

Bush, Gore address nation, trade barbs

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winner is declared "to close ranks as Americans."

Bush dismissed the notion. "The outcome of this election will not be the result of deals or efforts to mold public opinion," he said. "The outcome of this election will be determined by the votes and by the law."

"This process must have a point of conclusion, a moment when America and the world know who is the next president."

Democrats said precious time was wasting while Republicans tied up the recount drive in court.

"They stop and start and stop. And the clock is running out," Gore campaign chairman William Daley said of the recounts, then added in a slap at the Republican secretary of state: "Her clock anyhow."

An NBC-Wall Street Journal poll showed a small majority of voters said they are willing to wait for the recounts if the choice is between naming a victor now or rechecking the ballots. But seven out of 10 said a winner should be declared once the overseas ballots are added to the totals this weekend.

By a 2-1 margin, voters told pollsters they thought Bush would be the next president.

Senior Gore advisers say the presidency hinges on whether they can show progress in the next two or three days. They need vote gains to persuade courts to keep the recounts going and, more importantly, to survive the court of public opinion.

Gore holds a popular-vote lead of about 230,000, and has a narrow lead in electoral votes - with Florida the prize that would put either man over the 270 votes required to win the White House.

In a telephone interview, Daley said the counties need more time to complete their recounts. He said officials in Broward and Palm Beach counties seem eager to get to work. "Everybody is trying to speed this up. Whether or not there is a deadline Friday, they figure if they can go crazy maybe they can get some (recounts) in" before the deadline, he told the AP.

Even the vice president's advisers conceded his options would dwindle this weekend if he couldn't claim a lead - or dramatic progress toward one - with the hand recounts.

Democratic leaders on Capitol Hill gave Daley a thumbs-up Wednesday, but said

privately afterward that they will reassess at the end of the week.

A Democratic official who has spoken with Gore within the past 48 hours said party officials were afraid the vice president's side in the dispute wasn't being presented well to voters. Campaign officials are increasingly frustrated that the hand recount issue is being cast as an unusual procedure when in fact it is not so rare, said the official.

Thrust into the glare of the nation's spotlight, county officials in Florida have wavered, bowed to pressure and bickered - leaving the situation fluid and, at times, indecipherable.

Miami-Dade County, the state's largest and perhaps Gore's best hope of picking up votes, voted against a full recount Tuesday night. The vice president was taking that case to court.

In Broward County, home to Fort Lauderdale, officials reversed course Wednesday and granted Gore's request for a full recount of its 588,000 presidential election ballots. After the first 7,000, Gore had picked up three votes.

Palm Beach County delayed its recount until the state Supreme Court spoke on what it could count. Officials there planned to begin counting today.

It was chaos bordering on the comical in some areas.

In West Palm Beach, a judge gave the vote counters wide latitude to decide whether a ballot with "dimpled chad" could be counted or not. Republicans accused county commissioner Carol Roberts of fiddling with the ballots to help Gore. Just as Harris has been labeled a partisan by Democrats from Washington, Roberts abruptly found herself the focus of attacks from the GOP.

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