Early Voters Arrive At South Florida College Campuses

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Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Gimenez talks to a voter on the first day of early voting at Miami-Dade College North Campus on Oct. 22, 2018.

KATIE LEPRI / WLRN NEWS

A cheering crowd greeted county officials and the president of Miami Dade College as early voting began on the school's north campus Monday.

The pep rally-like scene was especially celebratory because, only weeks ago, there were no plans for voting on college campuses here at all.

Listen here to the audio version of this story.

After a July court ruling that overturned a previous ban on early voting on campuses, civil rights groups and students pressured county mayor Carlos Gimenez's administration to establish polling places at MDC and Florida International University. The two public institutions serve among the largest populations of Hispanic students in the country.

The Miami-Dade supervisor of elections initially resisted calls to open more sites, but ultimately Gimenez and the county commission moved to establish early voting at both MDC's north and Kendall campuses as well as FIU's main campus.

"Not only are we thankful and very grateful, but we're also proud of ourselves for coming together and making this happen," said Carolina Mendoza, president of the college's Student Government Association who attends the downtown Wolfson campus. "We're all dressed really festively. We all took a bus over here. It was a huge deal for us."

The mood was festive indeed. Students donned red-white-and-blue tutus and shook plastic star-shaped clapper toys as they excitedly lined up for their turn to vote. The room erupted into applause for a first-time voter as she stepped up to get her ballot.

Miami Dade College president Eduardo Padrón got in line around noon to vote. He came out of the polling place wearing an "I voted" sticker and waving a small American flag.

Gimenez and a few county commissioners joined Padrón to celebrate the start of early voting — although Gimenez hasn't voted yet; he said he's a traditionalist who likes to go to the polls on Election Day, which is Nov. 6.

Gimenez said he had to balance the cost of operating early voting sites with the need for accessibility.

"This early voting site costs a lot of money — each one costs a lot of money to run. So we have limited resources. We try to spread it out geographically," he said.

According to his staff, it costs $170,000 for each of the 28 early voting sites, including paying for poll workers and their training as well as the necessary equipment.

The sites are open for 12 hours a day, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., for two weeks leading up to Election Day.

Read More: Want To Vote Early? Here's How To Do It In Broward, Miami-Dade, Monroe And Palm Beach Counties (http://www.wlrn.org/post/want-vote-early-heres-how-do-it-broward-miami-dade-monroe-and-palm-beach-counties)

Meanwhile, in Broward County, students and professors arrived in between classes to vote early at Nova Southeastern University in Davie.

"By having early voting on campus, it facilitates students to participate, ... and it's all about participation," said Charles Zelden, who teaches history and political science at NSU.

Anyone, student or not, can vote early inside of the Carl DeSantis Building. There's no relation to the Republican gubernatorial candidate, Ron DeSantis.

"DeSantis is sort of our use-all building for these sort of things," Zelden said. "It's ironic."

Louis Nemzer voted in between teaching one of his physics classes.

"I knew it was long [the ballot]. I really tried to research beforehand. It only took me about 15 minutes," he said. "If my students are listening — yeah, studying helps."

The other college campuses in Broward County serving as early voting sites are Broward College's North Regional Library in Coconut Creek, and the South Regional Library in Pembroke Pines.