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A visit to Florida's wildest early voting site | Steve Bousquet

Steve Bousquet, South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Sat, October 26, 2024 at 8:58 AM EDT · 4 min read

Early voting should be a peaceful and positive exercise in democracy.

First, voters find a parking space. They fish around for a photo ID. They might be greeted by volunteers with materials promoting a favorite candidate, wait in line to vote — if there's even a line — and then it's over.

Then there's Tamarac.

In this west Broward city, politics — and early voting — have become increasingly chaotic, divisive and bizarre.

A half-dozen Broward sheriff's deputies arrived at a Tamarac early voting site Tuesday, at a county building that houses a library and a branch office of the supervisor of elections.

A verbal commotion had ensued over the presence of black security cameras attached to pillars outside the building in plain view of voters and hangers-on.

The four cameras were installed by City Commissioner Elvin Villalobos. He said he wants to have video evidence if more problems arise with Commissioner Marlon Bolton between now and Election Day.

The two officials have a highly toxic relationship, and both face re-election on Nov. 5.

Villalobos said Bolton, or his supporters, have accosted voters or workers for his opponents' campaign, including jostling people, physically taking campaign literature out of their hands and replacing it with pro-Bolton flyers, or by telling people they had the "wrong" brochure.

"I'm not going to get hit again," Villalobos said.

[It is a federal and state crime in Florida](#) for any person to use “any tactic of coercion or intimidation” to pressure anyone to vote for or against a candidate.

Anyone who feels intimidated should contact the sheriff’s office or supervisor of elections (954-357-8683) or a national voter protection hotline (1-866-OUR-VOTE).

Bolton is pastor of Praise Experience Church in nearby North Lauderdale (“loving people God’s way,” as [its website says](#)). He is also a county employee as the full-time, [\\$80,000-a-year aide](#) to County Commissioner Hazelle Rogers.

His controversial eight-year record, which includes [a city-initiated investigation](#) of complaints of a hostile work environment, has spawned a website, [StopBolton.com](#), where the scrolling text reads: “We the voters must put an end to Bolton.”

Bolton, who cultivates a cult-like image, is known for outrageous behavior that some residents find very troubling.

“He is very, very intimidating,” said Sami Sofia, a retiree from the nearby Bermuda Club condos. “Eight years is enough.” (Sofia has his own anti-Bolton website, [sidewalkactivism.com](#).)

Sofia stood near a security camera wearing a hand-lettered sandwich board-type sign that said: “Bully Bolton must go.”

Bolton’s opponent, Viola Watson (who’s [recommended](#) by this editorial board), quietly paced the sidewalk Thursday in a campaign T-shirt and dark sunglasses.

She spoke in a stage whisper, explaining how Bolton supporters touch people without their consent or eavesdrop on others’ private conversations.

Mayor Michelle Gomez, Bolton’s most visible critic, corroborated Watson’s version of events.

As tensions mount, the mayor said, candidates and their hangers-on should be restricted to specific locations to prevent them from (in her words) “bum-rushing” voters. A state law that prohibits voter contact 150 feet outside the polls is not working, she said.

“Marlon’s people are over the line and the supervisor of elections is not doing anything about it,” Gomez said. “Marlon’s people are bullies, and people are scared of him.”

Bolton routinely does not comment to the Sun Sentinel.

Voters in Tamarac, many elderly and infirm, have to run a gauntlet along a narrow sidewalk crowded with campaign workers who call out names of favored candidates, and sometimes wave literature in their faces.

The sheriff's office, which provides police protection in Tamarac, should have a stronger presence there to ensure that the election laws are obeyed.

After all, Sheriff Gregory Tony in July [declared “zero tolerance”](#) for election intimidation at the polls in Broward.

Villalobos told us that the sheriff's office told him the cameras are OK, but the sheriff needs to tell that to the public. Supervisor of Elections Joe Scott told me he was unaware of the cameras' presence before I showed him a picture of them.

The cameras pose an interesting question. Nobody should have an expectation of personal privacy on public property — I took pictures when I was there, too.

But no one should feel intimidated while trying to vote.

In election campaigns, accusations routinely fly back and forth — political signs vandalized, flyers and mailers [full of lies](#), and so on. What's going on in Tamarac is beyond the petty skirmishes so common elsewhere.

Mayor Gomez sees a slight improvement, however: “They're behaving a little better because the cameras are up,” she said.

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