

The season for movies about voting

By JEFFREY RESSNER | 7/30/08 4:36 AM EST



'Stealing America: Vote by Vote' is directed by Oscar-nominated filmmaker Dorothy Fadiman and features a nonpartisan lineup of experts ranging from Ronald Reagan economics adviser Paul Craig Roberts to liberal activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr.
Photo: AP

Opening this week is Walt Disney's "Swing Vote," featuring Kevin Costner as a drunken single dad who gets to decide the winner of the presidential race after a voting machine error throws the entire election into disarray. And, a few weeks back, the HBO telefilm "Recount" scooped up armfuls of Emmy nominations for its lively re-creation of the Bush v. Gore controversy of 2000, bringing back memories of hanging chads and other voting irregularities.

Needless to say, 'tis the season for movies about voting. But no recent film comes closer to showing the horrifying potential glitches in the electoral process than the new documentary "Stealing **America**: Vote by Vote." The low-budget, fact-packed movie debuts at the Quad Cinema in New York City on Friday before opening in Los Angeles and other cities in August. Filmmakers will be flooding the media with DVDs of the film during the two political conventions, and it will also be distributed via grass-roots marketing.

Despite the budgetary constraints and talking-heads content, the film is a must-see for anyone interested in the future of democracy and the ugly truth behind voting irregularities. Narrated by hip actor Peter Coyote — who performed the same role for the 2005 doc "Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room" — the 90-minute movie was directed by Oscar-nominated filmmaker Dorothy Fadiman and features a nonpartisan lineup of experts ranging from **Ronald Reagan** economics adviser Paul Craig Roberts to liberal activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

OK, so Kevin Costner doesn't show up. No matter. The film is more frightening than "Waterworld" as it describes the eroding reliability of exit polls over the past decade, the simplicity of hacking into electronic voting machines, glitches in election software and the maneuvering that goes on behind the scenes when elected (and nonelected) officials get to decide exactly how average citizens cast their ballots.

One of the experts who appears in the film is Ion Sancho, the Leon County, **Fla.**, supervisor of elections who helped oversee the recount in Miami-Dade County during the 2000 presidential race.

When we spoke to him late last week about the new documentary, Sancho said the subject matter is definitely germane to what's happening this year, and he pointed to states such as Indiana and Pennsylvania as potential problem areas in the 2008 presidential race.

"Pennsylvania and Indiana are jurisdictions with partisan election administrations, and that's one of the things that the film tries to illustrate," said Sancho. Fadiman is also concerned about an Indiana law that requires voters to show government-issued photo identification, he said. "Senior citizens, young people, low-income and minority voters often lack photo IDs and, as a result, they may potentially be disenfranchised."

Despite their concerns about possible voting mishaps, Sancho and Fadiman are encouraged by events such as the grass-roots efforts that helped **New Mexico** enact laws giving voters some verification of their ballots. "There's a move among citizens towards the paper ballot option," she said. "In New Mexico, activists reached the Legislature and the governor and, indeed, now there are paper ballots used there. The paper ballot option is encouraging, but the movement is gradual. It's not going to happen in 10 minutes."

Indeed, Fadiman is hopeful that her documentary can be used as a tool to help spur state activists to demand better voting procedures. "The film isn't for 2008, per se. It's laying the groundwork for years of reform and years of election integrity work that need to go forward slowly, state by state," she said.

Despite calls for some sort of federally mandated voting system, there seems to be little hope of things moving in that direction. "The main resistance comes from state election officials, who view this as historically their turf, and they don't want the federal government intruding," said Sancho, who added that some federal moves, such as the Help America Vote Act, have also been heavily orchestrated behind the scenes by voting machine vendors. "Elections are the most public event that we hold in this country, yet we conduct them through private companies, which means secret proprietary software is used. We've outsourced a public process, and when election officials like myself try to independently verify the security and accuracy of these machines, we get attacked by [their protectors]."

"Stealing America" follows a series of several other documentaries about voting problems, including HBO's excellent "Hacking Democracy" and "Unprecedented," an examination of the 2000 presidential election.

"One thing we're counting on is hunger," said Fadiman, who estimates that nearly a dozen docs on the subject have been released in recent years. "There are some documentaries that are beautifully made, and some of them do really well. But with this film, we're counting on a deep curiosity, a real hunger, for information about elections at this time." We'll vote for that.