

How to lose a million votes

By Greg Palast

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In the 2000 presidential election, 1.9 million Americans cast ballots that no one counted. “Spoiled votes” is the technical term. The pile of ballots left to rot has a distinctly dark hue: About 1 million of them – half of the rejected ballots – were cast by African Americans although black voters make up only 12 percent of the electorate.

This year, it could get worse.

These ugly racial statistics are hidden away in the mathematical thickets of the appendices to official reports coming out of the investigation of ballot-box monkey business in Florida from the last go-round.

How do you spoil 2 million ballots? Not by leaving them out of the fridge too long. A stray mark, a jammed machine, a punch card punched twice will do it. It's easy to lose your vote, especially when some politicians want your vote lost.

While investigating the 2000 ballot count in Florida for BBC Television, I saw firsthand how the spoilage game was played – with black voters the predetermined losers.

Florida's Gadsden County has the highest percentage of black voters in the state – and the highest spoilage rate. One in 8 votes cast there in 2000 was never counted. Many voters wrote in “Al Gore.” Optical reading machines rejected these because “Al” is a “stray mark.”

By contrast, in neighboring Tallahassee, the capital, vote spoilage was nearly zip; every vote counted. The difference? In Tallahassee's white-majority county, voters placed their ballots directly into optical scanners. If they added a stray mark, they received another ballot with instructions to correct it.

In other words, in the white county, make a mistake and get another ballot; in the black county, make a mistake, your ballot is tossed.

The U.S. Civil Rights Commission looked into the smelly pile of spoiled ballots and concluded that, of the 179,855 ballots invalidated by Florida officials, 53 percent were cast by black voters. In Florida, a black citizen was 10 times as likely to have a vote rejected as a white voter.

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But let's not get smug about Florida's Jim Crow spoilage rate. Civil Rights Commissioner Christopher Edley, recently appointed dean of Boalt Hall School of Law at UC Berkeley, took the Florida study nationwide. His team discovered the uncomfortable fact that Florida is typical of the nation.

Philip Klinkner, the statistician working on the Edley investigations, concluded, "It appears that about half of all ballots spoiled in the U.S.A. – about 1 million votes – were cast by nonwhite voters."

This "no count," as the Civil Rights Commission calls it, is no accident. In Florida, for example, I discovered that technicians had warned Gov. Jeb Bush's office well in advance of November 2000 of the racial bend in the vote-count procedures.

Herein lies the problem. An apartheid vote-counting system is far from politically neutral. Given that more than 90 percent of the black electorate votes Democratic, had all the "spoiled" votes been tallied, Gore would have taken Florida in a walk, not to mention fattening his popular vote total nationwide. It's not surprising that the First Brother's team, informed of impending rejection of black ballots, looked away and whistled.

The ballot-box blackout is not the monopoly of one party. Cook County, Ill., has one of the nation's worst spoilage rates. That's not surprising. Boss Daley's Democratic machine, now his son's, survives by systematic disenfranchisement of Chicago's black vote.

How can we fix it? First, let's shed the convenient excuses for vote spoilage, such as a lack of voter education. One television network stated as fact that Florida's black voters, newly registered and lacking education, had difficulty with their ballots. In other words, blacks are too dumb to vote.

This convenient racist excuse is dead wrong. After that disaster in Gadsden, Fla., public outcry forced the government to change that black county's procedures to match that of white counties. The result: near zero spoilage in the 2002 election. Ballot design, machines and procedure, says statistician Klinkner, control spoilage.

In other words, the vote counters, not the voters, are to blame. Politicians who choose the type of ballot and the method of counting have long fine-tuned the spoilage rate to their liking.

It is about to get worse. The ill-named "Help America Vote Act," signed by President Bush in 2002, is pushing computerization of the ballot box.

California decertified some of Diebold Corp.'s digital ballot boxes in response to fears that hackers could pick our next president. But the known danger of black-box voting is that computers, even with their software secure, are vulnerable to low-tech spoilage games: polls opening late, locked-in votes, votes lost in the ether.

And once again, the history of computer-voting glitches has a decidedly racial bias.

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Florida's Broward County grandly shifted to touch-screen voting in 2002. In white precincts, all seemed to go well. In black precincts, hundreds of African Americans showed up at polls with machines down and votes that simply disappeared.

Going digital won't fix the problem. Canada and Sweden vote on paper ballots with little spoilage and without suspicious counts.

In America, a simple fix based on paper balloting is resisted because, unfortunately, too many politicians who understand the racial bias in the vote-spoilage game are its beneficiaries, with little incentive to find those missing 1 million black voters' ballots.

Greg Palast is the author of "The Best Democracy Money Can Buy - The New Expanded Election Edition" from which this article is taken. For more information, visit www.GregPalast.com. An excerpt from The Best Democracy Money Can Buy is published at coldtype.net