

GREG PALAST

AN EXCERPT FROM THE NEW EDITION OF HIS BOOK

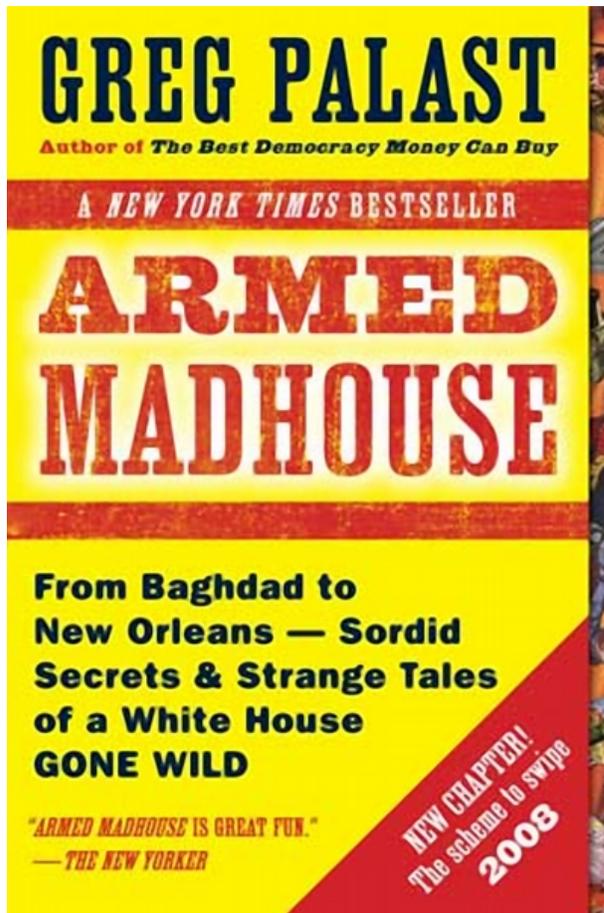
ARMED MADHOUSE

FROM BAGHDAD TO NEW ORLEANS – SORDID SECRETS
AND STRANGE TALES OF A WHITE HOUSE GONE WILD



The
THEFT
of
2008

**AND HOW TO STEAL
BACK YOUR VOTE**



AN EXCERPT FROM

**ARMED MADHOUSE: From Baghdad to
New Orleans – Sordid Secrets and
Strange Tales of a White House Gone Wild
BY GREG PALAST**

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The Republican Party won the 2008 Presidential race on January 1, 2006. It was a private affair, so the Democrats wouldn't recognize the GOP had put the ballots in the bag a couple years ahead of the voting. But before I tell you how they stole it, I'm going to tell you how they *didn't* steal it . . .

I know I'm going to get burnt at the stake for saying this. It's pure heresy, but someone's got to say it: the Republicans aren't stealing the 2008 election by monkeying with your touch-screen vote. Am I saying the computers machines are *safe*? No. Pay attention, damn it. They'll jerk the machines for sure. But that's not how they'll steal it. The 2000 election was certainly stolen; so was 2004 – but not by computer. And in 2008, they won't steal it by computer either. But they'll steal it, nonetheless, but by methods more insidious, more certain . . . in fact, they've already done it. Millions of citizens' votes have *already* been snatched.

In 2000, it was theft by secret "scrub": by Katherine Harris and Jeb Bush targeting 94,000 innocent voters, mostly Black men, for elimination from the voter rolls.

Exposing Jeb's little "felon" scam seems to have kicked off an entire industry of writing about vote thievery and jump-started a growing movement of activists out to prevent the heist of our democratic franchise. That's good. What's bad is that many in this enthusiastic army of the aroused are marching the voter protection movement straight into the open jaws of Karl Rove. We saw this in 2002 when activists signed off on the Help America Vote Act, creating a "provisional" ballot that, instead of helping voters, helped Republican operatives shunt 3 million voters to this newfangled baloney bal-

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lot. One in three were then legally tossed away.

And we saw it in 2004. That November, John Kerry's votes were lost in a blizzard of hanging chads in the state with the greatest number of ancient punch-card voting machines, Ohio. Go ahead and shoot me for saying this, but Secretary of State Blackwell was more than happy to have white folk campaign against placing Diebold computers into inner-city voting booths. That let him keep the chad-hanging machines in place. Blackwell had confidentially written to fellow Republican chiefs that keeping the old punch-card machines would spoil thousands of ballots. They did.

And now, we're doing it again, making it easy for the voteburglars to snatch elections by placing all our hopes and efforts onto one single, incredibly narrow matter: making war on touchscreen electronic voting machines. And there's no better example of how the other side is using this fear of computer voting to beat us to death than New Mexico. There, the GOP agreed to paper balloting in return for a whole new set of weapons to use against voters of color, most particularly, a new requirement for voters to produce I.D. cards.

And it didn't take long. Just before the 2006 mid-term elections, the Secretary of State of New Mexico was swamped with 200,000 returned, mis-sent voter I.D. cards from the Albuquerque region. That is, the *Democratic* region.

The Republicans won 2008 on January 1, 2006

On that New Years day, a new provision of the Help Americans Vote Act [HAVA] became law, unnoted in US newspapers. This sneaky little codicil allows each of the fifty Secretaries of State to reject voter registrations. In years past, Secretaries of State like Katherine Harris and Kenneth Blackwell skirted legal limits to say, "You can't vote" to a couple of hundred thousand US citizens who happened to be Black and worse, Democrats. In 2006, this law-breaking came to an end. Not because of a change in officials' behavior but because the officials changed the law.

Beginning 2006, the HAVA law gave Secretaries of State the right - in fact, *required* them - to reject any voter attempting to register whose exact name and "identity numbers" (driver's license, social security, passport numbers) did not match up against a state "verification" list.

It sounds like pretty arcane stuff and not too treacherous. But if you think I'm getting wound up over a picky-picky matter, consider this: When HAVA gave state politicians this power to reject registration forms nationwide, the official

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hacks told one in three Americans attempting to register, *get lost!* Most states used the rejection power with a mad vengeance. For example, at the beginning of 2006, California rejected 40% of registrants. Does it really make a difference? Each year, about 24.3 *million* Americans attempt to register or re-register. At the current rejection rates, it won't take long to clean out the voter rolls of undesirables – that is, undesirable to the Secretaries of State. The key question is, of course: Who is tossed out?

Overwhelmingly, it's folks with names like Garcia-Marquez, Yao Ming, and Mohammed, according to Justin Levitt at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University's School of Law.

"Unusual names," he explained. Unusual for *Republicans*, that is. Well, if they aren't legal voters, then we can't complain.

However, a case-by-case review in one state disclosed that 71% of the registration forms rejected were tossed out as the result of data-entry errors by the government's own clerks.

And that's the point. There is not one scintilla of evidence of an attempt by millions of citizens to vote illegally. However, in the California case, the thousands of rejected were guilty of VWH, Voting While Hispanic. In Los Angeles, where a Democratic, Chicano mayor and his allies have no interest in wiping out the Chicano vote, county officials went back through the local list of the 40% of applicants rejected. Simply by contacting those voters and correcting obvious clerical errors on the forms, they reduced the rejection rate from 40% to nearly zero. In other words, the rejected were, in fact, legitimate voters. That was L.A. But for those given the boot in whiter counties, it was, "*tough luck, José.*"

Los Angeles is the rare case of officials attempting to protect voters. But across the USA, millions are getting the registration heave-ho with barely a peep from the press. In the bad old days of Jim Crow, Black folk attempting to register were beaten or worse. Today, their forms are taken with a smile – then tossed away.

But not always without a fight. The Brennan Center for Justice and a labor union coalition successfully sued the State of Washington which had excluded nearly one out of three voters in urban Seattle. In that case, the victims were, in suspiciously large numbers, those with Chinese or Filipino names, who suffered double the rate of rejection as in the suburban and rural (i.e. white Republican) areas.

But the State of Ohio has so far outfoxed the legal watchdogs by keeping Ohio's methods and rules a foggy mystery. It's hard to sue a fog, and in this case, the fog-maker was then-Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell.

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Blackwell, it's worth noting, got an early start in the registration rejection business. Leading up to the Bush-Kerry race, Blackwell attempted to reject thousands of applicants who filed on forms where the paper was not the right thickness. He got caught out on that one. Nevertheless, Blackwell's rules allowed him to reject 36,251 new registrations before the 2004 election.

Blackwell was just testing the limits of the powers granted in the first two years of HAVA's operation. But he wasn't alone. In the two years leading to the Bush-Kerry race, 3,815,000 registration forms were officially thrown in the electoral garbage can. That was bad, but under the 2006 change, the sky's the limit on rejections. In effect, the HAVA law is the cover for keeping the voter rolls as exclusive as a Georgia country club.

And why? What on earth required our Congress, four decades after the end of Jim Crow registration rules were abolished, to suddenly add a new weapon to the vote-heist arsenal? The official excuse is summed up by Republican Congressman Russell Pearce of Mesa, Arizona:

"There is a massive effort under way to register illegal aliens in the country."

Really? Holy cow! A conspiracy to flood the voter rolls with the Brown Hordes of Juarez who've swum the Rio Grande just for a chance to vote for Hillary Clinton!? I called the Congressman to ask him how he uncovered this grand cabal – to get a few names of the "massive" number of illegal voters and the perps behind the effort. I suggested that he turn over these ne'er-do-wells to the Justice Department for prosecution. But, the Congressman didn't have a single name of a single illegal voter. Nor could he tell us who committed this felony crime of "massive illegal" registration.

So, to prevent *a crime that doesn't happen*, the number of citizens denied the right to register, based on the new rejection rates, will easily double from 3.8 million to 7.6 million. Count on it.

Crime Scene Investigation

Before I took up the questionable career of journalist in my late forties, I was, for decades, an investigator. My specialty: "forensic economics." The job was to cut into the evidence and figure out the scams by following the money and piecing together the statistics.

That's what's needed here. Vote rustling is a game of numbers, of probabilities, of shaving a percentage point here, a point there. The winners at this game understand that victory is in those "nega-votes," something polls don't catch:

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stopping your opponent's voters from voting or preventing their vote from counting.

So let's pause here for a bit of Fun with Forensics. Begin by ignoring the media myths and bullcrap about Black and Brown folk being too lazy to register and vote. Look coldly at the numbers. Despite what we hear, African-Americans are as likely to vote as white voters, a notable nine-out-of-ten Blacks who are registered (87%) vote, virtually the same as white voters (89%). (The difference, though small, is completely accounted for by the higher number of Black voters *denied a ballot* at the voting station.)

The big difference is in registration. Three-fourths of the white population is registered (75%), but only 69% of African-Americans. If Blacks registered at the same rate as whites, there would be another 1,630,000 African-Americans on the rolls, enough to change control of both houses of Congress and the White House.

But Blacks *do* register at the same rate as whites. *Huh?*

What I should say is that Black folk *attempt* to register, fill out forms, at a slightly *higher* rate than the white population – roughly 78% versus 77%. But the rate of minority forms rejected is so much higher, as is the rate of removal from voter rolls (purging), that the percentage of African Americans allowed onto the rolls and allowed to stay on is so much lower than the percentage of white voters. Example: When I totaled up the wrongful purges in Florida, I found innocent Black voters *nine times* as likely to get the axe as innocent White voters.

In other words, it's not minority "culture" at fault for low registration. It ain't the culture, it's the *vultures*, the vote suppression predators.

Why are minority registrations under attack? One Republican pundit, John McWhorter, debating me in Harlem, suggested that people of color would not be targeted for such ugly vote suppression tactics if they'd only stop voting for Democrats. I'm certain he's correct.

While African-Americans are victimized, the wipe-out of Hispanic and Asian registrants, targeted immigrant groups, is even more severe.

Following the dramatic protest marches by several million Hispanics in 2006, their leaders announced that they would register a million new Hispanic voters. That should have been easy given that there are *seven million unregistered Hispanic US citizens*. Voter forms by the hundreds of thousands were collected.

The Black community was also signing up like crazy. Rev. Jesse Jackson and other ministers collected literally hundreds of thousands of registration forms at Black churches and rallies. But despite these registration drives, minority regis-

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tration rates stay weirdly low. And now we know why: they're filling up a leaky bucket. The more registrations added, the more are rejected or purged.

Hispanics and Asians, given the chance to vote, do so in nearly the same numbers as White and Black folk – over 80% of registrants. But the percentage of those enrolled to vote is dismal, 47% of Hispanics, 44% of Asians. That's less than half of those population's American citizens.

And for 2008, the Republicans are hard at work punching more holes in the registration bucket, beginning with the hunt for

Real Murkins

Arizona Congressman Pearce's posse isn't satisfied with HAVA's open door to voter-list manipulation. The pol went a step further promoting what I'd call the ultimate "José Crow" law: Proposition 200.

Prop 200, which became law in Arizona in 2006, requires proof of citizenship in order to register. That sounds fair: you can't register unless you can prove you're, as George Bush says, "a 'Murkin.'" The problem is that there are only three proofs of citizenship in most states: a certified original birth certificate, naturalization papers or a passport. These are not easily available to a large chunk of those of us born in the USA.

Many elderly and poor were never issued an official birth certificate – and almost no poor and working class Americans have passports. In fact, only 23% of US citizens have passports. The effect of this "prove you're American" rule is to make it darn hard to vote if you arrived from the rural South and were born outside a hospital – but darn easy if you've just had your passport renewed to ski in the Alps.

The aim is to change voter registries from profiles of the nation to guest lists for the select.

And it's working. In the first year after Proposition 200 went into effect in Arizona, one-third of new Phoenix-area residents were denied the right to vote. An ACLU monitor determined that rejections were concentrated among "the poor." In Arizona, that means, "Hispanic." Yet, if these rejectees, over ten-thousand of them, are, in fact, illegal immigrants, shouldn't they be busted and deported? That should be easy because they've *given their addresses* on the registration form.

So I called the Secretary of State Jan Brewer – she is in charge of this ethnic

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cleansing of the voter rolls – to ask how many illegal immigrant voters she’s nabbed. No one in her office could come up with a single instance of uncovering an illegal alien among these rejected voters. (I should mention that Ms. Brewer was also the co-chair of the Bush re-election campaign.)

Watching the Big Brown-Out in Arizona caused by Proposition 200, Republicans in Washington began to salivate like hound dogs under a rotting rump steak. Congressman Henry Hyde (R-Ill), never one to let democracy get in the way of a fresh ballotbending scheme, sponsored a bill that would impose on all 50 states the requirement that *every* voter, not just new registrants, produce proof of citizenship and a photo ID in order to cast a ballot. It’s such an obviously mad, biased and blatant attack on the right to vote that it passed overwhelmingly in the Republican-controlled House. Our nation should be grateful that the Senate, as of this writing, is still dawdling over the matter.

The Crusade Against the League of Women Voters

To make certain that do-gooder groups don’t fix the fall in registrations through voter drives, the last four years have seen the rise of new rules to block registration campaigns among the poor. Florida is typical of Republican-controlled states. There, Sue Cobb, the Secretary of State appointed by Jeb Bush, threatened the League of Woman Voters with fines of up to \$100,000 for any registration form they submitted that contained a clerical error. That basically put the little ladies with the clipboards out of business. The group says it can’t take the risk: just 14 bad forms would bankrupt the organization.

But don’t assume it’s always the GOP that holds the electoral lynching rope. In Georgia, in 2006, then-Secretary of State Cathy Cox imposed a set of roadblocks to voter registration drives, disallowing all bundled registration sheets, barring groups from helping voters fill out the complex forms, outlawing photocopying of forms (necessary for groups to track if voters are rejected), and preventing anyone from collecting a form who is not “deputized” by the state. Cox is, like her former Senator Zell Miller, a nominal Democrat. Like Zell, she seems to have a deepseated fear of a Black majority within their own party.

Luckily, a state judge could smell the old Jim Crow tactics a mile away and slapped down most of Cox’s anti-voter tricks as unconstitutional.

But ultimately, it’s not about race or even party. Registration blockades are simply a new front in the class war. Registering to vote is rapidly turning into an exclusive privilege of the privileged. The percentage of Americans with

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incomes under \$15,000 registered to vote has, for the first time in memory, dropped below 50% of those eligible. This is not, as the media have it, because low-income Americans don't give a damn about voting but because their applications are quietly chucked in the reject pile.

Or, when no one's looking, the registrations are simply erased from the voter rolls altogether, a very common occurrence in

Purgistan

If a poor or dark-skinned voter somehow makes it onto the registration list, staying there is another matter. The second prong of the Republican attack on democracy is the purge. The phony Florida felon purge of 2000 wasn't just an ugly moment in history, it was a practice run for the national GOP. The HAVA law *requires* Secretaries of State to "correct" their lists, an invitation to suspect purges.

Civil rights lawyers are getting hip to the faux "felon" purge game, so politicians are finding new grounds to scrub the lists. For example, in 2006, using the new HAVA powers, Kentucky's Republican Secretary of State discovered 8,000 residents of his state were also registered in another state, intent on voting twice. He wiped their names off the voter rolls - and did not even bother to notify these double-dippers. Oddly, he couldn't identify a single case of someone actually voting in two states, but hey, he stopped them before they could carry out their double-voting scheme.

Or maybe he didn't. It appears he only discovered that, in a nation of nearly a third of billion people, several have the same name and birthday. An artifact of slavery is the commonality of names among African-Americans. This makes Black voters especially vulnerable to purges based on simple database name matches. Did the Kentucky Secretary of State, a Republican, know he'd nail thousands of innocent Black voters? A judge did notice and reversed the purge as unconstitutional (albeit *after* the election).

There's as many ways to purge a voter list as a Secretary of State can dream up including purges for "suspect addresses" - the grounds for several hundred thousand challenges secretly orchestrated by the Republican National Committee in 2004. As you'll recall, a suspect address is one housing a Black soldier shipped to Baghdad or wherever our President sends our Hummers for a fill-up.

But the granddaddy of purges, the tried and true method first given a road

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test by Katherine Harris, the purge of alleged “felons,” is still with us. It’s not small stuff, either. In June 2006, Georgia’s Secretary of State Cox purged 80,000 voters as convicted felons. That’s stunning. Given that an ex-con registering in Georgia is committing a new felony, the state must have been in the grip of an unprecedented crime wave. Yet Cox busted not a single one of these recidivist criminals. On the day of the big purge, I flew down to Atlanta and confirmed that Cox had simply discovered too many citizens Voting While Black. In Georgia, it was a boll-weevil Democrat who did the purge work, but, as is usually the case, it’s the Republicans who grin and reap the electoral windfall.

The Uncle Wiggily Strategy

I *loved* to play Uncle Wiggily when I was five years old. Karl Rove loves to play it *now*. Except that *we* are his tokens, the pieces he moves around the elections board.

Let’s stop a moment and take a look at what’s going on here. First, they block the registration drives. Then, if you still get a registration form, they reject it. If you get past their rejection gauntlet, they purge your registration.

These are the first moves of what I call, The Uncle Wiggily Strategy. In this old 1910 board game, players have to get past bunny-eating squids and down through rabbit holes and out of traps and thickets to get to Dr. Possum’s house. It’s an obstacle course where winning is based on a roll of the dice.

Except, in the 2008 Election edition of Uncle Wiggily, the dice are loaded against players that are Hispanic, Black, poor or “itinerate” (i.e. students). It’s the crowd without too many passports, otherwise known as “heavily Democratic voters.”

For those looking for The Trick for 2008 – mucking with computer touch screens – forget it. It’s not one trick, it’s an entire game. The program is to create a series of hurdles in which, at each stage, another small percentage of colored voters (that is, the Blue ones), lose their rights.

So far we’ve talked about HAVA’s new roadblocks to registration. Yet, those voters that get registered and avoid the purge monsters are still a long way from Dr. Possum’s polling station. Today, there’s new obstacles between you and the voting booth. Then, if you do make it into the poll, there are several new, sophisticated barriers to getting a real ballot. Then, if you manage to get a ballot, there’s a darn good chance your vote simply won’t get counted.

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Obstacle Course Democracy

Once voters get past the registration blockade and somehow cling on to the registry, there's still the matter of actually getting a ballot.

Some of the tricks are just raw. More effective than giving "enemy" voters suspect touch-screens voting machines is to give them none at all. In 2004, in Chavez County, New Mexico, Republicans placed the only early voting station in a white shopping center, an hour's drive from the Hispanic workers. In Jacksonville, the one station was simply too small to accommodate the busloads of Black voters from the distant ghetto.

In Ohio, the "No Colored Voters" operation was far more scientific. In Chapter 4, we calculated with grim accuracy that Democrats lost 85,950 votes to long lines. What we've learned since our first edition, thanks to the stellar sleuthing of investigators Bob Fritakis and Harvey Wasserman, is that Republican operatives deliberately *removed* one out four voting machines from key Democratic precincts, guaranteeing six and seven hour waits.

ID: Can you prove that you are you?

Now that you've made it to the polling station, *show me your ID, buddy.*

Are you *you*? Can you prove it?

Andrew Young, the former Atlanta mayor said, "requiring ID can help poor people." Martin Luther King called Young, "my favorite Republican." He's not mine. Young is on the board of Barrick Gold Mining of Canada – he took George Bush Sr.'s post, one of the world's top-paying board memberships. I don't know which poor owners of Barrick's gold mines he polled to reach his conclusion; but in Louisiana, African-American voters, according to a Justice Department survey, are only one-fifth as likely as white voters to have the photo ID that would qualify them to vote under proposed legislation. And that survey was taken before their IDs got washed away by Hurricane Katrina.

I'm not going to repeat the stories [see Chapter 4] of the games that can be played with ID to knock out voters of the wrong racial or political tint, just to remind you that 300,000 voters were turned away from polls because of a challenge to their ID in 2004. (Notably, none of this crew of "illegal" voters was charged with attempting to vote illegally.) Since the 2004 test run of ID disenfranchisement tricks, twelve states, including Louisiana and Florida, every one a presidential swing state, have passed or about to pass new photo ID require-

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ment laws, quadrupling the number of voters getting carded. Undoubtedly, this will then quadruple the number of voters rejected at the polls to 1.2 million.

If you have any doubt about who these laws are aimed at, just look at whom the law does *not* apply to. Some states with tough ID requirements (most states have none) allow what I call the 'Good Ol' Boy exemption.' Alabama, for example, gives a voter without any ID a ballot if he's "identified by two poll workers," as in, "Oh, that's Clem, he's a good ol' boy - just give him a ballot." If you aren't in Clem's club, well, buzz off.

Provisionally Caged

You've jumped past the man-eating registrars, waited two hours in line and finally get your ballot. But it's *provisional*, that HAVA-created placebo ballot meant to fool you into thinking you have a vote.

Not everyone gets a fake-o ballot. Provisional balloting was almost unheard-of in suburbs except for voters with "unusual" names, as the Brennan Center politely puts it. For example, John Brakey of the Arizona poll-watching group AuditAZ told us that on Election Day 2004, "One voter had the name Juarez. The poll workers looked it up as a 'w' and then pushed him over to a provisional." Brakey recorded one after another Hispanic getting the Brown-ballot provisional treatment. He filed a complaint with the Secretary of State who was too busy running the Bush for Re-election campaign to act on his legal action.

Most important, 1.1 million of the provisional ballots were rejected under whatever arbitrary rules the Blackwells could dream up. Those ballots could have been saved, and at least three state presidential races overturned against Bush, but the Democratic party stood down its attorneys, believing it wouldn't "make a difference" in the outcome of 2004. Maybe not, but it *will* make a difference in 2008. Now that Republicans know they won't be challenged over their provisional gaming, you can count on provisional ballots and rejections doubling.

Of course, some may try to avoid the long lines and provisional ballots by mailing in their ballot. But Uncle Wiggily doesn't always read his mail. As a record three-quarters of a million absentee ballots were rejected in 2004 without a peep from the national Democratic Party, the Rove-bots will be thinking of new ways to dump them in the dead-letter file. For example, HAVA requires states to demand ID from new voters who didn't provide verified ID when registering. That's just about every Black and Brown voter registered in those

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church-sponsored drives. If the absentee ballot is mailed in without proof of identity or, in some states, citizenship, the ballots will be tossed out when challenged. And believe me, they'll be challenged.

That's because, at the heart of the rise in rejected absentee and provisional ballots, will be the "caging lists," the secret scrub sheets that the RNC used in 2004 to challenge voters.

Will the Republicans use these racially poisoned hit sheets again? After BBC TV uncovered this smelly plan to whack Black voters by the hundreds of the thousands, US media reacted with deafening silence. In most states, the challenge game went unchallenged, so you can bet they'll do it again adding "suspect citizenship status" to their "suspect address" lists. Hispanic soldiers in Baghdad will be twice as likely to have their mail-in votes blown away.¹

Don't Count on It

You're halfway through the shoots and ladders of the voting gameboard, safe in that voting booth, hold your breath, close your eyes and make a choice. Now the real fun begins. You know you voted, but does the machine know? As they found out in the Pueblos of New Mexico, you can pull the lever until your arm hurts and punch that card in Ohio harder than Muhammed Ali and still you're recorded as an "undervote" - no choice made. Or in the county offices the optical scanner finds your ballot "unreadable." Oddly, as we've explained, this spoilage happens almost exclusively (88% of the time) in minority and low-income areas.

And it will happen again, but with a digital twist. As touchscreen voting replaces democracy, spoilage will take a new form: the machine that jammed, that zapped and sent your vote to outer space, the unfortunate accidental breakdowns that, as we saw in Florida in 2002 only happened with computers in Black precincts.

1. I must acknowledge that Florida Democratic Party lawyers did go to court to scream bloody murder about the challenge lists. As a journalist, I couldn't give them the help they requested, but I sure as hell can applaud efforts to protect voters' civil rights. Intriguingly, Howard Dean's first act as Party Chairman was to hire Greg Moore out of the NAACP Voter Protection Fund to work on these issues, a sign that signals from the ground are finally reaching the dinosaur's brain.

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Just because I've said that touchscreen voting isn't Danger #1, doesn't mean it isn't a threat. And the biggest threat is not in suspect software (which you have good reason to lose sleep over), but in the oldest trick in the book - machines meant to confuse voters, frustrate them, or simply don't work in selected precincts. They practiced this in 2002, they perfected in 2004 and 2006, and they're ready to increase the breakdown factor in 2008. It will be an "accident." It always is an "accident."

But it's not all grim. Because of crusading groups like Voter Action New Mexico, I actually expect to see a decline in the number of unrecorded votes ("undervotes") and ruined ballots ("spoilage") in 2008 compared to 2004. The trend downward in spoilage should save half a million votes, not a bad return on activist efforts spent. So we don't lose'm all - but we ain't won it yet.

Democracy in Box: Dangers Down the Wire

We've made it past the registration roadblocks, jumped the provisional ballot turnstile, hope we've not been "spoiled," but then we still have to total up the votes.

With all the panic about touch-screen voting, not many voters realize that most computerization - and the opportunity for shenanigans - is happening "down the wire." You may vote on a paper ballot with a cool in-precinct scanner. But the vote is *tabulated* on a computer receiving a message from the scanner.

The good old system of calling in the vote to government offices with cameras rolling is pretty much defunct. Now the vote count is privatized, proprietary and secretive. And sometimes, they make errors, like leaving John Kerry's votes off some precinct totals as we saw on the tab sheet reproduced in Chapter 4. We hope our vote influences these privateers but, *quien sabe?* Don't worry: I'm sure these contractors are as committed to democracy as our contractors in Iraq. But You Can't Recount if You Don't Count in the First Place

The fight over the "recount" of the Florida vote of 2000 was not, in fact, to recount ballots, but to force officials to look again at the "spoiled" or allegedly "blank" ballots that were never counted in the first place. Like the eyebrow-raising 27,000 "blank" votes for President from the Black precincts of Jacksonville. Robots counted read those ballots, but humans could have (if only the Supreme Court had allowed it). Florida's eliminated that problem ... by eliminating the requirement in the law to automatically recount ballots in close races. They had

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to eliminate the recount because the touchscreen machines don't produce paper that can be recounted.

No paper, no paper to review. Lawsuits to force a "recount" in electronic races are sad acts of self-delusion: you can't recount electrons. We should all be grateful that Thomas Jefferson wrote the Bill of Rights on paper. Had it been recorded only on a single touch-screen computer, Dick Cheney would be telling us the Bill of Rights begins with the Second Amendment. You can have voting without paper, but not democracy.

Nationwide paper elections are feasible, reliable and cheap: forty million Mexicans voted for President by paper ballot in July 2006. Of course, that election was stolen, blatantly, grossly, violently. Which brings up the single biggest problem of relying on paper ballots: you have to *count* them.

In a little-noticed ruling, the New Mexico Supreme Court smacked Gov. Richardson for refusing to recount the ballots for President. Not counting the votes is unconstitutional. But their ruling came two years after the fact. Richardson said it didn't matter. Didn't matter to *whom*, Bill?

I admit, had Richardson agreed to a recount, which would have certainly handed New Mexico to John Kerry, those black-robed bandits called the Supreme Court majority would have figured out a way to overturn it. Fine then, make them steal it. If they know you won't demand a re-count, they won't count the votes in the first place. And that's what will happen in the New Mexico in 2008 and Arizona, Nevada, Louisiana and Colorado where 2008 will be stolen.

So, what are you going to do about it?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Palast turned his skills to journalism after two decades as a top investigator of corporate fraud and racketeering. A persona non-grata in the United States' mainstream media, Palast's reports have been exiled to BBC's top current affairs show, Newsnight, and Britain's Guardian newspaper. He is also the author of **The Best Democracy Money Can Buy: The Truth About Corporate Cons, Globalization, and High-Finance Fraudsters** (Pluto, 2004), and **Democracy and Regulation: How The Public Can Govern Essential Services** (with Jerrold Oppenheim and Theo MacGregor – United Nations-ILO/Pluto Press, 2003).



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