

Election Report from Florida

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Region: [USA](#)

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Dear Friends and Family,

I send you greetings from Florida, where I've been volunteering for the Kerry campaign here in Bushland. Feelings are running high and strong here, as people still remember the debacle of the 2000 election. I have never seen so much anger and frustration in this country. 'I don't recognise my country any more,' 'This isn't democracy, it's fascism,' 'We can't trust the system after the 2000 election,' 'All three branches of government are suddenly in the hands of the same cabal - that's not how it's supposed to be,' 'We've got to take our country back,' 'If the Supreme Court decides the victor again without counting all the votes there's going to be an uprising in this country,' are some of the comments I've heard this week.

People seem both very well informed - astonishing for Americans - and sadly cynical about the outcome in a state where Bush's brother Jeb is in charge of counting the votes. I guess the challenge is for people to channel the strength of their feeling into action and away from despair. It's difficult when there is no public model for respectful and rational discussion of any of the critical issues. Rather, the media climate seems exactly patterned after the modus operandi of the Bush regime - namecalling, shouting down, suppressing and demonising any dissenting voice. It's as if the bullies of the playground are suddenly running the world; 'might makes right'. Many people seem to want to identify themselves with the bullies and so perhaps to have a vicarious experience of power-over; I can think of no other explanation for the working- and middle-class people who support Bush against their own best interests in terms of the environment, the economy, their own civil rights and world security. The playground-bully-wannabe theory might also explain the sheer rudeness, antagonism and obscenity I've seen among Bush supporters at the polls. The current administration really has set a precedent in its foreign and domestic policy where the true arts of diplomacy and government, based on listening and responding, are supplanted by the unapologetic destruction of human rights in the pursuit of profit and power.

There are surely many people who are shocked and disheartened by the whole scene and who are withdrawing from 'politics' altogether. I understand this desire, but I also feel that a vote not cast, whether as a conscious protest or out of lethargy, will equate a vote for Bush, so I am trying to encourage the young people I meet in particular to make the effort to vote and to reclaim democracy in our country. And, on the positive side, I've spoken with literally hundreds of people whose grief and passion over all of this simply fuels their determination to make sure their vote is counted this time around. There seem to be many obstacles, unfortunately, and after a week here it seems clear that the major problems of the 2000 election are bound to be repeated.

Florida, like some other states, has introduced 'early voting' to try to cope with the

overwhelming numbers of voters predicted to go to the polls this year (1.55 million new voters registered this year in Florida alone). I've been serving as a volunteer at one of the early polling stations here in Palm Beach County, where the worst of the 2000 outrages took place (remember the hanging chads, the illegal purging of tens of thousands of likely Democratic voters from the electoral rolls, the infamous butterfly ballot?) and where, alas, the county Election Supervisor is none other than Theresa LePore, who designed that very butterfly ballot which wrongly directed thousands of votes away from Gore. She's since been voted out of office, but is still in power until December and making all the decisions

Early voting seems to be working fine in the heavily Republican districts of the county, with plenty of voting machines, plenty of parking, and waiting times of no more than 20 minutes. In the mainly Democratic town of Delray Beach, however, people are squeezed into a small county office building with seriously inadequate parking, and are made to wait three to four hours, since (by LePore's decree) everyone must be processed through one of only two laptop computers before being allowed to vote. Needless to say, lots of people get discouraged and go home, which some say is the not-so-secret intent behind the obstacles. Yesterday many voters emerged from this marathon to find they'd been given parking tickets, for parking along a roadside where there are no No Parking signs. I spent some time liaising with these voters, the police department, and the Florida Sun-Sentinel about this, and we managed to induce county officials to post No Parking signs instead of issuing more tickets. This story made the front page of the local paper today and felt like a small but significant victory in that it modeled how speaking truth to power, with respect and perseverance, can actually solve some of the systemic dysfunctions that at the moment are exacerbating people's fears of disenfranchisement.

Some of the more serious problems may be insoluble. I spoke with hundreds of voters who'd requested their absentee ballots, some as early as August, but who haven't received them. I had thought this only affected American voters overseas, but it turns out many people throughout the country have chosen to vote absentee so that votes can be recounted if necessary - and as seems inevitable at this point in such a closely fought election. More than half of Florida voters are voting on electronic touch-screen machines which do not print out a receipt so there's no paper trail to follow in a recount. These machines, manufactured by firms which are among the major contributors to the Bush campaign and the Republican Party, are seriously vulnerable to hacking and manipulation. People are aware of the problem, but in 4 years, despite numerous lawsuits challenging the legality of these machines, nothing has been done to solve it - in fact, more people will vote on the flawed touch-screen machines than in 2000.

Anyway, so far it seems that at least a hundred thousand people haven't yet received their absentee ballots, and that those who can't physically come to the polls on Tuesday to vote in person will simply lose their right to vote in this election. This affects college students in particular, who (coincidentally?) are likely by a vast majority to vote for Kerry. Rumours are flying thick and fast, to the effect that absentee ballots got mailed out in plenty of time to Republican districts but not to Democratic ones. I've heard from postal workers reporting piles of ballots lying around in post offices not being delivered; from a couple who requested their ballots at the same time and place, yet the Republican wife received hers immediately while the Democratic husband is still waiting for his ten weeks later; and from another couple who deliberately registered as 'independent' voters rather than Democratic specifically in order to avoid 'accidental' disenfranchisement of this kind.

One of my favourite tasks this week was handing out free bottles of cold water to the long line of voters enduring the 3- hour wait, compliments of John Kerry. I was severely restricted in what I could say to them, since no 'electioneering' is allowed in the building, and rightly so. But I could listen. And listen I did, fully and deeply, thanks to Kay Kay's good coaching. While my hands blistered from opening bottles, I listened and felt simply awed by the passion and determination in the strong hearts and minds of the mostly frail and elderly folks in line. More than one person over 80 told me they would gladly wait twice as long if they had to in order to vote Bush out, that this is the most important election of their lifetime. It was incredibly moving to hear elderly Jewish people – tattooed numbers from the concentration camps still visible on the fragile flesh of their forearms – say that they have never felt so frightened for the future as they do now. It was a privilege to witness this and I loved being a water-bearer to these courageous souls.

Another day I stood on the busy corner outside the hard-to-find polling place, holding a big Kerry-Edwards sign. Standing in the 90F degree sun for hours with my arms high above my head, I appreciated my years of training in Armenian dance – and had the extraordinary feeling of the inner development of that dance, supporting me on a very deep level. I suddenly felt keenly aware of the thoughts and prayers of all of you and of many people filling me and flowing out, as if through a chalice of love and light. I was overwhelmed by the sense of channeling a stream of fervent prayer for the benefit of all beings everywhere, opening my heart to pour this water of life to all the strangers passing by. Oddly enough, other volunteers reported that the incidents of abuse from passing Bush supporters – which had been sadly quite frequent – dropped to almost nothing during the time that I was out there.

I hope and pray that the fountain of compassion may flow in everyone's hearts now and during the days to come, so that the terrible atmosphere of tension and division here in my home country may transform into the strength for us all to choose compassion over violence. Thank you so much for holding all of us in your awareness. Please keep us particularly in mind on Election Day, this coming Tuesday Nov. 2, and for however many days following it takes to count the votes and obtain an accurate and just result. So much is riding on this election, for humanity everywhere, not just in the USA.

With love and blessings,

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