The Democratic Party establishment is no more committed to the defense of democratic principles than the Republicans. They employed the same methods to suppress voter turnout that their Republican opponents carried out—with far greater effect—in 2000. They even targeted the same social groups—minority and largely working class voters in south Florida—for denial of voting rights.

Republican spokesmen gleefully jumped on this example of hypocrisy on the part of the Democrats. A spokesman for Governor Jeb Bush denounced suggestions that he was responsible for the problems in the primary balloting. "That's just not an argument that's going to resonate," the Bush aide said. "It's going to be difficult for Democrats to capitalize on this by blaming the governor without reminding voters that the Democratic nominee, Bill McBride, didn't want all the votes counted."

National Republican operatives made similar comments. Typical was the appearance of Alex Castellanos on the CNN program Crossfire September 12. In response to criticism of Jeb Bush, Castellanos declared, "What you should do is tell about the Democrats' dirty little secret in Florida. And that's that the Democratic power brokers in Florida were warned that these two counties weren't getting ready months ago. And you know what? They did nothing. And you know why? Because this is Janet Reno's base, and they didn't want Janet Reno on the ballot."

Program co-host Robert Novak, a vitriolic right-winger, added that the Democrats "had to undermine her vote in those two counties. Isn't that true?"

Such comments are unintentionally revealing. It is no doubt true that the Democratic Party establishment in Florida deliberately, through inaction and failing to upgrade the electoral machinery, deprived thousands of their voting rights in the 2002 primary. By the same token, however, the denial of voting rights to hundreds of thousands in the 2000 election—due to antiquated machinery, poorly designed ballots, deliberate purging of minority voters from the registration rolls for a variety of false reasons, outright intimidation of minority voters on their way to the polls—was deliberate, and on a far larger scale.

The Republicans, moreover, based their campaign to halt manual vote recounts, as ordered by the state Supreme Court, on the anti-democratic argument that the US Constitution did not ensure the right of the electorate to vote for US president.

The defense of democratic rights cannot be entrusted to any section of the big business parties, Democratic or Republican. It requires the building of an independent political movement of the working class, which will have as one of its principal tasks the defense and extension of democratic rights, including the right to vote.



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