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Friday, Nov 10, 2006

Elections

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SARASOTA

18,000 votes in U.S. House race may be lost

Thousands of votes were either not counted or not cast in Sarasota's nationally watched congressional race.

BY MARC CAPUTO
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SARASOTA - The latest Florida election whodunit, replete with a razor-thin vote margin and a looming recount, played out here Wednesday as state and county officials were at a loss to explain why 18,382 votes weren't cast or recorded in the nationally watched congressional race to replace Katherine Harris.

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Already, the specter of mere mention of Harris cries, with Republican 368-vote victory near 1

Democrat Christine Jennings number" of so-called "un other four counties in the Hospital Board Sou

Hanging in the balance same type used in Miami the first in Florida to an system.

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"These numbers are strange, fishy," said Douglas Jones, a University of Iowa vote-machine expert who reviewed Miami-Dade's system in 2002. "There's really not a good reason that there were so many undervotes. The number is just too high."

Sarasota's election supervisor, Kathy Dent -- who days before the election acknowledged the race's ballot layout troubled some voters -- insisted Wednesday she oversaw a "good election" and that there was "no equipment failure." Still, Dent, a Republican elected in 2000, couldn't explain why there were so many undervotes. She speculated the day before that voters might have been turned off by the nasty campaign.

With touch-screen machines, undervotes can't really be counted because they're not recorded, which will hurt Jennings when the two-day recount starts Monday. Jennings has hired Miami lawyer Kendall Coffey, a leading Democratic 2000 recount lawyer.

The House District 13 undervote rate was more than 10 times higher than the two elections that bookended it: the governor's race and the U.S. Senate race Harris lost. The undervotes in Sarasota also stick out next to those from comparable Manatee County, where the no-vote rate was about 3 percent. Manatee uses fill-in-the-blank, optical-scan machines, as does Sarasota for absentee voters.

But on Election Day on touch-screen machines, voters had a 14 percent undervote rate and 18 percent undervote rate in the early-voting week before, when complaints surfaced.

Dr. Richard Malkin said he and his wife voted early and realized their votes in the congressional race weren't recorded just before electronically casting their ballots. So they re-voted. "The lady right next to us had the same problem. So many people said the same thing," said Malkin, a Democrat who sits on a SunTrust bank board with Buchanan. "It's like 2000 all over again."

Others wrote e-mails to Dent and the Sarasota Herald-Tribune. Dent then responded in an e-mail: "I hope we can stop looking for ways to disrupt the process and disenfranchise voters" -- a reference to the group that wanted a paper trail.

Jenny Nash, the state's Division of Elections spokeswoman, said the machines are rigorously tested before they're used.

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Why so many undervotes?

"You can't really get in the minds of the voter," Nash said, noting people decide not to cast ballots out of protest or because they just wanted to sign in on Election Day to preserve a good voting record.

In Tallahassee, Leon County's elections supervisor, Ion Sancho, conducted a controlled test earlier this year showing that votes could be easily changed without a trace if an insider computer hacker was able to bypass security checkpoints. "These voting machines should be impounded and looked at real hard," Sancho said of the Sarasota machines. "Something wrong -- not necessarily nefarious -- happened here."

In the face of all this, the state Legislature, which mandated electronic voting systems after 2000, has refused to vote on a paper-trail system. A spokesman for Election Systems & Software, which manufactures Sarasota's machines, said it stands by its product and has a paper-trail feature that Florida could add.

Jennings said it's time to make sure every vote is counted.

"There were 18,382 undervotes in this congressional race -- more than 1 out of every 7 ballots cast. That is a staggering number. Sarasota voters have been victimized by not having their vote count," she said Wednesday afternoon.

Buchanan's response: "I was told I was the winner by the supervisor. I won more votes."

Miami Herald staff writers Gary Fineout, Jack Dolan and Martin Merzer contributed to this report.

