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Nicole Brodeur / Times staff columnist

Keeping watch over democracy

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Brodeur

Along with his clothes and phone charger, Stuart Wilber packed some resolve into his suitcase the other day.

The personal chef has volunteered as a political smoke-jumper, of sorts, flying into one of the nation's hotspots — Broward County, Fla. — to serve as a poll watcher for the People for the American Way Foundation (PFAW) and the Election Protection Coalition.

"I am outraged by what I feel has happened in past elections," said Wilber, who lives in Seattle. "And I just want to contribute to the process in a more direct way."

Wilber is one of thousands of Americans who can't stay still this Election Day. They are voting early or by absentee, then taking leave of their jobs, homes and comfort zones.

Whatever it takes to ensure that, no matter the results of today's election, they will spend the next four years knowing they did all they could to see it done right.

Others have a more vested interest. The eight-member staff of Soapbox Communications in Seattle is closing up shop today to monitor polls for Planned Parenthood.

"It's one thing to say you support people participating in democracy," said Soapbox partner Christine Stepherson. "It's another to say, 'You can either get paid to work, or to be a good citizen — your choice.'"

The staff is taking the good-citizen route and heading to polls in Kent and Issaquah to check lists of those who have voted, against their lists of pro-choice supporters.

If those voters have not yet made it to the polls, Soapbox staffers will notify phone-bankers who will urge them on. And if anyone needs a ride, Soapbox is ready.

"It's either that or start drinking at 8:30 in the morning," joked Janda Black, Stepherson's partner in the public-relations firm. "It gives us a sense of all being together on Election Day instead of sitting around biting our nails," Black said. "We want to be proactive and part of the election in communities where we don't live."

Wilber, who is in Florida on his own dime, worked a phone bank Sunday before training yesterday and this morning.

Wearing a T-shirt that will identify him as a poll monitor, he will make sure the polls open on time and don't close early. In between, he will answer voters' questions.

If people are turned away from the polls, PFAW volunteers will use cellphones to contact staff attorneys to review each case.

"People die all over the world to have a right to vote," Wilber said. "And here we are in the country that puts itself up as the model of democratic procedure.

"But we're behaving in such a manner that we're losing all credence in what we say."

Wilber told of an election official who tried to keep people from registering, saying the paper was the wrong weight.

"It's obvious that there were other issues involved than the weight of the paper," he said.

Those issues — and the memory of all those crazy chads — sent him and others packing to ensure that the true winner packs for, or stays put in, the White House.

Nicole Brodeur's column appears Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. Reach her at 206-464-2334 or nbrodeur@seattletimes.com. Box of rocks.