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'Stinking Evidence' of Possible Election Fraud Found in Florida

By Thom Hartmann

There was something odd about the poll tapes.

A "poll tape" is the phrase used to describe a printout from an optical scan voting machine made the evening of an election, after the machine has read all the ballots and crunched the numbers on its internal computer. It shows the total results of the election in that location. The printout is signed by the polling officials present in that precinct/location, and then submitted to the county elections office as the official record of how the people in that particular precinct had voted. (Usually each location has only one single optical scanner/reader, and thus produces only one poll tape.)

Bev Harris of www.blackboxvoting.org, the erstwhile investigator of electronic voting machines, along with people from Florida Fair Elections, showed up at Florida's Volusia County Elections Office on the afternoon of Tuesday, November 16, 2004, and asked to see, under a public records request, each of the poll tapes for the 100+ optical scanners in the precincts in that county. The elections workers - having been notified in advance of her request - handed her a set of printouts, oddly dated November 15 and lacking signatures.

Bev pointed out that the printouts given her were not the original poll tapes and had no signatures, and thus were not what she'd requested. Obliginglly, they told her that the originals were held in another location, the Elections Office's Warehouse, and that since it was the end of the day they should meet Bev the following morning to show them to her.

Bev showed up bright and early the morning of Wednesday the 17th - well before the scheduled meeting - and discovered three of the elections officials in the Elections Warehouse standing over a table covered with what looked like poll tapes. When they saw Bev and her friends, Bev told me in a telephone interview less than an hour later, "They immediately shoved us out and slammed the door."

In a way, that was a blessing, because it led to the stinking

evidence.

"On the porch was a garbage bag," Bev said, "and so I looked in it and, and lo and behold, there were public record tapes."

Thrown away. Discarded. Waiting to be hauled off.

"It was technically stinking, in fact," Bev added, "because what they had done was to have thrown some of their polling tapes, which are the official records of the election, into the garbage. These were the ones signed by the poll workers. These are something we had done an official public records request for."

When the elections officials inside realized that the people outside were going through the trash, they called the police and one came out to challenge Bev.

Kathleen Wynne, a www.blackboxvoting.org investigator, was there.

"We caught the whole thing on videotape," she said. "I don't think you'll ever see anything like this - Bev Harris having a tug of war with an election worker over a bag of garbage, and he held onto it and she pulled on it, and it split right open, spilling out those poll tapes. They were throwing away our democracy, and Bev wasn't going to let them do it."

As I was interviewing Bev just moments after the tussle, she had to get off the phone, because, "Two police cars just showed up."

She told me later in the day, in an on-air interview, that when the police arrived, "We all had a vigorous debate on the merits of my public records request."

The outcome of that debate was that they all went from the Elections Warehouse back to the Elections Office, to compare the original, November 2 dated and signed poll tapes with the November 15 printouts the Elections Office had submitted to the Secretary of State. A camera crew from www.votergate.tv met them there, as well.

And then things got even odder.

"We were sitting there comparing the real [signed, original] tapes with the [later printout] ones that were given us," Bev said, "and finding things missing and finding things not matching, when one of the elections employees took a bin full of things that looked like

garbage - that looked like polling tapes, actually - and passed by and disappeared out the back of the building."

This provoked investigator Ellen Brodsky to walk outside and check the garbage of the Elections Office itself. Sure enough - more original, signed poll tapes, freshly trashed.

"And I must tell you," Bev said, "that whatever they had taken out [the back door] just came right back in the front door and we said, 'What are these polling place tapes doing in your dumpster?'"

A November 18 call to the Volusia County Elections Office found that Elections Supervisor Deanie Lowe was unavailable and nobody was willing to speak on the record with an out-of-state reporter. However, The Daytona Beach News (in Volusia County), in a November 17th article by staff writer Christine Girardin, noted, "Harris went to the Department of Elections' warehouse on State Road 44 in DeLand on Tuesday to inspect original Nov. 2 polling place tapes, after being given a set of reprints dated Nov. 15. While there, Harris saw Nov. 2 polling place tapes in a garbage bag, heightening her concern about the integrity of voting records."

The Daytona Beach News further noted that, "[Elections Supervisor] Lowe confirmed Wednesday some backup copies of tapes from the Nov. 2 election were destined for the shredder," but pointed out that, according to Lowe, that was simply because there were two sets of tapes produced on election night, each signed. "One tape is delivered in one car along with the ballots and a memory card," the News reported. "The backup tape is delivered to the elections office in a second car."

Suggesting that duplicates don't need to be kept, Lowe claims that Harris didn't want to hear an explanation of why some signed poll tapes would be in the garbage. "She's not wanting to listen to an explanation," Lowe told the News of Harris. "She has her own ideas."

But the Ollie North action in two locations on two days was only half of the surprise that awaited Bev and her associates. When they compared the discarded, signed, original tapes with the recent printouts submitted to the state and used to tabulate the Florida election winners, Harris says a disturbing pattern emerged.

"The difference was hundreds of votes in each of the different places we examined," said Bev, "and most of those were in minority areas."

When I asked Bev if the errors they were finding in precinct after precinct were random, as one would expect from technical, clerical, or computer errors, she became uncomfortable.

"You have to understand that we are non-partisan," she said. "We're not trying to change the outcome of an election, just to find out if there was any voting fraud."

That said, Bev added: "The pattern was very clear. The anomalies favored George W. Bush. Every single time."

Of course finding possible voting "anomalies" in one Florida county doesn't mean they'll show up in all counties. It's even conceivable there are innocent explanations for both the mismatched counts and trashed original records; this story undoubtedly will continue to play out. And, unless further investigation demonstrates a pervasive and statewide trend toward "anomalous" election results in many of Florida's counties, odds are none of this will change the outcome of the election (which exit polls showed John Kerry winning in Florida).

Nonetheless, Bev and her merry band are off to hit another county.

As she told me on her cell phone while driving toward their next destination, "We just put Volusia County and their lawyers on notice that they need to continue to keep a number of documents under seal, including all of the memory cards to the ballot boxes, and all of the signed poll tapes."

Why?

"Simple," she said. "Because we found anomalies indicative of fraud."

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Thom Hartmann (thom at thomhartmann.com) is a Project Censored Award-winning best-selling author and host of a nationally syndicated daily progressive talk show. www.thomhartmann.com. His most recent books are "The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight," "Unequal Protection: The Rise of Corporate Dominance and the Theft of Human Rights," "We The People: A Call To Take Back America," and "What Would Jefferson Do?: A Return To Democracy."

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