

Tensions mount over US presidential election recounts

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2 December 2016

The first major statewide recount of a presidential election since the Florida standoff that determined the outcome of the 2000 election began Thursday in the state of Wisconsin, where Republican Donald Trump won by a narrow margin of 22,177 votes, less than one percent, over Democrat Hillary Clinton.

In Michigan, the state where Trump won his narrowest victory on November 8, with an initial margin of 10,704 votes, Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein filed Wednesday with the State Board of Canvassers for a recount. On Thursday, lawyers acting for the Trump campaign filed an objection to block the recount, with a hearing set in Lansing on Friday morning to determine the outcome.

Stein has also filed for a recount in Pennsylvania, where Trump's margin was more substantial, nearly 70,000 votes, but still well below the 1 percent mark. A full recount in Pennsylvania remains unlikely, since the procedure is prohibitively complex, requiring three voters in each of the thousands of precincts to seek a recount in that precinct. Stein has gone to court seeking a full statewide count.

The recounts are being conducted—or debated—under conditions where Hillary Clinton's popular-vote lead over Trump has passed the 2.5 million mark, and her percentage lead in the popular vote is approaching 2 percent, larger than those won by 10 of the country's 44 presidents.

Clinton's popular-vote lead is five times that of Al Gore over George W. Bush in 2000, when the Republican became the first candidate in 112 years to win the presidency while losing the popular vote, thanks to the political intervention of the pro-Republican majority in the Supreme Court.

The historical precedent of the 2000 election was clearly on the minds of officials as they began the

recount in the Wisconsin state capital, Madison. State elections administrator Mike Haas declared, "This is certainly not Bush v. Gore," referring to the infamous Supreme Court decision that halted the Florida recount and awarded the White House to the Republican.

Bush lost the popular vote to Gore by a margin of 540,000 but edged him narrowly in the Electoral College, 271 to 267. Trump has a wider margin than Bush in the Electoral College, leading Clinton by 306 to 232, because of his narrow victories in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, the three states being recounted, with a combined 46 electoral votes. The initial results in all three states would have to be reversed to change the outcome in the Electoral College.

The three recounts were initiated by Stein after she was approached by a group of academics specializing in election cybersecurity. Stein has denied that she initiated the recounts in an effort to shift the result of the election and install Clinton in the White House, claiming that she is merely seeking to verify the results of the election against any possibility of tampering by cyberattack from Russian-based hackers.

But in taking up the claims by the Clinton campaign and the Democratic Party of a massive effort by Moscow to disrupt the 2016 election, Stein has solidarized herself politically with an effort closely akin to McCarthyite witch-hunting. No evidence of Russian government intervention in the US elections has been presented, either by the US government or the corporate media outlets, most notably the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, which have promoted the "Russian hacking" story so assiduously.

Despite the dubious political motivations of those who initiated the recount, there is no doubt that the widespread response to it reflects both popular hostility

to Trump and anger over the prospect that he will become president despite such a massive loss in the popular vote.

When Stein made an online appeal for money to pay for the legal and processing costs, more than \$7 million was raised in a few days, almost entirely from small donors. This is twice the amount Stein raised for her own presidential campaign, which the Greens largely downplayed once it became clear that the contest between the two main capitalist candidates was tightening.

The recounts sparked a typically “big lie” response from Trump himself, who claimed in a tweet that he won the Electoral College in a “landslide” and would have won the popular vote in a similar fashion but for “millions” of illegal votes cast for Clinton. He also claimed that there was ballot-rigging for Clinton in New Hampshire and Virginia, which she won narrowly, and in California, where her margin was in the millions.

The Trump campaign has been equally hostile in its legal tactics, intervening in each state to oppose a recount, restrict its scope, and, if possible, prevent hand recounting of individual ballots in favor of machine recounts.

In Wisconsin, press reports indicate that most of its 72 counties will recount ballots manually, with a goal of completing the process by the deadline of 8 pm on December 12. Milwaukee County, the state’s largest, is one of a handful that will not recount by hand, but simply feed the ballots through the same machines that counted them initially. Stein went to court seeking to compel a hand recount in every county, but lost the case.

In Michigan, the Trump campaign argued that Stein was not entitled to a recount because she finished in fourth-place and therefore could not be “aggrieved” by any alleged fraud, as well as claiming that the recount could not be completed in time to ensure the state’s electoral votes are properly cast when the Electoral College meets December 19. “There is no reason to rewrite Michigan election law to accommodate the conspiracy-minded requests of an acknowledged loser,” the Trump petition argues.

Stein’s lawyers in Michigan pointed to the large number of ballots where no presidential vote at all was recorded—at least 60,000, far more than the 10,000-vote margin separating Trump and Clinton. Some optical

scanners may fail to read faint pencil marks, they said.

The Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign have taken a largely hands-off approach to the recounts, sending legal observers to participate in hearings, but not giving any material or political support. Clinton’s legal counsel, Marc Elias, said that the recount effort was within Stein’s legal rights, but would not change the outcome of the election.

The Obama administration has been openly hostile, with an unnamed “senior official” telling the press last week, “We stand behind our election results, which accurately reflect the will of the American people.” This remarkable statement echoes the language used by Trump and his spokesmen, although the “will of the people,” at least as expressed in the popular vote, went clearly against Trump.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest was pressed on the subject at a briefing November 28, when he declined several times to go beyond the statement that Obama was fulfilling his “institutional responsibilities” in preparing the hand-over of power to Trump, and that “election administrators at the state and local level in states like Wisconsin and Michigan have a very clear set of rules and responsibilities that they should follow. And the President’s expectation is that’s what they should do.”



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