A cloudy outlook for Obama as spotlight hits the Sunshine State

David Usborne

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The noisy carnival that is every presidential race in Florida has started already on the corner of Route 1 and Oakland Park Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale, the preferred spot for Barry Sheen to brandish assorted slogans at oncoming traffic. He has had "projectiles" hurled at him by drivers, he says, and 20 death threats so far.

"This is not Hyde Park Corner," he proclaims as he grabs one of his many hand-written placards and marches back and forth on the roadside with urgent agitation. He is not a fan of the incumbent. "Romney for president, Obama has failed," says one. "Barack? U Got some Splaning to do on LIBYA," declares another. A young man passing on his bicycle returns in kind: "God damn you and your liberation theology," he shouts.

Not everyone is as fanatical as Mr Sheen – he may or may not be giving his real name – who will continue to ply his political prejudices on this street corner from now until election day. But Florida as a whole is nonetheless fizzing with this race, not least because Boca Raton, about twenty minutes north of here, was the site of tonight's final debate between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, where the stakes for both men could hardly have been higher.

Probably, there will never be any budging Florida from the spotlight in election season. Candidates bombard it with love, not just because it is always so finely balanced between the two parties but also thanks to its outsized influence on election night. Florida offers a trove of 29 votes in the Electoral College, more than any other swing state. And who has forgotten the pandemonium of 2000 when the entire country was thrown into a constitutional crisis as election officials pored over thousands of punch-card ballots that hadn't in fact been punched properly, leaving so-called hanging and pregnant chads? In the end it took a ruling by the US Supreme Court to deliver Florida – and therefore the White House – to George W Bush. He was declared to have outpolled Al Gore in the state by a mere 537 votes.

What's coming this time? That the contest in Florida is looking slightly ominous for Mr Obama – a poll released at the weekend by Public Policy Polling (PPP) showed Mitt Romney ahead by one point in the state – is not lost on Michelle Waniewski, 43, a teacher at Florida
Atlantic University who on yesterday evening stopped for an early supper at the Boca Diner in downtown Boca Raton with her husband, daughter and mother.

To her, Mr Romney is beyond the pale. She knows something about him because before moving to Florida seven years ago she lived in Massachusetts when he was governor there. "Been there, done that and I'm not doing it again," she says. "He changes his mind on everything. He is a flip-flopper. And I don't think he has any idea what it's like to be a real person, worried about where the next dollar is coming from."

The Florida contest "looks like it's going to be another nail-biter", predicts Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at Florida Atlantic. "The race is a statistical tie that's probably going to come down to turnout." Could it be so close that on election night we will again be held hostage to muddle and recounts in the Sunshine State?

Yes, it is possible. Those antiquated punch-card voting machines are long gone, but the potential for a hold up this time lies with new voting laws that may force Floridians who can't produce the right identification on voting day to fill in provisional ballots to be verified later. Too many of those and too tight a race could quickly lead to trouble.

"In a close election, all eyes are going to be on those provisional ballots, and those same canvassing boards that were looking at pregnant chads and hanging chads back in 2000," warns Daniel Smith, a politics teacher at the University of Florida. "It's a potential mess."