



'Stealing America': When Democracy Loses the Vote

By S. JAMES SNYDER | August 1, 2008

"**STEALING AMERICA: VOTE BY VOTE**," A COMPELLING examination of modern-day voting practices that opens Friday at Quad Cinemas, is a bold, if slightly dry, act of journalism. The documentary begins with a rather straightforward thesis that has not been examined as thoroughly as it should be: The past two presidential elections, in which victory has been determined by razor-thin margins, have been beset by a skyrocketing number of mishaps at the polls. The mainstream press often dubs them "voting irregularities," and one doesn't have to be a supporter of any of the candidates involved to know that they are damaging our concept of free and fair elections.



Direct Cinema Limited

ONE VOICE Dorothy Fadiman, the director of 'Stealing America: Vote by Vote.'

It wasn't until the infamous re-count of 2000 and the difficulty in deciding whether, for example, a dimpled chad indicated voter intent, that the average American became familiar with the weaknesses inherent in our voting infrastructure. For her part, "Stealing America" director Dorothy Fadiman became infuriated during the 2004 presidential election about the way in which the confusion, fear, and outright suspicion felt by so many voters went all but unaddressed by major news organizations.

Ms. Fadiman was working as a volunteer at the polls in Florida on Election Day in 2004 when she heard numerous reports of citizens voting for one candidate, only to have another name light up on the electronic screen before them. The director was struck by the mounting frustration of the voters, who could not find acceptable solutions to the problems they had encountered at the polls.

The documentary is quick to point out that manipulating election results is as old as elections themselves, but conspiracy theories of corruption are not the goal here, despite the ring of the title. What has changed in recent years is the degree of reliance on technology, which is more vulnerable to sabotage and less helpful in terms of verifying or scrutinizing results — not to mention in clarifying who has won a tight race.

Not surprisingly, given the results of the 2000 and 2004 elections, the majority of the voters and election volunteers interviewed by Ms. Fadiman are Democrats. But she takes pains to balance the voices in her film in order to show that the irregularities that have come to plague our electoral system represent a bipartisan concern. The dozens of interviewees include state Senator Kay Hagan, a Democrat, who witnessed on-screen vote switching; the BBC investigative reporter Greg Palast; Avi Rubin, who runs the Information Security Institute at Johns Hopkins University; the pollster John Zogby, and Ion Sancho, who was appointed to conduct the 2000 Florida recount by the state's Supreme Court.

"Stealing America" aligns these interviews to support a couple of distinct arguments. First, Ms. Fadiman argues, technological upgrades in the polling booth have left our elections more susceptible to interference, malfunctions, and tampering. In some cases, analysts attempting to re-examine past election results have been told that the raw voting data are proprietary information owned by a private company, and that the only figures available for study are the summaries the company delivered to election officials.

Moreover, the costly equipment and software upgrades for the new machines have not been evenly distributed, leaving many precincts underserved. In 2004, various reports out of Florida and Ohio described citizens waiting in excess of six hours to vote — and in some cases longer.

Ultimately, though, Ms. Fadiman's ire (as communicated through Peter Coyote's narration) is directed firmly at the press. Using the firsthand evidence of what she witnessed, not only unreliable computer terminals but election-night results that deviated widely, for the first time in history, from exit polls — a fact that alone should have drawn greater scrutiny — "Stealing America" lambastes the press for its failure to properly dissect the problem. Juxtaposing the exasperation of voters and election volunteers with the calm and steady news reports of the same day in 2004, it's clear that these are two versions of Election Day that do not mesh.

"Stealing America" suffers from limited production values... It also lacks the flair of a singular personality, such as Michael Moore or Morgan Spurlock. But perhaps that's precisely the point. The movie almost goes out of its way to avoid being provocative for the sake of provocation. It substantiates its arguments, and though it asks big questions, Ms. Fadiman offers a virtual bullet-point list defending why they deserve to be asked.

The 21st century has become an era of neck-and-neck elections that play out moment by moment on 24/7 cable news — elections run by machines and managed by people fixed in the political structure. Ms. Fadiman doesn't want to sell us on the theory of a swindled populace, but she makes a compelling argument that now is not the time to take the right to the vote, or the security of our voting apparatus, for granted.

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