

2008 Election goes well into the morning in Hillsborough County, many glitches in voting software

By: Carmel Delshad

TAMPA—Results at the Hillsborough County Supervisor of Elections Office moved at a sluggish pace on election night until 3:30 a.m. when vote counting officially stopped because of numerous technical difficulties.

Issues arose early on with the optical scanning machines. According to Judge James Dominguez, Chairman of the Hillsborough County Canvassing Board, issues began when the ballots cast during early voting clogged up the system and delayed the transmission of preliminary results.

"The system slowed during the uploading of early votes, so we just had to move on to today's votes. And as far as I know, there never was any intention of counting the absentee ballots that we received today during today's hours because the deadline was at 7 p.m. It would be a very labor-intensive process to do that at once with the other tabulations. From what I gather, later on tonight, we will shut the systems down and start the early voting count again. It will probably take two and a half hours to clean this up," Dominguez said at roughly 2:30 a.m.

Poll workers struggled with the new optical scanning machines, address changes, provisional ballots and a large influx of voters at the University of South Florida precinct. Many voters were not given the second page of the ballot.

Rose Ferlita, District 1 County Commissioner and canvassing board member, spoke of the voting calculations during the onset of the issues at 8:45 p.m.

"In terms of what we have been doing with the canvassing board in the days leading to today, there have been no big blunders. I think the disappointment right now is that although we have given out the absentee vote results for the ones that have been counted, the early voting is lagging behind a bit. I understand they have tabulated each specific precinct but it has not been merged into the main system to be able to give you one big number," Ferlita said.

One of the races held up during Tuesday night's voting mishap was the for the Supervisor of Elections position, where Republican incumbent Johnson held a slim lead over Democrat Phyllis Busansky.

Poll workers scrambled to fix transmission errors at the onset of the night. Delays in precinct votes due to electronic problems were of a major concern. Any remaining precincts whose votes did not transmit correctly were forced to bring November 4th's ballots to the Falkenburg location physically, which greatly stalled the reporting process.

Hillsborough was one of the many counties along the coveted I-4 Corridor that decided the fate of Florida in the general election. Barack Obama's win in the state was projected early on; however, results for the local races were slow at best.

With the 2000 and 2004 elections still a fresh wound in Florida, many felt it was even more important to ensure voter accuracy with the new electronic machinery in this major swing state. Missing and uncounted ballots and machine malfunctions marred both presidential races in Florida, making the 2008 election the perfect time to revamp voting equipment.

The Board of County Commissioners unanimously approved new optical scan voting equipment, furnished by Premier Elections Solutions, as their choice for the 2008 election. After extensive research, this system proved to have the best performance and price in comparison to other voting machines. The

new system provides a “voter verifiable paper trail and a ballot-on-demand system for early voting,” according to a media kit issued by the elections office.

Tabulations of votes started around 7 p.m. at the Falkenburg elections location. Hillsborough Supervisor of Elections Buddy Johnson was at the University of South Florida voting precinct in the early evening, aiding poll workers and speaking to local media. Issues began surfacing as early as 8 p.m.

“I cannot tell you how happy I am and how proud I am of the office. But as for the delay tonight from our vendor, whom we will partner with and continue to work with, this is a brand new system, presidential year, the second brand new system in the second presidential election that Buddy Johnson has administered, and I’m proud of what we are doing here. The issues are what they are. But we are reporting,” Johnson said.

Johnson stated that the county saw a record number of phone calls in the weeks leading up to the election. Office staffer Geneva Prevatt noted that the phone lines shut down about four times the day before the election due to the high volume of calls.

“The phone system itself has just been flooded. The non-stop phone calls probably started two weeks ago and have gotten heavier and heavier as time went by. This is the main headquarters, everything gets routed here,” Prevatt said.

The USF precinct experienced many delays in the meantime, and backup poll staff were sent there to alleviate the mass congestion in the voter lines. Some of the 1,000 voters at USF waited as long as four hours to cast their ballots, according to the St. Petersburg Times. Many people in the line were able to change their addresses while they were at the voting precinct, thanks to a new law allowing them to do so.

Johnson said that the congestion caused at USF was mainly due to an underestimation of voter turnout.

“Polling clerks processed about 200 to 300 students in the last hour, most of them with address changes, which the law now allows. If you are in line at 7 p.m., you get to vote. I think Premier is writing a statement as to why their system is a little slow tonight, it is not the same issue as in the primary, but I don’t know exactly what they determined. I think we are at about 70 percent of the total now,” Johnson said.

By 3 a.m., Premier Elections Solutions had not released any statements clarifying the mechanical issues facing Hillsborough and other counties.

Poll workers and staff struggled to get the results out as fast as possible, but the technology seemed far less committed.

“For the second time in a row, the vendor has failed to produce the uploaded results; the [machines] are all right there, and you can see them. We will remedy the situation as soon as we get the results, and it means exactly what it means,” Johnson said.

As of 2:39 a.m., 377 out of 384 voting precincts reported results at a 59 percent voter turnout rate. Johnson said that the contract with Premier would be remedied as soon voting calculations are finalized.

“This is a situation where [Premier] was unable to perform, they did not deliver tonight, they did not deliver in the primary. But we are reporting; this is not another 2004,” Johnson said.