



Campaign 2000

# Media Reality ✓ Check

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Media Are Hostile to Florida Official's Decision to Abide By Statutory Vote-Counting Deadline

## Networks Don't Pass "Smell Test" on Partisans

Katherine Harris, the Republican Florida Secretary of State, repeated yesterday that the legal deadline for each of the state's 67 counties to certify their vote totals was 5:00 this afternoon. (That view was upheld this afternoon by a state judge who is a Democrat.) Shocked that Gore partisans wouldn't be able to continue collecting votes from selected Democratic precincts, the networks groused that Harris's decision was unfair and probably calculated by partisanship and her alleged ambitions for higher office.

Monday morning, minutes after her decision was first announced, NBC's Tim Russert called it arbitrary and a prelude to chaos: "If in fact the Secretary of State arbitrarily says 5 o'clock tomorrow, 'That's it, give me your machine count or your votes don't count,' or if the Republicans say, 'Hold on a second. We initially didn't want a hand count statewide, now we do,' then we have chaos again."

Monday night, CBS's Byron Pitts branded Harris "a GOP loyalist" and reminded everyone watching the *CBS Evening News* that she was "a delegate for Bush at this year's Republican National Convention." ABC's Linda Douglass said last night on the network's primetime special, *A Nation Waits*, that Harris has been "described by reporters who cover the state house as politically ambitious."

This morning, as the clock continued to tick, the theme that Harris was playing favorites by following the law was repeated. ABC's Diane Sawyer lectured Bob Dole that "you have a Secretary of State, who is a Republican, and who is now making the central decision to cut this off at 5 pm this afternoon and that, on its face, looks unfair." Across the dial on *Today*, NBC's Katie Couric demanded of another Florida official, "she is a friend, she's a friend of Jeb Bush, is that accurate?" Actually, Bush endorsed Harris's opponent.

On the same show, Matt Lauer asked *Newsweek* writer

and MSNBC contributor Jonathan Alter if he thought Harris's statement "passed the smell test." Alter smugly replied: "I don't think so, Matt. I mean this is not a *Survivor* episode.... This is supposed to be an election, and if she used a hurricane as an excuse to extend the deadline the last time, why not this? It's at least as important."

When reminded that Harris has been a widely traveled Secretary of State, Alter snidely added that "if Bush is elected, she'll get an ambassadorship to Togo out of it."

Contrast that with the reception that the networks gave Carol Roberts, the Democratic Palm Beach County Canvassing Board member who pushed through several pro-Gore decisions, including the controversial decision to push for a hand count of the whole county's ballots. (See box.) Instead of being tarred as a partisan, CBS's Jim Axelrod called her a

"homemaker-turned-kingmaker." Profiling Roberts for the *CBS Morning News* on Monday, Axelrod was sympathetic: "She's the public servant who started the week minding her own business, and ended it with the world minding hers....Carol Roberts, a Democrat and mother of six, swats away challenges that she's playing partisan politics."

But according to a profile in the local *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Roberts is an ambitious partisan who may be intent on seeking a U.S. congressional seat someday, the same alleged facts that the networks found so disqualifying in Katherine Harris. — Brent Baker and Rich Noyes

### TV Won't Call Roberts "Partisan"

**"It is hard not to admit the obvious: The Gore campaign is trying to railroad a victory. Nothing captures the true intentions behind this strategy better than the Palm Beach County Canvassing Board's announcement of its 2-1 decision to proceed with a hand count....Canvassing board member Carol Roberts walked everyone through her math — there could be 1,900 more votes for Mr. Gore out there! — and then voted to go ahead with a full hand count." — Wall Street Journal editorial, November 14.**

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