

Red State Harvest

Dorothy Fadiman's 'Stealing America: Vote by Vote,' shows that dangling chads are the least of our problems

By Richard von Busack



DOWN FOR THE COUNT: The 2004 election results in Ohio were fishy enough to warrant a protest movement.

FOUR YEARS—minus three-score days—ago, the national elections resulted in vote tallies of notorious fishiness. The Republican Party has a strict policy of "losers weepers," shared by the allegedly liberal communications conglomerates that covered the '04 election. In key battlegrounds—places as disparate as eastern New Mexico and urban Ohio—the election results were more than merely cloudy.

Now Menlo Park's Oscar-nominated filmmaker Dorothy Fadiman offers her spare, homebrewed documentary on the election, *Stealing America: One Vote at a Time*. Narrated in Henry Fonda-ish tones by Peter Coyote, it is a calm, intelligent overview of the irregularities (or, if you like, felonies) that led to Bush and Cheney's win.

Certainly, bent elections are a tradition in the United States. Fadiman takes a clip from Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*, where Colbert solicitously asks guest Robert F. Kennedy Jr. if Bush stealing the '04 election was more difficult than his uncle JFK's theft of votes in 1960.

Go back further, and there's the anecdote found in Ray Ginger's book *Age of Excess*. Matthew Stanley "Boss" Quay of Pennsylvania, after using the railroads to ship voters into the then swing-state Indiana to beat Democrat Grover Cleveland, had to watch as the Republican Benjamin Harrison declared, "Providence has given us this victory." Quay was frank enough to tell reporters, "Think of the man! He ought to know that providence hadn't a thing to do with it."

Winking at this problem ignores the evidence that election irregularities are rising. Once, exit polls were good forecasts of how the country voted. Now, as Fadiman shows, the increased usage of electronic voting machines coincides with rising discrepancies between exit polls and final tallies. (We're reminded how many newscasters called the election for Kerry in the evening, thus that nasty surprise for Democrats the following day.) One important exit-polling firm, Edison/Mitofsky, won't explain why the margin of error keeps growing, claiming proprietary rights.

No longer does a political gamesman have to enlist the dead to fill election registers or to ship in transient voters. Today's swindlers only need inexpensive pieces of electronic hardware to remove or to switch votes. The machinery for voting is prone to rigging and failure; as a character on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* half-joked, "Most of these voting machines run on the same rock-solid Windows platforms that never crashes at your home or office." It's well known that the then chairman of Diebold, Walden O'Dell, stated that he would do anything he could to aid George W. Bush's victory: certainly one of the decade's most unfortunate political pronouncements.

Fadiman focuses on the mess in Ohio, where numerous irregularities were reported in 2004. There were discouraging hours-long lines in precincts where students or African Americans were voting. Meanwhile, there were insignificant waits in country club precincts. Kenneth Blackwell, the Ohio Secretary of State, had the job of overseeing the elections. He also was a member of the committee to re-elect Bush and Cheney. In the end, there were more than enough challenged voters in Ohio to give Bush the state and the subsequent win. Some heroes emerge. Fadiman interviews Ion Sancho, who was in charge of the Florida recount in 2000, before his hand was stayed by the Supreme Court's *Gore v. Bush* decision. Journalist Greg Palast describes the way Republicans made lists of overseas African American soldiers to use for "caging votes," a way of purging potential voters.

Another subject is the meek, soft-voiced Pat Leahan, an activist from Las Vegas, N.M. Leahan was so distraught at the undercounting in her precinct that she started the successful campaign to bring back paper ballots to her state. And we watch Congressman John Conyers' committee examine the voting. Conyers book *What Went Wrong in Ohio* was mostly ignored, even though House Judiciary Committee found that "intentional misconduct and illegal behavior" marred the Ohio voting.

Is this all whining, then? Was Kerry's weakness the deciding factor in the loss? Was the election so close that it hardly mattered which mediocre candidate won? The last four years likely have convinced voters that there's more at stake in 2008 than there was even in 2004, back when record numbers of voters turned out to vote. The numbers are frightening—according to the Census Election Survey, though 125.7 million voted, there were 3.4 million votes left uncounted. *Stealing America: Vote by Vote* insists that the new methods of election filching are a bipartisan issue: interviewee Harvey Wasserman, the senior editor of the *Columbus Free Press* comments, "If in fact the Republicans stole the election, the Democrats were willing accomplices by sitting back and not challenging it."

Fadiman's fine and compelling work provides a useful overview of the way the scam went down. It's a compilation of sinister incidents that adds up to far more than tinfoil-hat conspiracy theories. This film defines faith-based voting as voting and having faith that your ballot won't be switched, eliminated, challenged or caged. Is there hope? The film suggests that Americans aren't as easily deluded by base, muddy political campaigning as it seems. There's too much evidence here of monkey wrenching by self-deluded patriots, the kind who stole elections in the past. They'll do it in the future, too, if they aren't stopped.