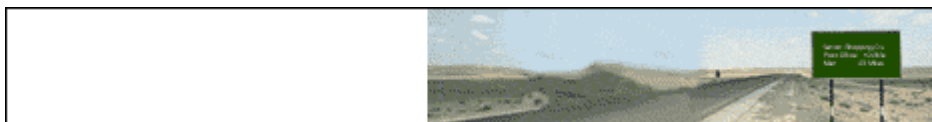


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Friday November 10 2:11 PM ET

Bush's Margin Drops in Florida Election Drama

By Michael Peltier

TALLAHASSEE, Florida (Reuters) - Republican George W. Bush on Friday led Democrat Al Gore by a slim margin in the latest official vote recount in the decisive state of Florida aimed at resolving an epic crisis over who will be the next president of the United States. The count of 65 of Florida's 67 counties scored 2,910,074 votes for Bush and 2,909,114 for Gore, giving the Texas governor a lead of 960 in a state of about six million -- a little more than half his lead on Tuesday night -- the elections department said in a statement.

The controversial vote has spawned a firestorm of legal suits demanding a fresh ballot, angry street protests from Gore supporters, defiant declarations of victory from the Bush campaign with Gore aides saying the election is far from over.

"It appears that the Gore campaign is attempting to unduly prolong the country's national presidential election through endless challenges to the results of the vote here in Florida," James Baker, a former secretary of state and Bush's emissary at the recount, told a news conference.

Gore campaign chairman William Daley said earlier the Republicans had declared their man victorious prematurely after an unofficial recount gave him a razor-thin lead of 327 votes in the entire state. Daley said the Democrats would not concede anything until the legal system had run its course.

The state's latest official tally did not include recounts in Hernando and Palm Beach counties, officials said.

Palm Beach County was scheduled to begin a second recount of votes on Saturday. Its first recount found a swing of 643 votes to Gore, according to media reports, which would take the Bush margin down to just over 300 votes.

Overseas ballots sent through the mail have until Nov. 17 to arrive so an official final count cannot be released until then.

High Drama In The Final Act

The Sunshine State has become the stage for the final act of an extraordinary drama to choose the 43rd president to succeed President Clinton which has turned the 109th election into one of the biggest brouhahas in American political history.

Florida's 25 electoral votes hold the key to Tuesday's election as neither candidate can reach the 270 votes required to win the keys to the White House without them. A recount was ordered when the state race became too close to call.

In Palm Beach County, about 200 demonstrators gathered on Friday in front of the building housing the elections office for a second day of noisy protests over the disputed vote.

The protesters were on both sides of the issue, some saying the election was over, others saying their fundamental right to vote had been denied.

"High-tech America, low tech voting system," one sign said. "Voters should have read their sample ballot," said another.

Protests broke out after elderly voters filed lawsuits saying the layout of the ballot sheet confused them so much they punched the wrong hole.

Courts in West Palm Beach, focal point of the disputed presidential election, were officially closed on Friday for a Veteran's Day holiday, but a federal court judge was prepared to handle cases related to the disputed vote.

Theresa LePore, Palm Beach county's supervisor of elections who designed the ballot, spent much of Thursday in tears, one county aide said, after she was named in lawsuits that criticized her ballot design for misleading them and sought a new election.

Legal Firestorm

U.S. District Judge Kenneth Ryskamp, who on Thursday presided briefly over a vote-related lawsuit that was quickly withdrawn, was on stand-by, ready to hear pleadings.

"The only pleadings we're handling is anything in connection with the vote issue," a U.S. District Court clerk's office spokesman told Reuters.

Hundreds of voters in Palm Beach County have protested against what they said was a confusing ballot layout sheet that led them to cast votes by mistake for Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan rather than their preferred candidate Gore.

Some 19,000 Palm Beach ballots were disqualified because voters mistakenly punched their ballot sheet twice, effectively casting votes for two candidates. With Gore and Bush only a few hundred votes apart in Florida, the disputed Palm Beach vote could be pivotal to the outcome of the presidential election.

Howard Weiss, a Boca Raton attorney who filed one of the suits on behalf of three disgruntled Palm Beach County voters, said the action seeks a new election in the county on the grounds that the ballot layout violated Florida law.

The lawsuit seeks a declaratory judgement ordering a new election. Weiss said all of the lawsuits filed in Palm Beach County Circuit Court may be consolidated with his on behalf of all voters who want new elections.

Florida Frenzy Brings Echoes Of Elian

The frenzy of lawyers, journalists and politicians once again flocking to Florida brought comparisons with the saga of Cuban shipwreck survivor Elian Gonzalez, who was grabbed from his Miami relatives by U.S. agents amid a legal battle and who was eventually returned to Cuba with his father.

The furor brought troops of lawyers for both candidates as well as aides. Civil rights leader Jesse Jackson also flew in.

Allegations of poll irregularities in Florida have been so rife that U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno has agreed to review a request by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to investigate reports that there had been discrimination against blacks at some polls.

The NAACP also planned a public hearing in Miami on Saturday to investigate the alleged voting irregularities.

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