

Commentary: Every vote counts, but is every vote counted?

'Stealing America' is year's scariest movie

By Martin A. Grove

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Voting in Ohio in 2004.

Scary "Stealing:" The year's scariest movie isn't, as you might expect, a horror film, a slasher thriller or a comic book driven monster fantasy.

No, top honors in the scary film department definitely go to Dorothy Fadiman's all-too-real documentary "Stealing America: Vote by Vote," opening Aug. 1 in New York and Aug. 15 in L.A., followed by a national rollout via Direct Cinema

Limited. While a good horror genre movie will keep you on the edge of your seat, "Stealing" will send you out of the theater terrified for the future of democracy in America. In examining U.S. elections going back to 1998, the film reveals just how widespread election altering "glitches" have been and still are.

What's scary here is that we've all grown up hearing that we should always vote because every vote counts. What we've never really thought about before is whether every vote is actually counted. Fadiman's film certainly leaves us wondering about that as it presents case after case of voting machinery that's known to have displayed on-screen votes for candidates the voters pushing those buttons did not select as their choice. Besides the vote flipping problem, Fadiman also focuses on numerous mechanical breakdowns that conveniently reduced the number of votes that could be made at a location as well as instances when too few voting machines were available from the start, thereby forcing voters -- typically those in less affluent areas -- to wait for nine hours or more to cast their votes or, even worse, to find after waiting all those hours that the polls had closed and they could not participate at all.

Produced and directed by Dorothy Fadiman, "Stealing" was executive produced by Mitchell Block and James Fadiman and is narrated by Peter Coyote. Among the many experts who appear in the film are Ohio state senator Bob Hagan; activist-author Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.; investigative journalist Charles Lewis; former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Paul Craig Roberts; Johns Hopkins Information Security Institute director Dr. Avi Rubin; and international polling authority John Zogby.

The issues Fadiman focuses on are ones that most people probably don't even think of as being widespread problems in the U.S. today, but unfortunately they are. After an early look at "Stealing" -- which should be a must-see movie for anyone who votes and, particularly for Academy members voting in the best documentary feature category -- I was eager to learn more about the situation from Fadiman. Her past films include the Oscar nominated 1992 short subject "When Abortion Was Illegal: Untold Stories" and the Emmy Award winning 1995 production "From Danger to Dignity: The Fight for Safe Abortion." When we spoke I also had an opportunity to discuss the ins and outs of election fraud with Ion Sancho, an expert at uncovering such problems, who was appointed by the Florida Supreme Court to count votes in the disputed 2000 presidential election and who comments about that in detail in the film.

"Hopefully, it also left you wanting to do something," Fadiman replied when I told her how "Stealing" had left me horrified. "We have a web address with a huge amount of action items raging from simple tasks to major opportunities (to change things)." You can check it out by clicking here www.StealingAmericaTheMovie.com/GetActive.

Asked how the film came about, she told me, "I was working at the time (of the 2004 Presidential election between George Bush and John Kerry) in Florida as a volunteer and doing a number of different things. As I was being oriented in Southern Florida I was told to be aware that votes were flipping. People were reporting people voting for Kerry and getting Bush on the screen. I (was told) I should be aware of that, but not tell people about it because it might deter them from voting. That, of course, troubled me. Indeed, when I worked at the polls that is exactly what I found. People were reporting that they'd vote for Kerry and get Bush, which was happening throughout South Florida. I wasn't sure if it was just that part of the country, but as a filmmaker I began to think this might be a story worth telling."

Flying home, she continued, "the attorneys and (others on the plane) were talking about the same thing. That was the beginnings of the film. I started making interviews and basically sketching out a film about vote flipping. But when I entered that realm and began to do my research I found a wide spectrum of irregularities, of disenfranchisements, of exit poll discrepancies and the list is fairly long. I realized that if I was going to take on this subject that what I'd seen -- horrible though it was -- was just one piece of the puzzle."

From there Fadiman began speaking to people who'd been studying the issue, in many cases going back to the 2000 Presidential election in which George W. Bush very narrowly defeated Al Gore after a hotly contested and very controversial recount in Florida. "I realized that there was this budding election integrity movement, which hadn't gone very far yet, but one by one people around the country were starting to inform themselves, talk to each other and try to talk to their election officials," she said.

"What I (found) over the last three and a half years while making the film is that when I first started I could barely find any interviewees who would talk about it. By the first two years (into the project) I had people all over the country contacting me and saying, 'I'd love to tell you my story. I'd love to tell you what I know.'"

As she began to assemble all these contributions of election horror stories, Fadiman found there were "two pieces to the puzzle. It was worse than I had imagined. I couldn't have imagined it because most of it is insidious. And that's a very important point when you're looking at this puzzle. Most of the pieces are difficult to find. If you find them, it's difficult to find what they fit together with. And even when you start to put it together it's difficult to figure out what it looks like because for the most part mainstream media has not been reporting this issue. The data and the information that the people who are doing research have wanted and needed has been very difficult for them to get. And so it moved from being kind of a horror story to being kind of a mystery story of how do you put this together in such a way that it starts to make sense?"



Voting in Ohio in 2004.

By the time she was into well into production, Fadiman said, "We realized there were these little pockets of break-throughs. Across the country, a few arrests were being made here and there. In the state of New Mexico they were moving toward paper ballots (instead of electronic voting because people) went to the legislature and to the Governor. New Mexico now has paper ballots.

And (with) the exit poll discrepancies which seemed so strange when they were first being charted and examined, more and more people have been piecing together exit poll discrepancies in other elections.

"And, indeed, it happened again in 2006. So what we're moving toward in 2008 and beyond is much more awareness about the things that can go wrong, the things that may go wrong and the feeling that people if they're informed will have a voice. So they don't have to be victims. They don't have to be passive. They don't have to feel disenfranchised and furious and not vote, but they can begin to speak out."

Are these things that are going wrong on their own or is there some reason that they're going wrong? "That's a very complicated and interesting question," she acknowledged. "There have been whistle blowers who've come forward and in the film we interview several of those. These are people who say, 'So-and-so asked me to do something, which clearly changed the result or would have changed the result of an election.' When these whistle blowers have attempted to tell their stories through legal means and political means and legislative means and congressional means for the most part they've been stopped."

One of the reasons she made the film, Fadiman explained, was "to give these whistle blowers a platform, a stage, an opportunity to tell their stories and you can see how they were sidelined. We're counting on the fact that public interest will move these stories forward."

One of those whistle blowers, Ion Sancho, was with Fadiman when we spoke and told me, "In 2005 I authorized independent testing of election equipment that my jurisdiction used, which was supplied by the Diebold Election corporation, now known as Premiere (Premiere Election Solutions) -- they had to change their name. Despite all the promises of the vendors that the equipment was completely secure, could never be tampered with (and) would leave evidence of any such tampering on an audit trail, we found that all of these promises were in fact not correct. The reason I actually undertook the test was the fact that in Alameda, Calif. in 2004 Diebold was found guilty of lying to election officials and was fined \$2.6 million. Diebold did not tell me as a user of their product that this had occurred. I read about it on the Internet."

Through the tests he authorized, Sancho said he found that, "You could actually alter the outcome of elections and not be detected. Rather than saying, 'Wow, that's a great discovery, let's fix it,' they attacked me, severed their contract with me and then I found that the other two certified voting machine vendors in the state (of Florida) also blackballed me and refused to sell me any equipment necessary to conduct the 2006 election.

"Now let me tell you I have an excellent reputation. I've been in the field for 20 years. The election that I conducted in 2000 was so clean that it was considered one of the nation's best election jurisdictions and the Florida Supreme Court appointed me to be the technical advisor to the recount in 2000, which the (U.S.) Supreme Court stopped."

The issue, Sancho emphasized, "is we have an elections process controlled by private companies who place their private corporate profits and interests over that of the public interest. Elections are the most public of all the activities that we have in our self-governance and we have outsourced it to private companies who take umbrage and attack anyone who reveals the deficiencies of the product.

"Partisan elections administration is also a critical element in this because I witnessed Katharine Harris, who was in charge of the Bush campaign in the state of Florida counting the votes, which was the same thing that happened in Ohio. So I don't think there's any coincidence that partisan elections administration had some influence on these irregularities."

Martin Grove hosts movie coverage on the broadband television channel www.UpdateHollywood.com