

## Election Night

Behind the scenes proves telling

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By: Billy Shields

**I**t's early in the evening, and Hector Lombana isn't happy. Prowling his Coral Gables law office, he just realized someone has taken the Spanish knight from his custom-made chess set of the Spanish-American War. He cursed under his breath.

There's a professionally rendered chalk drawing of Hollywood gangster Vito Corleone casting a dour gaze over the chess set.

"Someone gave me that as a joke," he laughs, lest his guests get the wrong idea.

Setting aside the vexation, he raises his cell phone to his ear and calls fellow political consultant Steven Ferreiro.

Preliminary returns for the absentee ballots in Tuesday's judicial races should be coming in, and Lombana — who officially and unofficially supports a candidate in every race — wants to know how these pieces are going to play out on the board.

"Turnout is low today," Lombana said. "There is going to be anywhere between 10 and 12 percent voter turnout."

Preliminary returns suggest 52,000 absentee ballots were submitted by 93,000 people who requested them, 3,000 more returns than in 2006. Conventional wisdom holds that smaller turnouts help Anglos and incumbents, Ferreiro tells him. In a county that is predominantly Hispanic, a higher turnout generally helps Hispanics.

Lombana said he started his foray into judicial politics when he came to Miami from Newark, N.J., in the 1970s. He is a partner in the Coral Gables law firm of Gamba & Lombana, a litigation shop.

This year, he supported candidates in every judicial race in Miami-Dade County. He held official positions in several campaigns.

"I found a lot of bias when I came to town — from the bench and on the bench — against Hispanics," he said. "And I started getting on it and working on it to make it right."

"And little by little, we started developing critical mass in this county, and we started influencing political elections.

"Now we seek quality wherever it comes from."

Lombana heads to an Elks Lodge on Sunset Drive, where political consultant Bob Levy has set up camp. The absentee returns come in over the phone as Lombana walks into the lodge. An early surprise is in store. With less than 38 percent of the vote, Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Douglas Chumbley is far behind solo practitioner Marcia Caballero. Circuit Judge Jeri Beth Cohen has less than a percentage-point edge over her opponent, Miami solo practitioner Abbie Cuellar.

Solo practitioner Mario Garcia holds a 16 percentage point lead over prosecutor Stacy Glick, welcome news at the lodge since Garcia is one of Levy's clients.

Lombana is quick to point out the results mean almost nothing — at least one out of every five voters who sent ballots back didn't vote for judges.

Decked out in a Stars and Stripes-themed shirt, Levy anchors a round table in the Elks ballroom. He's constantly working his cell phone and gazing at an old television for returns. By 7:35 p.m., no live precincts have reported.

"Caballero has a sizable lead," he said, referring to absentee and early votes coming in for his client's opponent. "A 10,000-vote lead is a lot. But it's too early to tell."

Levy is dismayed by Chumbley's lack of punch at the polls.

"He did everything right. He worked his tail off. He spent the right amount of money," he shakes his head. "It must be the name."

Anglo, that is.

On Levy's left sits Jose Diaz glued to a laptop and calling out fresh returns. On Levy's right is an empty seat, a space for candidates to talk shop as they drop by.

The TV announces Levy client Miami-Dade Circuit deputy general counsel Abby Cynamon is virtually even with solo practitioner Ricardo Corona.

"How did Corona get so much?" someone yells rhetorically.

"Ricardo Corona is a nice guy," Lombana answers. He is Cynamon's campaign treasurer.



Hector Lombana

An hour after the polls close, Levy hands his phone to Lombana.

"It's Jeri Beth," he said.

"You're about 5,000 votes ahead, and that's going to be hard for the other people to make up," Lombana tells Cohen. "You're in good shape."

It's all part of the job of being involved in judicial politics.

"You have to be part consultant, part cheerleader and part social worker," he laughs.

It's almost 9 p.m., and Garcia enters the lodge without seeing the initial returns. But he wears a ready smile, and early returns have given his camp confidence.

Steven Millan, another Levy client, is the next to enter with his family of five children, buoyed by initial indications of a lead in his three-candidate race. His only thoughts are whether he can win outright or face a runoff, a possibility Levy dreads.

"You basically have a month to raise money and a month to run," he said. "At the end of the day, you're on the ballot with presidential candidates who draw a lot more attention. It's almost like 'who cares?' You get lost."

Cynamon makes her appearance around 9:30, and Millan is trying to get his kids back to the house. With a head full of blond curls, Joseph Millan, 4, is introducing himself to everyone as his father tries to usher him out the door.

"Hello!" he said to onlookers as he hugged their legs.

It's nearly 10 p.m., and silence falls in the room as Glick takes a 100-vote lead from Garcia, but only 67 precincts are reporting. Chumbley still trails Caballero, but Cohen has grabbed a comfortable lead over Cuellar.

Levy is irritated that it's taking so long to count the votes. Four counties already had reported full results in Florida.

As the 10 o'clock hour wears on and Glick's lead grows, Garcia's initial optimism is replaced by resignation. At first sitting with his family, he migrates to a table with Cynamon, the two making small talk as the returns come in.

But the two candidates are headed in different directions.

By 11 p.m., Cynamon has 52 percent in her race, while Garcia slipped to 48 percent. He later sits by himself, alone with his Blackberry.

"We just have to wait till the last vote's counted," he said with a strained grin. "Maybe I'll run in six years."

He shakes a few hands and leaves the lodge with a 7,000-vote deficit.

At midnight, the elections supervisor suddenly reports all the precincts. Millan has gotten the kids to bed and returned to plot his runoff contest against Assistant Public Defender Yvonne Colodny.

Levy extends a hand to Cynamon, who carried 53 percent of the vote.

"Congratulations, judge," he said. "It'll take a while to sink in, but you won."

Cynamon, who said she had only an hour's sleep the previous night, managed a smile and declared, "I'm going home to Miami Beach."

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