

Voter frustration on the rise

As primaries near, voters' anger mounts

By JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER

John Till has seen a lot since he voted in the 2008 primaries.

A president who won over millions of Americans on his way to an historic election victory has watched his approval ratings tank as he has worked toward correcting a sputtering economy.

State lawmakers have met for two annual sessions in which they balanced billions of dollars in shortfalls by cutting services many Floridians once relied upon. The governor even left the Republican party to run as an independent to gain an edge in his quest for U.S. Senate.

At the local level, commissioners have failed to find a suitor for the long-vacant Murdock Village property, failed to put a stop to rising water rates, and announced a heavily-opposed plan to install sewers to serve about 18,000 Port Charlotte homes — all while property values continued to plunge.

These and other events gave Till a little more to ponder this year as he drove to the polls for early voting. In fact, they have completely altered the way he views the political candidates who hope to soon represent him.

"I just think we need to put the brakes on this type of government and head in the other direction," the Punta Gorda resident said. "People need to get more in tune with what's going on."

Till is just one of many area voters who said they're disturbed with elected officials and their hopeful replacements at the local, state and federal levels.

Led by the recession, health care overhaul, government spending trends and a lack of direction, the number of Southwest Florida voters who are generally unhappy with their government has reached new heights this election, local candidates say.

Concerned citizens have shown their dismay through candidate forums, call-in radio shows and letters to the editor. Now they are showing it with their votes.

"People are upset," Charlotte County Supervisor of Elections Paul Stamoulis said. "They are upset with their government, and that's true across the board. People only get to really express themselves once a year, and they're just not happy right now."

Stamoulis said when voters are grim, it generally means turnouts at polling places go up.

Charlotte County has sent out about 20,000 absentee ballots, and another 1,500 residents have already voted. Stamoulis predicts the total turnout for the Aug. 24 gubernatorial primary will be greater than the primaries in 2006 and 2008.

Similarly, Sarasota County has mailed more than 21,275 absentee ballots, with 5,850 residents participating in early voting as of Monday afternoon. The county tabbed 48,263 total votes in the 2008 presidential primaries, according to the Supervisor of Elections Office.

"People are frustrated, and a good deal has to do with the economy," Sarasota County Commission District 4 candidate Mark Smith said. "People are struggling out there, and they're tired of seeing these bums at the national, state and local levels. We have to get ourselves out of this mess."

Candidates said when voters are distraught it typically gives incumbents cause for concern, but this year, area voters have been critical of candidates on both sides of the fence — no matter the party.

Charlotte County Commission District 4 candidate Stephen R. Deutsch recalled a local forum in early July. During the event, angry residents provoked loud verbal exchanges with several of the candidates, and they made it clear they weren't satisfied with any of the answers they heard.

"I have been involved in elections before, but I have never seen this much negativity," Deutsch said. "There's times I agree with it. There's times I don't. At one time or another, it's been about every member of the commission. People are frustrated, tired and annoyed by everything they see."

Residents leaving early voting sites this week said the majority of their discontent lies with the federal government. The top issue on their minds is the lack of available work.

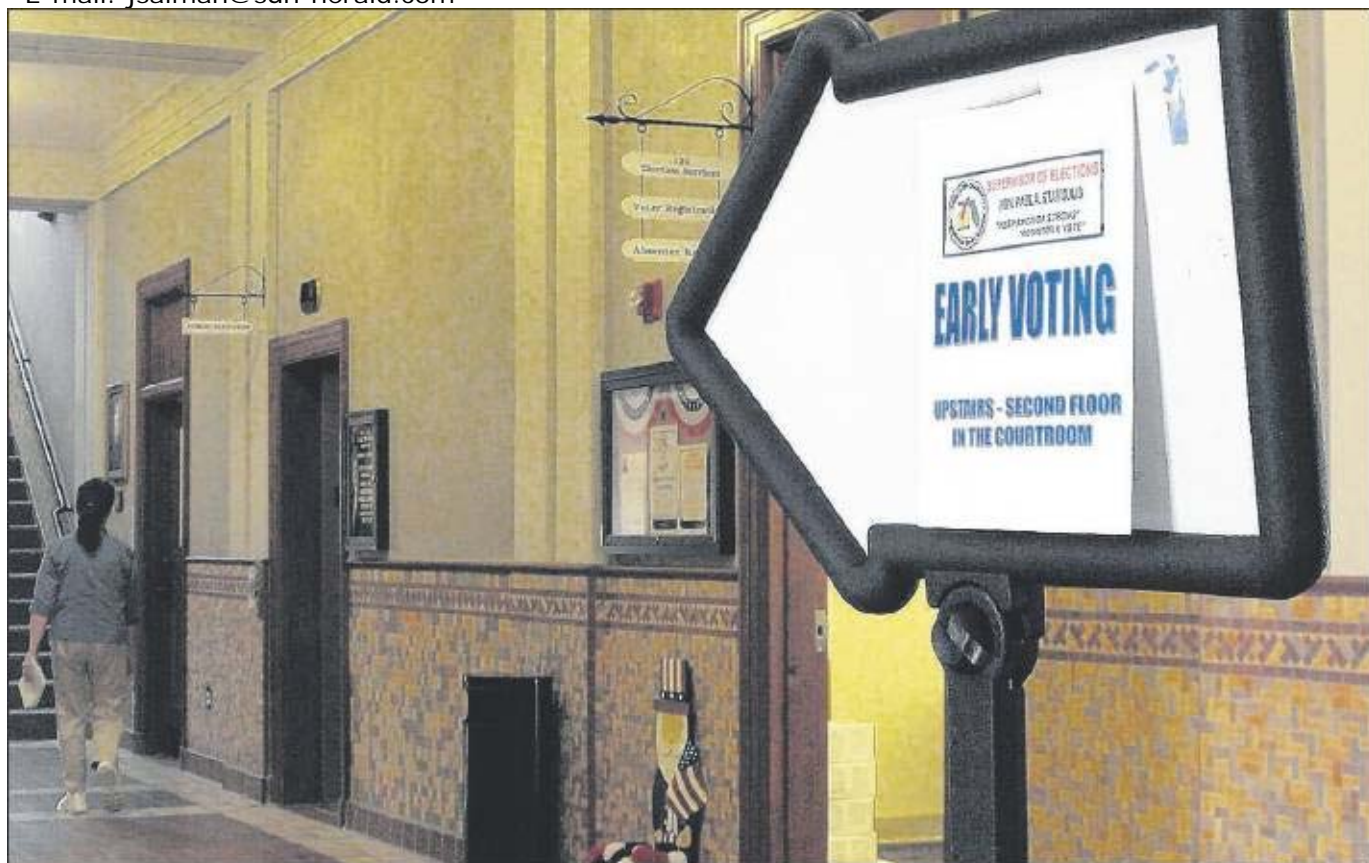
"I think the national government is more of an issue," said Scott Morris of Punta Gorda. "The economy is my biggest concern. Business creates jobs, and until we have a business friendly government, you can't expect things to recover. There's a lot of frustration, and our representatives just don't seem to be listening."

"The cost of running the schools and local government has grown out of control," said Rebecca Hansen of Harbour Heights. "There's just so much waste."

Early voting in Charlotte and Sarasota counties will continue until Aug. 22. The deadline for requesting an absentee ballot is Aug. 19.

Election workers will begin tabulating votes by mail and early voting before election day, but federal law prohibits the figures from being released until all the votes have been counted.

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SUN PHOTOS BY JOSH SALMAN, jsalman@sun-herald.com Driven largely by the economy and a lack of direction, area voters say they're generally distraught with local, state and national government heading into the Aug. 24 primaries. When voters are unhappy, it typically draws larger crowds at the polls.



Charlotte County polling deputy Marilyn Thompson still opens the polls at the Old Courthouse in Punta Gorda the way founding fathers did centuries ago, with a ceremonial old English speech.



SUN PHOTO BY JOSH SALMAN, jsalman@sun-herald.com Voters say they're generally distraught with local, state and national government heading into the Aug. 24 primaries, which could give incumbents a cause for concern.