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'Stealing America: Vote by Vote': Film sounds alarm over electronic voting systems

By Robert Horton
Herald Movie Critic

Thomas Paine, the author of "Common Sense," described voting as "the primary right by which other rights are protected." This quote begins "Stealing America: Vote by Vote," a new documentary demonstrating how this right might be eroded.

Filmmaker Dorothy Fadiman has compiled a withering case against allowing computerized voting systems -- easy to manipulate and hard to police -- to take over our election process. In most places, of course, they already have.

There's testimony from computer hackers about how easy it is to hijack voting procedures, and some examples of how it was done in the past.

In addition, Fadiman traces the history of exit polling over the last three decades. In the past, exit polls were those things that allowed network news channels to call an election five minutes after voting closed. It was always really annoying -- it sort of took the fun out of counting ballots -- but they were invariably right.

Much to the astonishment of pollsters (and the periodic embarrassment of newscasters), all that has changed lately. Exhibit A is -- everybody say it together now -- the Florida presidential count in 2000.

The exit polls established that more Florida voters meant to cast their ballots for Al Gore than George W. Bush in that election, and the networks dutifully reported the results. Florida would be the deciding state, and Gore would win the presidency.

The ballots that were actually counted, however, did not correspond to the exit polls, and a few hanging chads later, the contest was in doubt and the Supreme Court was called in.

Funny story about what happened next ... oh, never mind. The point of the movie is that Florida 2000 was not an exception, but an example of a disturbing trend.

Fadiman covers the irregularities reported in Ohio, an important swing state, in 2004. The system was clogged with computer malfunctions, slowness, and the disconcerting phenomenon of voters pushing the button for their candidate only to see the other guy's name light up.

Most of the stories in the film have Democratic candidates as the victims of polling-place shenanigans, and given the presence of lefty stalwart Peter Coyote in the narrator's chair, the sympathies here are undoubtedly one-sided.

But the subject is one that Democrats and Republicans alike should be freaked out about. Voting fraud happened long before computers came along, but in the Brave New World a single mouse click can change history. It's not paranoid to be troubled about that, it's common sense.

"Stealing America: Vote by Vote" 3 stars

Alarming: A documentary about the apparent ease with which ballot fraud can happen in computerized voting systems, which might explain why exit polls have been so wrong in big elections lately. The movie's undoubtedly left-leaning, but citizens on both sides can be troubled by the specter of a single mouse click deciding an election.

Rated: not rated; probably PG for subject matter

Now showing: Varsity

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