Election 2012: It's all over but the voting

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

7:56 AM EST, November 6, 2012

With the presidential contest too close to call in Florida, voters in Broward and Palm Beach counties have been turning out en masse – more than one in three registered voters casting ballots before the polls open today.

Polls opened across the region at 7 a.m. Voting is scheduled from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. but could last hours longer if people are lined up waiting to vote at closing time.

Though people need to steel themselves for what could be long lines, voting today could be much faster than the hours-long waits many endured during the eight days of early voting that ended Saturday. In-person early voting was held at 17 locations in Broward and 14 in Palm Beach County; each county has about 450 polling places to handle the onslaught today.

The burst of interest caps a seemingly interminable campaign that culminated in a frenzy of activity. After dozens of Sunshine State campaign appearances, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney made his final push for votes Monday in the Orlando area. Obama's last Florida stop was Sunday in Hollywood.

What you need to know

Hours: 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Anyone in line by the 7 p.m. closing time may vote.

Lines: Usually longest from 7 to 9 a.m. and 5 to 7 p.m. If the line is long, don't go to another precinct. People are required to vote in their neighborhood precincts.

Where to vote: Many polling places have changed since the 2008 presidential election, and a few have changed since the August 2012 primary. Precincts are listed on voter information cards and the Broward and Palm Beach county elections offices both have polling place locators on their websites.

ID: Bring photo identification that includes a signature. A driver's license works best, but Florida ID cards, passports, debit or credit cards, military ID, student ID, retirement center ID, neighborhood association ID and public assistance ID are also accepted.

Weather

The forecast is for good weather in heavily Democratic South Florida, where there's just a 20 percent to 30 percent chance of rain. There's a much higher chance of rain elsewhere: 60 percent
to 70 percent in Tampa and Orlando in the Interstate 4 corridor, the critical swing region of the state, and in northern Florida, which is more Republican.

Meteorologist Paul Walsh, vice president of weather analytics at The Weather Channel, said there's lots of evidence backing up what political insiders have always said: "Bad weather is basically not good for Democrats. It's better for Republicans."

A Weather Channel survey found 27 percent of registered Democrats who plan to vote feel that bad weather conditions would decrease their chances of voting, compared to just 20 percent of registered Republicans. The impact is much greater for independents: 35 percent said they would consider not voting if the weather is bad.

"It matters when the election is really close," Walsh said. "In a year where the candidates' polling numbers are so close, every vote will count, and ultimately weather could be a big factor in determining our next president."

Still, the impact will be lessened because so many people – perhaps half the people who will vote in Broward and Palm Beach counties – have already cast ballots by mail or in-person early voting.

**What's at stake**

The Obama-Romney contest for the state could hardly be closer. The latest pre-election survey, released Monday by Public Policy Polling, found 49.52 percent for Obama and 49.42 percent for Romney. The survey of 955 likely Florida voters on Saturday and Sunday has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.2 percent.

That gives voters in South Florida, which has the most populous counties in Florida, the ability to decide which one gets the prize: Florida's 29 electoral votes, more than one-tenth the number Obama or Romney needs to win the presidency.

Voters in Broward and Palm Beach counties have white-hot races that would be marquee contests in a normal year: the state Senate race pitting incumbents Ellyn Bogdanoff and Maria Sachs against one other, the replay of the 2008 Broward sheriff's race between Scott Israel and Al Lamberti, and the three-way contest for Palm Beach County state attorney among Dave Aronberg, Robert Gershman and Dina Keever.

This year, the presidential contest has taken up all the political oxygen.

**Campaigns**

With a tight race, neither side wants to wake up on Wednesday lamenting missed opportunities, so both campaigns continued their courtship of Florida voters till virtually the very end.

Romney began his last full day of campaigning Monday at an Orlando-area rally before jetting off to other battleground states.
His supporters also fanned out through the state. Sharon Day of Fort Lauderdale, the No. 2 official at the Republican National Committee, made a series of appearances. Former Gov. Jeb Bush and Condoleezza Rice, who served as secretary of state in former President George W. Bush's second term, headlined a get-out-the-vote rally in Davie.

The Democrats sent First Lady Michelle Obama to Orlando, with a campaign rally timed to get live television coverage on the 6 o'clock news in the critical I-4 corridor.

Singer Ricky Martin was scheduled to appear with the first lady. Martin is Puerto Rican, and the Obama campaign has been counting on a big vote margin among Puerto Rican voters who have moved to Central Florida in recent years.

And they sent Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to South Florida.

Voters

The candidates are competing for the votes of a sharply divided public.

"There's lot more polarization in the electorate right now," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University, who sees "a divisive election and a divided government after the election."

Still, people want to vote. A Quinnipiac University/New York Times/CBS News poll last week found 51 percent of Florida likely voters more enthusiastic than usual about voting in the presidential election. Just 10 percent said they were less enthusiastic and 38 percent said they felt about the same.

Joan Buckley, an Oakland Park Republican who likes the tea party but considers herself an independent, said she has no idea who will prevail.

"I don't know how anything's going to turn out," she said. "I'm just hoping for the best and saying my prayers."

Election info

State and county offices have more information.

Broward: http://www.browardsoe.org or 954-357-7050.

Palm Beach County: http://www.pbcelections.org or 561-656-6200.

State: http://www.election.dos.state.fl.us or 866-308-6739.