Daylight saving time ends
It's an hour earlier as you wake up this morning.

Tampa Bay Times

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2026 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

What to watch for as Fla. votes

Dems want to offset years of GOP gains. They will need a groundswell of independents' support to do so.

BY MICHAEL VAN SICKLER AND SHAUNA MUCKLE
Times Staff Writers

The ads are flooding our TV screens, the flyers are stuffing our mailboxes and the texts are swamping our phones.

This is what democracy looks like as millions and millions of dollars are spent in the final stretch of one of the most consequential midterm elections in U.S. history. Ultimately, Florida's active registered voters, whether they cast ballots or not, will decide the outcome. There are 13.7 million of them.

By Friday, about a third of the state's electorate had already weighed in. If history is any predictor, up to another 4 million could vote by Tuesday.

Here's what we'll be looking at Tuesday night after the polls close.

Independents to decide next governor

Yes, yes, of course: Florida is a red state. But every eight years, when voters have to pick a new governor, things get awfully purple. Republicans won the Governor's Mansion by a little more than 1% of the vote in 2010 and less than half a percent in 2018.

Polls suggest we're looking at another coin flip, this time between Democrat David Jolly and Republican Byron Donalds.

In close races like this, most partisans have already decided. So as campaigns hunt and peck for those voters they can still convince, they target those who have registered to vote with no party affiliation, the swingiest bloc there is.

In Florida, these voters make up a quarter of the electorate. That's nearly as much as what Democrats

See ELECTION, 19A



Patrons watch Buster Keaton's silent film "Sherlock Jr.," scored live by the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra, at Tampa Theatre's Centennial Celebration on Oct. 15. Local theaters across Tampa Bay are feeling renewed energy after a busy summer blockbuster season. *(LUIS SANTANA | Times)*

DO PEOPLE STILL GO TO THE MOVIES IN TAMPA BAY?

The box office will amass more than $10 billion in ticket sales this year, experts say. How did this blockbuster summer treat Tampa's indie theaters?

BY CAMILA JOSE GOMEZ
Times Staff Writer

Christopher Nolan's "The Odyssey" wouldn't be released in theaters for another year and a half when Tim Massett raised the idea of buying a 70 mm projector.

Massett, a co-owner of Sun-Ray Cinema in Tampa, knew the indie theater needed to capitalize on the release of Nolan's long-awaited retelling of the Greek epic.

The projector would not only draw audiences to the nascent cinema, it would allow them to get their hands on the film's physical copies, often a challenge for smaller, independently owned theaters.

So, Shana David-Massett and Tim Massett, the husband-and-wife team behind Sun-Ray, took a $130,000 gamble and bought a Century JJ, capable of projecting both 35 mm and 70 mm film. Alongside AMC Veterans 24 in Town 'N Country, Sun-Ray was one of only two theaters in the Tampa Bay area showing "The Odyssey" in this coveted format.

The gamble paid off. Ticket sales spiked five times over since the summer blockbuster's release in July.

"This was like a quantum accelerator for our business," David-Massett said.

This summer's box office has been lauded as the most successful since the pandemic. Financially, it was the best summer on record, raking in $4.76 billion in ticket sales — just enough to break the $4.75 billion record set in 2013.

See MOVIES, 8A



Lanette Cruz, left, and Jimmy Pepal hold a photo of Brian Pepal at Cruz's St. Petersburg home on Monday. Brian Pepal — Jimmy Pepal's son and Cruz's stepson — died after a struggle with St. Petersburg police officers in front of his apartment on Aug. 22. *(TONY MARRERO | Times)*

Police killing of St. Petersburg man was deemed 'excusable.' Was it preventable?

Brian Pepal's family understands officers had to use force to counter his attack. But they say he should be alive today.

BY TONY MARRERO
Times Staff Writer

Watching her stepson struggle with two St. Petersburg police officers in what would be his last few conscious moments, Lanette Cruz shouted from a nearby sidewalk.

"Brian, cooperate!"

Moments earlier that August morning, Brian Pepal had stepped out of his Fossil Park apartment and attacked Officers Daniel Poveda and Tammy Craig, who had responded to Cruz's request for a welfare check. Cruz watched as both officers fired Taser probes into Pepal. She heard him scream.

During a scuffle that lasted about two minutes, body camera video shows, the officers got Pepal onto his stomach and handcuffed him behind his back.

Pepal stopped moving. A minute passed, then two. During that time, Poveda and Craig crossed Pepal's legs and pressed them toward his lower back.

Poveda rolled him onto his side.

"He's turning purple," Craig said.

Soon after, the officers were pressing on Pepal's chest and using a bag to force air into his lungs. He died at a hospital about an hour later.

See PEPAL, 13A

Rain chances

8 a.m.	Noon	4 p.m.	8 p.m.
73°	77°	78°	73°

70% chance of rain
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