There’s a reason they call them counties: a day past election, five Florida counties still tallying

By John Lantigua
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Florida often manages to stay in the news for days after an election as it counts votes. It happens so frequently it could be an advertising gimmick for the state’s tourism industry.

“Come count with us. Bring sunscreen.”

It has happened again, with Florida on Wednesday the only state that had not decided who it backed for president of the U.S. The counting of absentee and provisional ballots continued into the evening Wednesday in several counties, including Palm Beach.

President Barack Obama was declared the winner nationally late Tuesday over GOP challenger Mitt Romney. By early Wednesday, every other state had been colored-in blue or red, but Florida was still stubbornly neutral. Obama’s Electoral College total stood at 303, well past the 270 he needed for re-election. Florida’s 29 votes would be icing on the cake.

As of 5 p.m Wednesday, according to the Florida Division of Elections, Obama held a 48,625-vote lead out of 8.25 million votes cast for either him or Romney. In all, almost 8.4 million Floridans voted, with some favoring lesser known presidential candidates.

The total number of voters was greatest ever in Florida, although the percentage of eligible voters who participated, 70.3 percent, was down from 2008, when 75 percent went to the polls. That discrepancy can be explained by population growth.

But the totals weren’t final, because according to state elections officials, five counties were still counting absentee votes. The others, apart from Palm Beach, were: Broward, Miami-Dade, Hillsborough, Duval.

Miami-Dade had 20,000 still to report. Palm Beach had 8,000 absenteees and some 2,000 provisional ballots. It was unclear how many ballots were still uncounted in the other counties.
The wait for a winner has been long compared to other states, but not by Florida standards. In 2000, Florida’s contested votes were the deciders in the presidential race and the world waited 36 days to get a final verdict by the U.S. Supreme Court.

This time Romney put the country out of its campaign-weary misery and conceded the national race not long after midnight Eastern Standard Time, so the counting in Florida, at least to determine who would live in the White House, became academic. But that counting went on, and it could go on for a while, due to legal anomaly.

As of late Wednesday, Obama was leading Romney by 0.42 percent of the vote. Legally, if the vote ends with 0.5 percent or less of a difference, an automatic recount occurs. Romney would have to write to the Florida Division of Elections specifically relinquishing that right. As of late Wednesday there had been no such announcement.

Unlike 2000, Palm Beach County did not play the lead role in South Florida in the delay. Miami-Dade apparently took those honors, based on sheer volume of uncounted votes.

In Palm Beach there were no hanging chads or butterfly ballots to foul up the works. But there are issues.

Delay in counting the absentee votes is due in part to a printing error that forced 27,000 flawed ballots to be copied by hand over the past two weeks. And then there is the sheer length of the ballot.

“The ballot was extremely long and that’s slowing up our process,” said Supervisor of Elections Susan Bucher, citing one amendment that took up an entire page of the six-page ballot in Palm Beach County.

Previously, there was a 75-word limit on proposed amendments, Bucher said. But when that restriction was lifted, amendments became wordy. That means when a ballot needs to be reviewed, the canvassing board must review all pages of the ballot – which lengthens the process.

If lengthy proposals are allowed, “the state has a responsibility to fund voting,” Bucher said.

It was not clear when the Palm Beach count would conclude. The process of counting absentee ballots is painstaking. First, elections workers must compare images of signatures on voters’ registration cards with the signatures on their absentee ballots, to try to preclude fraud. Then the workers must determine whether the ballots have been properly filled out before running them through scanning machines, which tally the votes.

If staffers reject any ballots, they send them to the three-member Palm Beach County Canvassing Board, which will decide if they should be counted. The process was still going on Wednesday.

In Miami-Dade, elections workers said early Wednesday they didn’t expect to be finished before Wednesday evening.
The office of Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez issued a statement early Wednesday saying that the “unprecedented length of the ballot” represents “over 100,000 pages that need to be reviewed and verified, one by one.”

“This in no way is representative of any issues or delays, but a matter of unprecedented volume,” the statement said.

Deputy Elections Supervisor Christina White also insisted Wednesday morning that an unusually long ballot, which contained 11 wordy amendments to the Florida Constitution, and high voter turnout in her county, 64 percent, were to blame.

“It’s not that there were any problems or glitches,” White told reporters. “It’s about volume and paper left to be processed.”

All the counties still counting absentee ballots — Palm Beach, Broward, Miami-Dade, Hillsborough and Duval — have sizable Democratic majorities in the number of registered voters. For example, the number of absentee ballots returned to the Palm Beach supervisor’s office by 2 p.m. Monday by registered Democrats stood at 53,241, while those returned by registered Republicans was 33,170.

There is no certain way of knowing who those voters supported for president, but Florida Atlantic University political scientist Kevin Wagner believes it is unlikely that absentee votes still uncounted will change the current order of finish and hand the state to Romney, given those strong Democratic numbers.

“I don’t expect that the distribution of those uncounted votes is going to be all that different from the ones already counted,” he said. “But it’s a really good thing that the presidency didn’t depend this year on what happened here in Florida.”

Post reporters Christine Stapleton and Jane Musgrave Post and researchers Michelle Quigley and Niles Heimeriks contributed to this story.