

ONLINE JOURNAL™

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2002 elections: Republican voting machines, election irregularities, and "way-off" polling results

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November 8, 2002

"The Republicans will never give up their voting machines," said a top Republican party official to Charlie Matulka, the Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate seat in Nebraska. This statement was in response to Charlie's very public protest against the conflict-of-interest inherent in the candidacy of Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE). Hagel has held top executive positions (and still has investments) in companies that owned the machines that counted the vote in Nebraska this election and last.

Republicans dominate the voting machine business. So, I expected the Republicans to take back the Senate... amid reports of voting machine "irregularities" in several states and polling results that didn't come close to election outcomes. And with billions of dollars at stake, who could resist the temptation to tweak results? It's duck soup.

Dr. Rebecca Mercuri, the nation's leading expert in voting machine technology, says, "Any programmer can write code that displays one thing on a screen, records something else, and prints yet another result." But they do make mistakes as we know from the multitude of reports in this election and past ones. Dr. Mercuri's real fear is that one day the "irregularities" will go away, as programmers learn their clandestine craft all too well.

Then how can we tell if the "fix was in?" An examination of exit polling and pre-election polling versus election results could raise a few red flags.

We can't use Voter News Service (VNS) this year. VNS is a top-secret private consortium owned by ABC News, The Associated Press, CBS News, CNN, Fox News, and NBC News that has "projected" election night winners since 1964. VNS collapsed camp on election day due to technical problems... they said. Or was it the glare of publicity since the 2000 presidential election that brought the charade to an end? Questions have been raised since its inception, that VNS was a cover for election day vote rigging or other shenanigans. And it was strange that when VNS management made its announcement on Tuesday, they didn't make a big deal over how the shutdown affected the 64,000 temporary employees they claim they hired for this election.

Anyway, that leaves us with pre-election polling to ponder. An intensive effort to review and interpret that data is currently underway by Bev Harris and her staff at Talion.com.

Meanwhile, I called John Zogby of the highly respected Zogby International. I asked him if over the years he had noticed increased variation between pre-election predictions and election results. Zogby said that he didn't notice any big problems until this year. Things were very different this time.

"I blew Illinois. I blew Colorado (and Georgia). And never in my life did I get New Hampshire wrong...but I blew that too." Or did he?

This year might instead be a repeat of the 2000 presidential election, when the polls accurately predicted the winner (Gore), but the voting system in Florida collapsed under the weight of voting machine failure, election day chicanery, and outright disenfranchisement of thousands of black voters by Republican state officials.

And for those who believed that the new election reform law does anything to protect the security of your vote...think again. The federal standards to be developed and implemented as a result of the new law will be VOLUNTARY. What Congress really did was to throw \$2.65 billion dollars at the states, so that they could lavish it on a handful of private companies that are controlled by ultra-conservative Republicans, foreigners, and felons.

Let's take a moment to look back rather than forward. In the last several decades the rich have gotten richer and the poor poorer. This is not a formula for a conservative groundswell. Yet both conservative Democrats and right wing Republicans have long enjoyed success at the polls. While, most of Europe still uses paper ballots, voting machines have been in America since 1889. The use of computers in voting technology began around 1964. Today, less than 2% of the American electorate use hand-counted paper ballots.

The question is...have elections in America been rigged to slowly, but surely shift power to the right? In the secretive world of voting machine companies, anything is possible.

The sad fact is that the legitimacy of government in the United States will remain in question as long as over 98% of the vote is tabulated by machines that can be easily rigged, impossible to audit, and owned by a handful of private companies. Until we get rid of those voting machines, democracy in America may be a distant memory.

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