

# Fixing Elections

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“It’s not the voting that’s democracy; it’s the counting.”

—Tom Stoppard

Electoral fraud is as old as elections. Societies that brag about traditions of electoral democracy can also claim a continuous history of electoral crime and chicanery. It’s a safe bet that large-scale electoral racketeering will not end with the Florida flimflam of 2000 and the judicial coup d’etat that installed the Bush-Cheney regime.

Vote fraud in the US can be found all along its 225-year timeline in venues ranging from high-school class officer elections to the smallest village council nose-counts to municipal primaries to national presidential campaigns.

Elections—like televised presidential debates—are the exclusive property of the Republican and the Democratic wings of the USA’s single-party ruling elite. They pick the candidates, set the rules, determine how and when those rules are enforced, and they announce the results. In this way, the ruling class has narrowed the political bandwidth to a sliver of what’s really out there, and you are forced to choose from within that narrow field. This problem cannot be solved by run-off voting, parliamentary systems, or any other partial proposal for more parties capitulating to capital’s rule.

The laughable proposition made by apologists is that somehow the two-party system will check itself and balance out any biases. This lousy refried Adam Smith-style logic also says that unfettered market capitalist competition will regulate itself. Think of it this way: regardless of how closely Pepsi monitors Coca-Cola, or how spirited the competition, you’ll never get the chance to sip homemade dandelion wine as long as you are forced to choose between two cola manufacturers.

The long-term effect this has had on the very notion of democratic self-rule has been insidious. Because elections are constantly equated with the ideals attributed to democracies and republics, the full implications of what it would mean to live in a participatory community has been cheapened, diluted, and distorted.

As the world prepares for the spectacle of Occupied Iraq’s make-believe, made-in-USA election in late June, you’ve got to wonder who is going to select the candidates, how the votes will be tallied, and who it will be that will be doing the counting and the backroom juggling.

Just as the US capitalist system absolutely requires at least 4% unemployment at all times in order to function, the US electoral system can only operate as its masters have designed if a fraction more than the 50% of those eligible turn up at the polls. This is why voter registration is so bureaucratically complex, why the locations of polling stations are so difficult to discern, and why Election Day is not a holiday. (Imagine what would happen if more workers had the day off and had time to go and vote).

Generally speaking, the most strident vote-reformers seem to be motivated by a patriotically devout appreciation for the Constitution and the election process prescribed therein. In their activism, they refuse to listen to anti-authoritarian and anti-statist arguments about why voting under the current system will never help to create a free society. Instead, they lash out angrily at the anarchist critique of election mythologies and denounce such thinking as disempowering, cynical, and defeatist.

But for those who have never trusted the way elections happen in the US, stories of voter fraud and ballot manipulation corroborate what's assumed to be typical. Rather than agitating for voting reform, retelling stories of voter fraud underscores the futility of using the helplessly ruined system of vote-casting to effect change.

Tales of conspiracy and deceit, such as those surrounding the outrageously corrupt US presidential elections of 2000, ought to convince most people who might vote in November to find a more meaningful channel for direct-democratic political participation.

The fiasco in Florida is the subject of the 2002 agit-documentary, "Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election." As an ugly chronicle of State-sanctioned voter purge lists, monumental conflicts of interest, and political opportunism of the most rancid sort. This film unintentionally makes a very strong case against voting in governmental elections. Though ostensibly meant as a call for reform, Unprecedented bolsters the anarchists' case for continued electoral boycotts. The Fix is in, so don't even bother going to the voting booth.

Like many other apathetic and outraged people, I boycotted the November 2000 presidential race between Tweedledee and Tweedledumber. Some liberal and social democratic friends threw a house party on the night of Election Day, so that they could all watch the voting results being announced, and I was invited as the token class-war curmudgeon. But, as it turned out, I had the last laugh and gloated for months afterward. It was the kind of farce that you'd expect to see in some post-colonial dictatorship in the mid-1960s. Even Fidel Castro recognized it. In a hilarious piece of diplomatic slapstick, the Cuban president-for-life sarcastically offered to send neutral observers to Florida to monitor the recount process in order to ensure that the process was free from corruption.

"Unprecedented" tells you all you need to know about why the US electoral system will never work. This 50-minute expose is based on leftist Greg Palast's investigative reports and examines how voting outcomes in Florida were engineered before and after Election Day to benefit Bush and the Republican wing of the ruling party.

All the usual crooks are brought in for the line-up: Florida governor and smarmy 2008 presidential hopeful Jeb Bush, Florida secretary of state and drag-queen role model Katherine Harris, Bush clan attack dog James Baker, and US Supreme Court Judge Antonin Scalia. Unfortunately, the filmmakers also give short shrift to an unmistakably sleazy story of massive fraud that would also make an interesting documentary: the overseas military absentee votes that the Bush gang miraculously produced at the last minute.

Documentarians Joan Sekler and Richard R. Perez provide quick sketches of what went down in 2000 in the Sunshine State. For example, there were instances of African-Americans being stripped of voting rights by an extremely haphazard and inaccurate felon identification system implemented by the State government. Black voters were intimidated by State troopers, harassed at the polls by election officials, and misidentified as ex-convicts who had been forced to surrender their right to vote once imprisoned.

The narrative in Unprecedented hints broadly that these irregularities are part of a broader pattern of bigotry and ignorance exhibited by Jeb Bush's administration, and the film seeks to mobilize outrage on the basis that there had been widespread discrimination by the Florida government against African-American voters. Unquestionably, racism and white supremacy play a huge part in the frankly undemocratic way governments are erected all across the US, but the real issue here is how the ruling institutions are empowered to invalidate the voting choices of a specific cross-section of people of the government's choosing.

Obviously, the bureaucratic machinery of elections and voter registration cannot be repaired by a federal order to Florida state employees to attend racial sensitivity workshops. For substantial and meaningful change, people need to seek more direct avenues of political action than submitting to the November nonsense of the voting booth.

There's a kind of naive moral outrage to Unprecedented that treats the Florida 2000 situation as some kind of freakish miscarriage of the US voting process concocted by the cynical old-guard of the Republican Party. But the more jaded eye will see it as simple confirmation that the terminally impaired US voting system is built entirely upon lawyers' knavery and the hocus-pocus of sideshow mountebanks with expensive haircuts.

Take a look at the sort of reform that the Florida farce directly encouraged: electronic voting. Amid all the ballyhoo about pregnant, dimpled, and hanging chads on punch-card ballots during the Florida recount, cries went out to make voting more efficient, and, predictably the cybercrats came to the rescue with a computerized touch-screen panacea.

As a consequence, the Help America Vote Act was passed by the US Congress which decreed that election officials replace lever and punch-card voting machines with electronic systems in time for the 2006 mid-term national

elections. But as folks like Bev Harris have shown (see her book and website *Black Box Voting: Ballot Tampering in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*), such technology is utterly unreliable and subject to mistakes and tampering. The Florida recount was the worst kind of travesty, but at least there was a paper trail to illustrate the system's failure. Not so with the latest computerized voting networks—today, Diebold, ES&S and Sequoia systems are already in place in 37 states. Other serious problems within the electronic systems of voting and registration include frightening possibilities for commercial privacy intrusions, identity theft, and police surveillance.

For those who believe that democracy is something different than going to a polling station to ritualistically submit to preordained political decisions, *Unprecedented* is a pitch-black dark comedy about the inner workings of the US voting racket.

Any anarchist worth her salt will be able to see through the liberal-left reformism. After all, as abhorrent and sociopathic as the Bush Administration has been in the last four years, can anyone really say how a Gore-Lieberman regime would have been less violent, less capitalist, less statist, and less authoritarian?

When November 2004 comes, which of the two leading former members of the privileged Skull and Bones Club secret society will you support? Does it matter which white male millionaire war criminal the people proudly vote for?

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