Punch that ballot

8 days of early in-person voting start at 14 Palm Beach County sites

By Anthony Man and Andy Reid, Staff writers

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Time starved and looking for convenience? Can't wait to give President Barack Obama or Republican challenger Mitt Romney your vote? Sick of all the politics and just want to get it over with?

Early voting, which starts today at 14 locations in Palm Beach County, is the answer.

For the next eight days, people can go to any early voting site in the county in which they live from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. The last day of early voting is Nov. 3.

Be forewarned: Long lines are almost certain, at least some of the time, said Palm Beach County Supervisor of Elections Susan Bucher. "It's really popular right now ... probably because of convenience," she said. "We expect it to be pretty crowded at the polls."

Usually the busiest times are in the morning, when people stop on their way to work; midday, when people have lunch breaks; and in the evening after folks get off work, said Brenda Snipes, Broward's supervisor of elections. Anyone who is waiting in line at 7 p.m. will be allowed to vote.

Another factor that may make lines longer this year: The state Legislature and governor cut back on early voting. It lasts only eight days, down from 14 days in the 2008 presidential election — when there were massive lines throughout South Florida.

With fewer days of early voting this year, Bucher opted to expand early voting sites from the 11 available in 2008 to 14 this year. "We are hopeful it doesn't affect voter turnout," Bucher said.

There's a big plus to vote early, either by mail or at an early voting site. Campaigns are legally entitled to lists of registered voters, including the names of people who've requested absentee ballots. Once the records show you've voted, they'll stop bothering you with those automated Robo-calls.

Fast and easy

Most important is having photo identification that includes a signature.
A driver's license or state-issued ID card is best, but other accepted forms include passports, debit or credit cards with photos, and identification for: members of the military, students, retirement centers and neighborhood associations.

Florida hasn't changed its identification rules since the 2008 election, Snipes said.

You're allowed to bring a marked sample ballot, palm card or other information into the polling place to help you remember your choices — and Bucher said that's especially important this year.

Because the Florida Legislature placed 11 proposed amendments to the Florida Constitution on the general election ballot — and exempted itself from limits on how long the questions can be — the ballots are exceedingly long, Bucher said.

Palm Beach County voters have three sheets covering the front and back.

**Critical for Democrats**

Republicans have long dominated absentee voting. Democrats have typically done better with early voting.


Democrats and their supporters, including organized labor and pastors of African-American churches, have organized events throughout South Florida this weekend to encourage early voting, and members of political clubs plan to fan out to early voting sites to pass out campaign brochures.

In-person early voting is so important for Democrats that Republican Bob Wolfe, co-chairman of the Romney campaign in Broward and founding president of the Lauderdale Beach Republican Club, said he'd be fine with a weekend of Hurricane Sandy-induced inclement weather. "I wouldn't mind it raining all over early voting."

Republicans aren't ignoring early voting. And Adam Hasner, the Republican candidate for Congress in the Broward-Palm Beach counties 22nd District, emailed supporters on Friday seeking volunteers to wave signs and pass out literature at polling sites, something he said "can change the course of an election. You will be the last face of our campaign that voters see before going to the polls."

**A major transformation**

Floridians love in-person early voting.
"It’s been remarkably popular, particularly with Democrats," said Kevin Wagner, a political scientist at Florida Atlantic University.

It started as part of the reforms implemented following the controversial 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore. In-person early voting and voting by mail are now huge — half of Broward and Palm Beach county voters cast their ballots before Election Day in 2008.

So far, political scientists who have studied in-person early voting haven't found evidence that it actually increases voter turnout. It may simply make it more convenient for people who'd vote anyway.

Still, Wagner said, though it hasn't yet been proven, it's logical to assume that it has some effect and at least increases turnout somewhat.

Figuring out exactly what affects turnout is difficult. "For example, he said, heavy turnout among young voters in 2008 was undoubtedly influenced more by Obama's popularity that year than by the availability of early voting.

In-person early voting and widespread voting by mail has forced candidates and their consultants to rewrite the political playbook, changing the way they mobilize their forces, spend their money and attack their opponents. Candidates used to focus their activities on the closing days of a campaign.

"Instead of Election Day, you have election month," said Terrie Rizzo, Palm Beach County Democratic Party Chairwoman. "Campaigns have to have their message out early."

With absentee ballots going out in early October and in-person early voting, the most intense part of the campaign now lasts for weeks. The effect of the last-minute surprise in the final days of the campaign is vastly diminished. And it makes campaigns more expensive.

"It has changed the campaign strategies," Palm Beach County Republican Party Chairman Sid Dinerstein. "It is challenging for campaigns."

Justin Sayfie, a South Florida lawyer who publishes the Sayfie Review political news site, said many of those people are voting before they get all the information that sometimes comes out near the end of the campaign. "Catching a last-minute burst of momentum isn't as impactful as it may have been 10 years ago," Sayfie said.