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Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, FL)

October 22, 2004 Friday Broward Metro Edition

SECTION: LOCAL; Pg. 1A

LENGTH: 916 words

HEADLINE: DEMOCRATS GAIN MOST NEW VOTERS IN COUNTY;
INVESTIGATION UNDER WAY ON SIGN-UP TACTICS

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BODY:

A frenzied, last-minute push for new voters by both major political parties in Broward County could set the stage for a more competitive presidential election in Florida.

But several of the activist groups responsible for the groundswell in new voters in Broward and elsewhere in the state are now being investigated by Florida's top law enforcement agency, according to a Thursday afternoon announcement.

Broward Democrats clobbered their Republican rivals based on totals of last-minute, get-out-the-vote drives. Democrats attracted almost three times as many voters than the GOP between Aug. 2 and Oct. 4, the last day for new voters to join the rolls in time for the presidential election. Almost 28,000 new Broward voters are now Democrats, compared to about 10,000 new Republicans. Broward now has 534,142 Democrats, 283,912 Republicans and 240,262 independents.

"That could be enough to give [Democratic presidential candidate John] Kerry the margin he needs," said Mitch Ceasar, chairman of the Broward County Democratic Party.

Currently some polls show the presidential race in Florida virtually deadlocked.

But don't count the Republicans out yet, party chairman Kevin Tynan said. The more-conservative communities in North Florida have historically counterbalanced Broward, which has more Democratic voters than any other county in the state.

"It does make things more competitive," Tynan said. "But what you're not equating is all the Republican voter drives farther upstate which, I would presume, are going to balance this out."

Statewide voter-registration figures for the upcoming election were unavailable Thursday. However, as of Aug. 2, Florida officials reported 9.7 million voters: 4 million Democrats and 3.7 million Republicans.

But the big challenge for both parties will be appealing to independent voters. More than 18,000 new voters among those registering in Broward declined to join either of the major political parties.

"People are very much turned off by the extremism of both parties," said Jane Gross, past president of the Broward County League of Women Voters. "They want to maintain their independence and make up their own minds on issues."

Voter-registration numbers in Broward, which were released Thursday, show a last-minute push by activist groups to sign up as many voters as possible before the Oct. 4 deadline.

For example, in the September period more than 47,000 voters joined the Broward rolls, but in the August period, only about 9,000 new voters signed up.

DEMOCRATS GAIN MOST NEW VOTERS IN COUNTY; INVESTIGATION UNDER WAY ON SIGN

Meanwhile, officials with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement on Thursday announced they were investigating groups responsible for signing up new voters -- including the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, or ACORN.

The national organization, which has targeted registering minority, poor and moderate-income voters, claims to have helped more than 50,000 voters to register in Broward this year. The group, which claims to be nonpartisan, reported signing up 1 million new voters across the country as of late September.

FDLE agents for weeks have heard complaints throughout the state accusing organization members of suppressing Republican voter registration forms and illegally signing voter-registration applications instead of having the would-be voter do so.

Secretary of State Glenda Hood has criticized independent voter registration groups for submitting incomplete applications and other sloppy work.

Faith Gay, a Miami lawyer for ACORN, said her clients contacted the FDLE to report possible wrongdoing by an employee who she said may have mishandled voter registrations. She questioned the timing of FDLE's announcement.

"It smacks of pure partisanship," Gay said.

In response, FDLE spokesman Tom Berlinger said his agency decided to form a statewide task force this week to investigate the matter. In the days prior, he said, FDLE agents had been conducting their investigations regionally.

"It's only been in the past day or so that we made a decision that it's too widespread to look at it only from a regional perspective," Berlinger said.

The voter-registration group this week also became embroiled in a court battle with former employee Mac Stuart, an ex-assistant director of registration in Florida.

Gay said if there are voter-registration problems, they would have been committed by Stuart. She said the matter was reported to the FDLE before ACORN was named as a group under investigation by the state.

Stuart and ACORN leaders accuse each other of violating election laws.

Gay said FDLE's investigation should center on Stuart.

"We've been really banging the doors down to try and get the investigation started," she said.

Stuart's attorney, Stuart Rosenfeldt, said he has proof the organization was illegally paying workers for petitions.

The case is pending in Miami-Dade County Circuit Court.

Meanwhile, voter interest among Broward voters intensified Thursday. By afternoon, 146,034 voters had requested absentee ballots.

The majority of the ballot requests, almost 75,000 of them, came from Democrats.

Another 45,750 came from Republicans, while 25,646 came from voters in neither party.

Broward already had received 29,513 paper absentee ballots by Thursday afternoon, and an additional 29,200 voters had cast early ballots by touch-screen voting machines at one of 14 office locations around the county.

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GRAPHIC: CHART; CHART: New voters in South Florida, Broward, Miami-Dade, Palm Beach counties. **SOURCE:** County records; Staff graphic, Karsten Ivey

LOAD-DATE: October 22, 2004