

Democracy on the Ballot

What's left of American democracy is on the Nov. 6 ballot, with the Republicans hoping that a combination of voter suppression and attack ads bought by billionaires will secure the White House and Congress. Investigative reporter Greg Palast describes the strategy in a new book reviewed by Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

With opinion polls heading into Tuesday's election a dead heat, the decision could come down to a controversial counting of ballots in a replay of Florida 2000. That would put the focus on how Americans vote, a story that has so far been a subtext to this presidential race.

The news media tend to concentrate on the horserace rather than the complicated issues surrounding how the winner will be determined. But the public is evidently interested. It has catapulted to bestseller status a humorous new book that probes the questionable techniques developed over the past 20 years to influence the outcome of national elections.

The humor to be sure is black. Having taught statistics at Indiana University, author Greg Palast is well aware that a dry political science study of the subject would not have sold nearly 20,000 copies in its first four weeks. Illustrated with a 48-page centerfold of Ted Rall comics, and with an Introduction and a chapter by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., *Billionaires & Ballot Bandits: How to Steal an Election in 9 Easy Steps* (Seven Stories Press, 284 pps.) reached the top 10 on the New York Times list. Clearly outraged, Palast's flippancy, however, risks taking the edge off the issue's deadly seriousness.

His investigation reveals a systematic effort, bankrolled by some of the nation's richest people, to deny votes to some of the country's poorest. Palast's central claim is that it's a campaign to revive the voting restrictions of the pre-civil rights era.

"Forget all the baloney about democracy you heard in the sixth grade from Mrs. Gordon about the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth Amendment, and the Voting Rights Act," he writes. "Ballot-box apartheid remains as American as apple pie."

Palast is a hybrid private investigator, reporter and social satirist. A University of Chicago graduate in economics, Palast was an investigator for the federal government and labor unions, leading the government's largest ever racketeering case against the Long Island Power Co. that won \$4.8 billion from a jury. Noting the sorry state of investigative journalism, he turned his skills to reporting in the late Nineties for the BBC and the Observer newspaper in Britain.

Palast first waded into the electoral morass in Florida 2000, the most controversial American election since Tilden-Hayes in 1876. That was decided in a backroom, exchanging withdrawal of Federal occupation troops from the South for Hayes' victory.

Palast has a knack for prying into backrooms. And he's been thrown out of a few too. He wormed into the offices of Jeb Bush and Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris to find evidence that Florida swept enough questionable felons from the rolls to influence an election decided by 537 votes.

Palast, for instance, obtained a computer disk from Harris' office listing 91,000 purged felons. He says he and his team checked each one and none had been convicted of a crime. He also got hold of a confidential letter from Gov. Bush's office ordering election officials to knowingly break state law by purging from the rolls felons who had been convicted in other states, not in Florida, before moving there.

Palast makes a persuasive case that so-called anti-voter fraud measures are themselves a fraud because voting fraudulently, a felony, practically doesn't exist. He's says on average only six people a year are convicted of it. "A half-dozen jerks convicted of voting illegally. In the whole country but in the Voter-Fraud Hysteria Factory these six become so threatening and dangerous that they will be used to take away the vote from six million."

That's the number, 5,901,814 to be exact, of voters that his study of U.S. Election Assistance Commission records show were illegally denied their ballot in the 2008 election.

Despite this, Palast says Republican governments in swing states like Florida, Arizona and Ohio keep trying to keep "fraudulent voters" from voting, for the other party. "To win an election, you need votes," he writes. "Or just as good,

you need to take away the votes of your opponent.”

In the book’s Introduction, Kennedy quotes Karl Rove writing in the Wall Street Journal as saying that “if you can get rid of one-quarter of one percent of black voters in this country you can turn the election.”

So Palast argues in *Billionaires and Ballot Bandits* that state Republican parties have indeed set out to reduce the Democratic vote in nine ways: by purging, caging, spoiling, prestidigitizing, tossing, rejecting, blocking and ejecting blacks, Hispanics, Jews and students who mostly vote Democratic from the voting rolls.

Purging is removing voters from the rolls by demanding IDs (which poor Democratic voters are less likely to have) or declaring them dead, doubly registered, legally insane or felons in states where they aren’t allowed to vote.

The ID issue has gotten the most attention. Palast quotes the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University as saying that five million seniors, blacks, Hispanics and youth will be denied their vote because they lack proper government ID. But what is proper government ID? Student ID cards from the state university have been rejected in Wisconsin and last week the Tennessee Supreme Court had to rule that photo library cards were acceptable.

Caging is sending mass mailings labeled Do Not Forward. Returned letters are used to strike names from the rolls even if it’s a student or soldier temporarily living away from home or if the address has a typo. Caging is illegal under federal law. but Palast shows it still happens. “Go to Iraq, lose your vote,” he writes. “Mission accomplished, Mr. Bush.”

Spoiling involves rejecting ballots that aren’t “correctly” filled out, for example, if the black dot goes slightly beyond the circle or if a chad isn’t completely punched out, even though courts have ruled it’s the voters’ intention that counts.

Prestidigitizing is when votes are dropped from unreliable voting machines put in the poorest and likely Democratic precincts. Tossing involves throwing out provisional ballots even for bogus reasons.

The evidence Palast presents for each of these dirty tricks is credible: leaked documents, government statistics, academic studies, and interviews with election officials, experts and disenfranchised voters. While some Democratic officials are guilty of these maneuvers Palast argues the vast majority are done by Republicans.

And he doesn't stop there. He delves into the big money interests that he says are behind them. Top of his list are oil magnates Charles and David Koch, and Paul Singer, the vulture fund financier about whom Palast devoted his previous book, *Vulture's Picnic*.

Acting after the 2010 Citizens United Supreme Court decision allowed corporations to secretly give unlimited funds to political SuperPacs, these billionaires, according to Palast, have spent untold millions to influence elections. "What do these billionaires want? What do men who have everything want?" he asks. "Well, Congress, gift-wrapped, would be nice. The White House would be nicer."

They've funded the principal Republican SuperPacs, Restore Our Future and America, Committee for Our Children's Future, and Karl Rove's American Crossroads. The book builds the case that together these SuperPacs have funded the effort to suppress the Democratic vote on Tuesday. Their aim is get politicians elected who will change laws, regulations and policies benefitting their businesses, he says.

All this should be front page news, according to Palast, who lambasts American journalism for lacking the resources and the guts to take on the issue.

Though the book is well-documented it can't be the last or authoritative word. Only a major, nationwide congressional investigation into such allegations can get to the bottom of it and remove suspicions about American elections. It's a tall order given state-control of federal elections, the politics involved and the role Supreme Court-sanctioned SuperPacs are playing.

Kennedy calls these Pacs "treasonous." He says they're designed to "subvert American democracy and turn our country over to the moneyed aristocracy." And he warns, "We are now in a free fall toward old-fashioned oligarchy, that noxious thieving, tyrannical, oppressive species of government that America's original settlers fled Europe to escape."

If a very tight race on Tuesday indeed becomes Florida 2000 redux, the issues explored in this book could well become what everyone is at last talking about.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist based at the U.N. since 1990. He has written for the Boston Globe, the London Daily Telegraph, the Johannesburg Star, the Montreal Gazette, the Wall Street Journal and other newspapers. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com .
