

A Once in a Lifetime Experience: Gatekeeper Delegation Visits Florida During Presidential Elections



Deerlake Middle School students pose with Latin American delegation.

Election officials, human rights representatives, and civic education program administrators from Panama and Peru visited Tallahassee during the week leading up to Election Day as part of the Civitas International Civic Education Exchange program. “It was a whirlwind trip”, reported Annette Boyd Pitts, Executive Director of the Florida Law Related Education Association, Inc. FLREA serves as a primary management site for the partnership which also includes Hungary, Romania, Mississippi, and Texas, as well as the Miami-Dade County Public Schools. “The gatekeeper delegation experienced our elections process firsthand and examined it from every imaginable angle,” Pitts added.

It was a learning experience for everyone involved. Students in Cathy Schroefer’s class at Deerlake Middle School participated in a

comparative constitutions exercise with the delegates, and their interpreters. Divided into small groups, the students and the delegates engaged in a scavenger hunt to determine the similarities and differences in their constitutions, as they related to elections, presidential qualifications and duties, and a host of other law-related issues. When asked what they had learned, the students raised their hands and began espousing their newfound knowledge. “I learned that the Panamanian Constitution specifically calls for a death penalty in certain circumstances,” stated a seventh grade civics student. Another student announced, “I learned that in Peru, citizens are required to vote between the ages of



Peruvian Delegation at Voting Precinct with Leon County Supervisor of Elections Ion Sancho.

18 and 70.” Another student was surprised to learn that to be a Supreme Court justice in Peru; you have to be 45 years old as compared to a president who only has to be 35. Some students had even printed out the U.S. Constitution in Spanish for the visiting delegation. The delegation also observed the class as they cast their ballots on campus as part of the Kids Voting program.

A visit with a class of pre-



Delegation visiting with Florida State University pre-service teachers.

service teachers at Florida State University turned into a lively exchange of ideas about what voters really look for in a president. Annette Boyd Pitts led the dialogue which began with a review of the constitutional qualifications and duties of the President of the United States. Then the class was quizzed on a number of characteristics which might impact their presidential decision making process. These included whether or not age, socioeconomic status, education, personality, or religion would impact their choice for President. Additionally issues such as personal appearance, marital status, disability, and gender were

also examined. Frank, honest discussions ensued with students examining these characteristics to evaluate the factors which may or may not impact their electoral behavior.

Only one student in the FSU class had not registered to vote in the 2008 Presidential Election. Peer pressure was strong as students questioned their classmate on his reasons for not registering. He seemed surprised when the Peruvian delegation reported the penalties for not voting in Peru. Next, Pitts asked the class to vote in a mock election in class, anonymously, to ascertain a small sampling of the youth vote for this election. The results were 10 to 8, with Obama leading. Pitts asked students what the results would be if we arbitrarily threw out 50-60% of the students votes. Students discussed the traditionally low turn out of youthful voters in the United States, and how it could seriously impact an election's results.

FSU President, T.K. Wetherall invited the delegation to the President's Box at the Florida State



Delegation at Doak Campbell Stadium awaiting election results.

University football stadium to watch the election night results. University students and faculty joined in the festivities. FSU was one of the two universities selected as broadcast sites for the national elections. CBS News had a live crew reporting from the FSU football stadium.



Doak Campbell Stadium score board displays early election results.

The delegates also visited election night festivities at the Leon County Republican and Democratic Party events in Tallahassee. “They stayed until after midnight,” Pitts remarked. “They wanted to watch the acceptance speech and meet some of the local candidates.”

The delegation visited precinct sites and met with Leon County Supervisor of Elections Ion Sancho. Sancho told of his experiences during the 2000 elections and shared with the delegates his participation in the filming of the HBO special, *The Hacking of Democracy*.

Florida Secretary of State Kurt Browning, Chief Elections Official, met with the delegation to discuss the changes in Florida’s voting process since the 2000 elections. Secretary Browning reported that now all 67 counties have the same type of voting equipment, opt-scanners. Hanging chads and even

touch screen technology were no longer options. The public demanded a paper trail. Florida’s new system is receiving positive marks from the public and election officials alike. The delegation shared their respective country’s voting systems and sought advice on new initiatives and processes under consideration.

The delegation observed a Kids Voting precinct and reviewed the student ballot, which included photos of the candidates. Kids



Peruvian Delegation, Annette Boyd Pitts, and Secretary of State Kurt Browning prior to 2008 elections.

Voting operates in Leon County to encourage elementary, middle and high school students to become comfortable with the voting process and to accompany their parents to the polls. The national mock student election, an on-line election, was also highlighted.

Representative Curtis Richardson met with the delegates to discuss the statutory changes to the recount legislation since 2000. He also addressed the middle school civics legislation which he

spearheaded in 2006. Richardson and Pitts engaged the delegation in a mock legislative session where the



Delegation poses with Representative Curtis Richardson in the House Chambers.

participants had to vote on whether or not to mandate compulsory voting in Florida. The proposed bill



Delegation from Panama with Florida Supreme Court Chief Justice Peggy Quince.

failed during the simulation.

The Florida Supreme Court was the final stop on the delegation's itinerary. Chief Justice Peggy Quince hosted a meeting with

the delegation to discuss the Court's role in the 2000 elections as well as subsequent elections.

The delegation included:

Panamá Delegación: Carmen Chacón de Cárcamo, Vice-Presidenta, Civitas Panamá; Sharon Sinclair de Dumanoir, Magistrada Suplente del Tribunal Electoral y Directora Nacional de Registro Civil; Edwin Castro Arenas, Coordinador del Programa, Proyecto Ciudadano.

Perú Delegación: Alfredo Leonidas Quintanillo Ponce, Coordinador de la Oficina Regional de Coordinación de Lima-Oficina, Nacional de Procesos Electorales/ONPE; Pablo Zavala Sarrio, Instituto Peruano de Educación en Derechos Humanos y la Paz; Doris Huando Villacréz, Coordinador del Proyecto Ciudadano, IPEDEHP

“Having participated in this delegation was an exhilarating experience,” stated Alfredo Quintanillo of Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales/ONPE. Edwin Castro Arenas, a delegate from Panama, said he would return to his country to work even harder to advance civic education. “It was indeed an honor to share this experience with our colleagues from Panama and Peru,” Pitts added. Planning sessions were held with each country's delegation to

advance civic education programs and policy initiatives.

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