"A Failed Election: The 1997 City of Miami Mayoral Race, and the Warnings it Offered"

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Joe Carollo entering a courtroom to applause from supporters, February 9, 1998, in the voter fraud trial related to his campaign for mayor of the City of Miami. February 9, 1998.

C.W. Griffin, Photographer, Miami Herald Collection, HistoryMiami Museum, MH-75412-2

Understanding how elections are contested by candidates is essential to learn what strategies can work with voters in future contests. However, understanding voting patterns is equally essential to learn what potential pitfalls exist in attempting to hold a free and fair election.

Over the last twenty-five years, keenly contested presidential elections have introduced uncertainty in the democratic processes of the United States of America. Most Americans look to the 2000 presidential election between Vice President Al Gore and Texas Governor George W. Bush – and particularly the thirty-seven days of uncertainty in the state of Florida – as a turning point toward a hyperpartisan environment related to election operation. But what if that election uncertainty was simply a symptom of a problem that was identifiable years before? The contentious 1997 City of Miami mayoral election between Xavier L. Suarez and Joe Carollo highlighted problems in Florida's electoral process that would reappear in later elections, and offered previews of strategies used by candidates to undermine confidence in democratic institutions today.

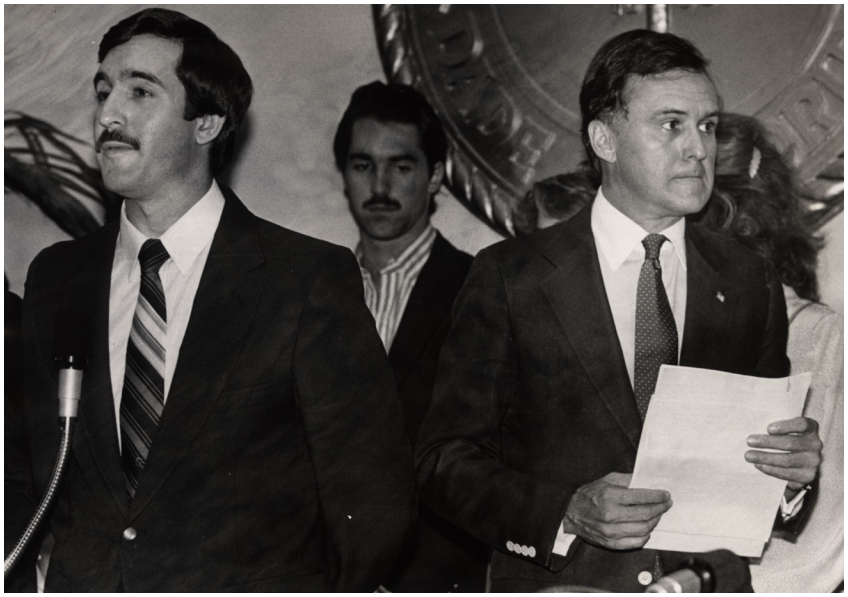
Carollo built a reputation on decades of being a defiant political pugilist. His baptism in electoral politics came through the 1976 campaigns of George Wallace for president and Dr. John Grady – a member of the National Board of Governors of the John Birch Society – for United States Senate from Florida.[1] After his involvement as an aide, Carollo wanted to run himself. His first effort to sit on the City of Miami commission failed in 1977, but a second campaign in 1979 saw him – at age 24 – become the youngest member of the commission in its history.[2] In a sign of things to come, two weeks after his election, Carollo proffered an official resolution seeking to condemn the arrival of Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley, who was coming to Miami to engage in a conference on Caribbean trade. The item failed to find a second and saw then-Mayor Maurice A. Ferré remind

Carollo that foreign policy was not within the normal scope of city business.[3] "Normal," however, would not appeal to Carollo during his first stint on the city commission. His public work would serve the interest of Miami's Cuban exile community, often at the expense of established political norms. He would engage in red-baiting, going as far as to heckle young Cubans who were attending the Special Olympics for not defecting. Carollo referred to Howard Gary, the city's first Black manager, as an "Oreo" engaged in criminal activity.[4] Miami Police Chief Kenneth Harms accused Carollo of using the force to enhance his personal reputation with Sheik Mohammed al-Fasi, a businessperson related by marriage to the Saudi royal family and seeking to "manipulate the system for his personal advantage and [to] denigrate those career appointees who have the ethical fortitude to resist."[5] The Gary attack prompted the *Miami Herald* editorial board to refer to Carollo as "the most hateful, divisive, mean-spirited, crude individual to hold public office hereabouts in modern memory."[6] A coalition of Black and white political leaders ultimately united around a Hispanic challenger, Victor De Yurre, to oust from the commission in 1987 the man who came to be known as "Crazy Joe."[7]

In the same year (1979) that saw Carollo succeed in his effort to join the Miami City Commission, Suarez failed to do the same. In Suarez's election bid that year, when *The Miami News* editorial board referred to Carollo's eventually defeated opponent Demetrio Perez Jr. as "a qualified person on the commission and … one person at city hall who will resist that structure's pervasive spoils system mentality," it also called the political neophyte Suarez, "the most qualified candidate on the ballot."[8] In contrast to Carollo, Suarez was

seen as a polished political player. He had received a degree in engineering from Villanova University before earning his master's from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and his law degree from the same school. Suarez failed to defeat Commissioner Armando Lacasa,[9] and later fell to Perez by less than one percentage point in 1981.[10]

Suarez and Carollo had a long history before 1997 and had previously been allies. Most famously, Carollo – either intentionally or impulsively – publicly humiliated former Miami Mayor Maurice A. Ferré during Ferré's successful 1983 reelection campaign over Suarez. Suarez – who had previously been running to dislodge Carollo from his commission seat – chose instead to run against Ferré, just three days before the filing deadline, and less than two months before Election Day.[11] Suarez came in second on November 8, forcing a runoff the following week. Ferré arranged for a joint press conference with Carollo just days before the runoff election, with the assumption being that Carollo would deal a deathblow to the candidacy of a man who had been challenging his position just weeks before. But rather than endorse Ferré over Suarez, as was expected, Carollo took the opportunity to publicly criticize Ferré's campaign tactics as racially driven and inflammatory. Ferré sat right next to Carollo as the television cameras rolled, aware that Carollo was trying to end his mayorship.[12] Instead of damaging Ferré, however, Carollo's stunt backfired, and Ferré defeated Suarez in the runoff to remain in office. Suarez would have his revenge, however, eliminating Ferré before the runoff and defeating Raul Masvidal to win the mayor's seat in 1985.[13]



Joe Carollo standing before the microphone with Miami Mayor Maurice Ferré on his right. Instead of announcing his support of Ferré in his campaign for reelection as mayor, as he had promised to do, Carollo shockingly threw his support to his opponent, Xavier L. Suarez, after explaining that he opposed Ferré for allegedly using racially charged campaign tactics.

Miami News Collection, HistoryMiami Museum, 1995-277-11750.

If Carollo's time as commissioner at the former Pan American Airways Terminal Building – which serves as Miami's City Hall – was defined by pugilistic bombast, Suarez's time as mayor was defined by general competence. Yet there were moments of embarrassment, including declaring a "Yahweh Ben Yahweh Day" in the city one month before Ben Yahweh, the leader of the Temple of Love, would be taken into federal custody on charges of conspiracy to commit murder and racketeering.[14] The biggest conflict came in 1990, when Nelson

Mandela came to South Florida. Months after he walked out the gates of the Victor Verster Prison outside Cape Town, South Africa, the African National Congress arranged for Mandela to make a tour of the United States, partly to thank American supporters for their efforts to free him and partly to fundraise for the ANC in its effort to build political power going forward. The tour included stops in New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Miami, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Oakland, California. At nearly each stop, Mandela received a hero's welcome from tens of thousands of supporters, as well as official recognition from state and local government officials.[15] However, in an interview with ABC's *Nightline* on June 21, 1990, when pressed by an audience member about some of the supporters of the ANC, Mandela replied that, "Yasser Arafat, Colonel Gaddafi, Fidel Castro support our struggle to the hilt."[16] This comment prompted the City of Miami, which had prepared a proclamation for Mandela's arrival, to demand an apology and withhold any official welcome without Mandela renouncing his support for the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba. The municipal snub – and the subsequent protests from Miami's Cuban exile community – motivated Miami's Black community to call for a boycott of Miami tourism.

The "Boycott Miami" campaign was a cause in search of a catalyst, as the Black community in Miami had grown more dissatisfied throughout the decade of the 1980s, and the disrespect shown to Mandela was the spark. The boycott would impact the city's economy, as well as that of cities outside the municipality and Dade County at large. Despite Suarez backtracking in December 1990, saying that the "pain



Protesters holding signs, some of which were critical of Nelson Mandela, a visitor to Miami Beach in June 1990. Among them were Cubans opposed to Mandela's laudatory statements of dictator Fidel Castro.

Charles J. Trainor Jr., Photographer. Miami Herald Collection. HistoryMiami Museum, 2004-365-409-1.

that our actions or omissions may have lessened the pride or affronted the dignity of our Black brothers," the economic direct action would last until May 1993, and would exacerbate a schism between Suarez and Miami's Black community, a constituency that was key in his early mayoral victories.[17] Despite those missteps, Suarez maintained a relatively strong level of popularity, and perhaps an even higher level of personal respect. Upon the announcement that he would not seek reelection in 1993 after eight years in office, a *Miami Herald* editorial concluded with the following:

"In his eight years in public office, Mayor Suarez has offered other young politicians a model of classy, idealistic, and inclusive public service. In his 'Tale of Two Mayors,' that fairly sums up the best of times. But even in the worst of times, it can be said that he was honest, even in his mistakes."[18]

Suarez vacated the office, claiming he wanted to spend more time with his young family. But at forty-four years old, not many – including Suarez himself – ruled out the possibility of a return to electoral politics.[19] The baton was instead passed to Stephen P. Clark, a man who served as mayor of Miami from 1967 through 1970, when he ascended to the office of mayor of Dade County, a position he held for more than twenty years.

Clark's second term as mayor would not last as long as his first. He shared with the public on November 3, 1995, that he had been diagnosed with stomach cancer;[20] the ailment would claim his life on June 4, 1996.[21] Two weeks after Clark's diagnosis was announced, Carollo got his revenge on De Yurre and returned to the city's commission.[22] After Clark's death, a special election was called by the city commission, and Carollo sensed it was his time to rise.[23] After a monthlong campaign, he dispatched six other challengers to claim the mayor's seat, two days before the city's centennial. It was a true comeback story, taking Carollo from outcast to top spot.[24]

The honeymoon was not to last for long. Within weeks of Carollo's inauguration, an enormous scandal – dubbed "Operation Greenpalm" by federal officials, a pay-for-play scheme involving information technology firm Unisys Corporation – rocked City Hall. On September 11, 1996,

federal agents arrested both the city's manager, Cesar Odio, and a commissioner, Miller Dawkins.[25] The scandal was problem enough alone, but Odio's departure, combined with interim replacement Merrett R. Stierheim's dogged effort, uncovered an even bigger issue. On September 20, Stierheim and Carollo shared with the public that the city would be facing at least a $25 million budget deficit. In a city with a budget of just more than $250 million, such a miss is statistically significant.[26] More sophisticated accounting provided with the help of five top fiscal and management experts from Dade County, however, would show within a month that the surprise deficit was actually $68 million.[27] The Carollo administration moved into crisis mode, thanks in no part to his actions. The revelation led to radical action, including Carollo asking Florida Governor Lawton Chiles to send the state's first financial oversight board for a municipality. Carollo argued the extreme steps were necessary to keep the City of Miami from the largest municipal bankruptcy since that of Orange County, California, in 1994. Critics argued it was an abdication of city independence and leadership. Voters would quickly have a chance to decide the fate of Carollo's rescue plan.

In 1997, the City of Miami featured one of the most hotly contested mayoral elections in its history. Carollo wanted a full, four-year term. Standing in his way was Suarez, who decided that after four years out of government, he was ready to return to public service in the city (an effort to become the leader of Dade County the year before had failed spectacularly, with Suarez finishing fourth).[28] The election was marked by Carollo's efforts to address perceived failings

of city government, and Suarez's contention that Carollo overplayed those problems for political gain. Both candidates were hoping voters would view the election as a referendum on the other's time in the seat of power.[29] The race was marked by familiar themes in Miami local politics in the later part of the twentieth century: sectarian division and personal attacks. Suarez alleged Carollo was out to gut public service unions and benefit developer friends. Carollo routinely called Suarez a liar, in one debate referring to the literary character Pinocchio and pointing out Suarez's pronounced facial feature.

A wrinkle to the race was the fact that the candidates were technically competing for a new kind of office. The executive mayor position was created by a successful referendum voted on by the city's residents on September 4, 1997. The new "strong mayor," as the role came to be known, could veto city ordinances proposed by the commission, pick its presiding officer, and hire and fire the city manager. These new powers made the top spot in City Hall even more politically appealing.[30]

Considering the high profile of the two candidates and the stakes for the city, it is no surprise that the election was close. As Election Day results trickled in on November 4, 1997, the day of the primary election, Carollo held an early lead. It appeared he would be well positioned to return to City Hall. However, an unusually large number of absentee ballots were reported by Miami-Dade County election officials. After all votes were counted, Carollo led by 1,252, but was 0.4 percent short of a clear majority. This meant the two candidates would head to a runoff nine days later.

Even before primary Election Day, allegations of improper electioneering marred the campaign. In the weeks leading up to November 4, two political activists – one working for the Suarez campaign, one an independent activist supporting Suarez – were arrested by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Private investigators working for Carollo uncovered "widespread evidence of forged signatures, doctored ballots, and voters who did not live where they voted."[31] In the days after the primary election and before the runoff, local reporters dug into the story of "ballot brokers," individuals who work for or volunteer for campaigns that assist in the collection of absentee ballots. The Suarez activists claimed they were acting as legal brokers, and the Carollo campaign had multiple brokers on staff. But the question was whether the campaigns were soliciting votes, or simply responding to requests from voters who could not otherwise submit their ballot. Florida Secretary of State Sandra Mortham considered the practice improper, if not fully illegal. "If people are going out there door-to-door and collecting ballots in baskets, I don't think that is what the law intended. It's kind of out there on the edge. Perhaps it's something the Legislature should look at," Mortham told the *Miami Herald*.[32]

For one voter in particular, it was clear it was a matter of fraud and not solicitation. Manuel Yip voted for Suarez as mayor in the primary election. But there was just one problem: He did not reside in the city of Miami at all, but could be found outside the city's borders in unincorporated Miami-Dade County, in a pauper's cemetery. Because Yip was dead, and had been since 1993. Dead a full four years before his ballot

was completed, witnessed, and returned to the Dade County Elections Department.[33] It was just the most extreme – and comical – example of the absurdity in absentee voting in the primary election for mayor.

With reports of investigations into his campaign supporters, it could be presumed that the Suarez name might drag in the runoff, giving Carollo an advantage. But instead of Carollo earning the less than one percent necessary to claim victory in the rematch on November 13, Suarez surged from behind and swamped him, winning with 53.3 percent of the vote in the two-person race. "Instead of hurting Suarez, however, the controversy seemed to work his backers up to fighting pitch. [Humberto] Hernandez spent hours Thursday urging voters to 'punish' Carollo for questioning the absentee ballots, as if it had become a matter of honor."[34] Suarez overcame the odds and appeared set to return to Miami's City Hall.[35]

Even before the results of the runoff, Carollo allies took legal action. Three supporters filed a lawsuit in Dade Circuit Court to throw out the absentee ballots submitted in the primary election and declare Carollo the winner based off in-person votes cast.[36] It seemed an implausible option, but it reflected the displeasure that Carollo felt in going into a runoff at all. Despite continuing challenges, he carried out the traditional actions of a losing candidate, including delivering a concession speech to his supporters and clearing out his office at City Hall.[37] However, in his exit were signals about the dissatisfaction among civil servants toward the now former mayor and his efforts at reforming the City of Miami government. The *Miami Herald* reported:

> Some former staffers screamed at him as he drove off. Some city workers snapped pictures of the Carollo departure. They said they planned to mail photos to former City Manager Cesar Odio, a Carollo enemy, who is serving 12 months in prison for obstructing the Operation Greenpalm federal corruption probe at City Hall. At sunrise, some workers passed out razor blades labeled "Party Favors," so they could scratch Carollo's name off the window of his office.[38]

Suarez took the oath of office on November 14, 1997, and completed his triumphant return to the halls of power. He started his second stint as mayor with a conciliatory tone, indicating that he might not want to be as disruptive as Carollo had been a year before. "When you take over the reins of a city and you realize the responsibility and that you are dealing with careers and human beings you want to go as gently as possible," Suarez told the *Miami Herald*.[39]

However, his third term as mayor would not be as tranquil his first two. The collection of unusual decisions is nearly too long to compile. Brett Sokol of the *Miami New Times* attempted to do so in 2004, in the run-up to Suarez's failed effort to take a seat on the Miami-Dade County commission:

> "Faced with a $68 million budget deficit, Suarez simply declared that his own math showed no such shortfall. … As Miami teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, Suarez flew up to Tallahassee to woo a state-appointed oversight board. His

> smooth negotiating strategy? Repeatedly call state Sen. John Ostalkiewicz 'Senator Cabbage,' refer to state Sen. Ron Silver as 'Santa Claus,' and when first introduced to Gov. Lawton Chiles, inquire about the governor's daughter's abortion as a conversational icebreaker. … After receiving an angry letter taking him to task for Miami's civic mess, Suarez decided a personal visit was in order. Hearing her doorbell ring late one December night, 68-year-old Edna Benson peered out the window of her Little Havana home to see a tall man, looking mad and brandishing a letter in one hand. Fortunately for Suarez, Benson recognized the figure as Hizzoner himself, and put down the loaded .38 pistol she kept for protection."[40]

The unorthodox behavior was just one part of the problem. Despite the conciliatory tone in Suarez's opening statements as executive, his actions did not align with those words. He took the new "strong mayor" powers for a ride immediately, firing city manager and Carollo holdover Edward Marquez immediately. Suarez's replacement for the job, Albert Ruder, lasted for only a week. Ruder refused to fire the popular city police chief, Donald Warshaw, believing he did not have the power to do so. Suarez continued to pressure Ruder to act while directly pressuring Warshaw and other city department heads – and their assistants – to resign. After 23 days, Ruder resigned instead, and while other city chiefs left their positions, Warshaw refused to do so. Frank Rollason was appointed as an interim manager, but refused

to accept dozens of resignations from senior-level employees until his resignation was requested, too.[41] Despite the more expanded executive mayor powers, Suarez was testing legal limits, and admitted a criminal investigation into the pressure placed on subordinates was underway. He negotiated an agreement with local law enforcement to avoid charges, but it also assured the putsch of civil servants would be halted.[42] Suarez's fourth manager, Jose Garcia-Pedrosa, was lured across Biscayne Bay from the same position in Miami Beach to try and bring stability to the city. All of these events took place between Suarez's inauguration on November 15, 1997, and the end of the year.

Suarez kicked off 1998 with another conflict, this time with the city's largest daily newspaper, the *Miami Herald*. On the evening of January 5, he left a voicemail for the newspaper's manager in charge of City of Miami legal advertising:

> "This is the mayor of Miami. I noted that we are subsidizing you and your newspaper with ads related to official notices of the city. If that's the case, I strongly suggest you tell your maximum leader of the free world for the publishing company, and I believe that's [*Miami Herald* president] Joe Natoli, that he better tell his maximum leader of the publishing side of the newspaper, that is to say [*Miami Herald* publisher] David Lawrence, to be a lot nicer to me. Because otherwise we're going to figure out every possible way of advertising in any possible newspaper except yours."

This would not be Suarez's last run-in with local media. In a December 4, 1997, *Miami Herald* column by Carl Hiaasen, the writer referred to Suarez as all of the following: "either nuts or seriously unmedicated," "babbling fruitcake," "erratic," "impulsive," "imperious," getting "loonier," "crazy," and "deranged."[43] After the *Herald* received the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting for its coverage of the election, Suarez filed a libel lawsuit against Hiaasen and the *Herald*'s political editor, Tom Fiedler. The legal challenge would be dismissed by the end of the year, with Florida Circuit Court Judge Amy Dean saying it was opinion and not presented as fact.[44]

Suarez's management style and the tempest it produced was *a* challenge, but not the biggest challenge to his administration. The biggest challenge came from his predecessor, Carollo. The lawsuit filed before the runoff would be heard in Miami-Dade Circuit Court (in the same 1997 election that Carollo and Suarez ran in, residents of Dade County voted to change its name to Miami-Dade County). With the aid of concurrent criminal investigations being carried out by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Carollo's legal team – led by former United States Attorney, Southern District of Florida, Kendall Coffey – was able to build a strong case against the validity of the mail-in vote on primary Election Day. According to the *Herald*:

- A handwriting expert questioned the validity of 225 of 699 absentee signatures in the election.

- Sixteen witnesses discussed irregular conduct on the part of vote chasers who had visited their homes, seeking absentee ballots.

- About two dozen people invoked their Fifth Amendment right to silence – a potentially devastating "negative interference" of wrongdoing for the judge to consider.

- A television news tape showed piles of absentee ballots in the home of Alberto Russi, a 92-year-old Little Havana resident who was charged with vote fraud by state agents.

- Hired investigators found several dozen damaged ballots, such as partially punched vote cards, or cards with their punch holes artificially plugged.[45]

Even Suarez's son, Francis Xavier Suarez – then a campaign volunteer and today, the current mayor of the City of Miami – was called as a witness. During cross examination, Carollo attorney Benedict P. Kuehne asked the younger Suarez if he witnessed and signed absentee ballots. He testified that he picked up a few completed absentee ballots, but never witnessed them. Kuehne then proceeded to show Suarez the son six ballots, all signed "F. Suarez," and all with different home addresses – in violation of state law. Kuehne asked if Suarez knew an "F. Suarez" who worked on the Xavier Suarez campaign. Suarez responded, "No," then after about a one-second pause, he added, "Well, I know myself who was working on the campaign."[46]

Political observers considered the idea of invalidating an election unlikely in November 1997. Allegations of voter fraud, and in particular absentee voter fraud, have become *de rigueur* in American politics. But on March 4, 1998, Miami-Dade Circuit Court Judge Thomas S. Wilson ruled in favor of Carollo, finding, "a massive, well-conceived and well-orchestrated absentee ballot voter fraud scheme," designed to, "defraud, literally and figuratively … [steal] the ballot from the hands of every honest voter in the City of Miami. As a result, the integrity of the election was adversely affected." Wilson ordered the Nov. 4, 1997, election void and ordered a new election within 60 days.[47] His ruling was clear and shook the political landscape of Miami, but it presented two problems.

First, the ruling was not the remedy that Carollo had asked for. He wanted to be declared the winner due to the fraud on primary Election Day. His attorneys went to the Florida Third District Court of Appeal the next day and asked for a review of Wilson's ruling. Second, the ruling created a very uncomfortable question, which served as the banner headline across the front page of the *Herald* on March 5, 1998: "Who is the mayor of Miami?" Both Suarez and Carollo claimed authority, as Suarez was the last man sworn into the position before the ruling, and Carollo was the man in the office on the day of the invalidated election.[48] Ultimately the city's commission elected to punt on the difficult constitutional question, choosing to go a full week without a mayor at all and waiting to pick an interim mayor until the Court of Appeal made its ruling and determined whether picking an interim before a re-contested election would be necessary at all.

It would not be necessary; instead, an action that the *Herald* referred to as "unlikely" the day after the primary election came to pass.[49] On March 11, 1998, a three-judge panel of the appeal court granted Carollo the relief he sought:

> "As a result, the voiding of the entire election and the ordering of a new election is hereby reversed, and this cause is remanded to the trial court with directions to enter a Final Judgment, forthwith, that voids and vacates the *absentee ballots only* and, furthermore, provides that the outcome of the November 4, 1997, City of Miami Mayoral election shall be determined solely upon the machine ballots cast at the polls, resulting in the election of Joe Carollo as Mayor of the City of Miami. Consequently, the trial court's Final Judgment shall delete the requirement of the holding of a new election since, by virtue of the foregoing, there is no need for such an election."

The court cited the 1984 Florida Supreme Court ruling in Harrel F. Bolden v. W.L. Potter. In that ruling, the court stated that "when there is present fraud and intentional wrongdoing, which clearly affect the sanctity of the ballot and the integrity of the election process, courts must not be reluctant to invalidate those elections to ensure public credibility in the electoral process." It also cited a 1976 Florida Supreme Court ruling in Edward F. Boardman v. Henry Esteva, in which the majority held that "where the number of invalid absentee

ballots is more than enough to change the result of an election, then the election shall be determined solely upon the basis of machine vote."[50]

Thus, Carollo was fully vindicated. The court argued that voting was a right, but absentee voting was a privilege. And for hundreds of voters in the City of Miami, who voted absentee because they were ill, disabled, or otherwise legally entitled to request an absentee ballot, their votes were legally thrown away. William Ward, a retired government worker who voted



Xavier L. Suarez (R), Joe Carollo's electoral mayoral opponent, in Judge Thomas S. (Tam) Wilson Jr.'s (L) courtroom during the voter fraud trial that embroiled both candidates, February 17, 1998.

C.W. Griffin, Photographer, Miami Herald Collection. HistoryMiami Museum, MH-75555-16.

absentee in the 1997 primary election, reacted angrily to the decision. "I think it's a farce. You mean I'm sick and I'm blind and my vote is not counted? I don't figure I've been dealt fair; I wish there was someone I could appeal to."[51] Carollo's legal strategy and the decision of the Court of Appeal provides a high-profile example of candidates and institutions working together to discard absentee votes, whether they were cast correctly or incorrectly.

The massive fraud and unclear legal standards led for calls to action. Eventually, more than a dozen people would face criminal charges for their involvement in fraudulent voting activity related to the 1997 mayoral race.[52] But the biggest change came not in Miami, but in Tallahassee. During the spring session of 1998, the Florida Legislature passed a raft of anti-vote-fraud measures designed to prevent the uncertainty seen in Miami's election. The two most significant pieces of the legislation included tightened rules for absentee ballot rules and stronger procedures to remove dead individuals and ineligible felons from the voter rolls. However, the tighter rules for absentee ballot voting were ultimately struck down by the United States Department of Justice, as the state of Florida was still under the requirements instituted in Section 4 and 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and changes to voting rules that could impact minority suffrage were subject to preclearance. Because minority voters were more likely to use absentee voting, that part of the law could not be enforced. State law enforcement officials chose to enforce the part of the law that remained, the ability to update voting rolls.

With a change in executive leadership at the state level in 1999 with the inauguration of Republican Governor John Ellis "Jeb" Bush, and Secretary of State Katherine Harris, the execution of this law evolved. Instead of applying a narrow scope, to remove only individuals who were definitely unqualified, state officials conducted a much broader search to generate a list of those who might be unqualified, then provided it to local elections officials to allow them to make final determinations. Due to the broadness of the search, and the relative lack of peoplepower in the local election offices, the number of voters who were removed from roles was significantly higher than what should have been expected. Whether it was intentional or not, thousands of living voters who were eligible to vote were removed from voter rolls and would not discover this news until the next major election – the 2000 presidential election.

A national election with immeasurable consequences came down to the state of Florida in 2000 and the number of votes separating the two candidates in the state was 537. It is not unreasonable to conclude that the thousands of voters who were denied access to the ballot in November 2000, directly because of the events in the city of Miami's mayoral election of 1997, could have led to a different result in the state, a different president, and a very different political track for the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century.[53] To add to the uncanny similarities, it was ultimately the judiciary – in this case the Supreme Court of the United States of America – that halted ballot recounting in Florida and guaranteed that

Texas Governor George Walker Bush would serve as the forty-third President of the United States, and not Vice President Albert Gore Jr.

The story of the 1997 election is a story of long-simmering sectarian tension in a single American city. However, it is also a story of what was to come in American elections. Expansion of mail balloting leading to allegations – in this case, ultimately true allegations – of improper behavior. Candidates whipping up support by attacking media. Legislatures taking action to attempt to address problems in voting that ultimately create larger problems. And, perhaps most critically, the judiciary making decisions that directly impacts who holds elected office.

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