Allegations of vote fraud in Ohio, Florida: Was the 2004 presidential election stolen?

The Editorial Board
24 November 2004

A number of Internet publications and critics of electronic voting procedures have raised serious questions about possible fraud in the 2004 presidential election. There have been no credible claims, as yet, that challenge Bush's margin of nearly four million in the popular vote. The allegations have focused more narrowly on the results in Ohio and Florida. Loss of either one of these states would have deprived Bush of his 286-252 edge in the Electoral College and tipped the election to Kerry, albeit as a minority president.

The starting point of many of the questions is the stark contrast between the exit polls, widely reported on the Internet throughout election day, and the vote totals subsequently reported after the polls closed. Kerry was reported leading comfortably in at least six states that he either subsequently lost—Florida, Ohio, Iowa, New Mexico—or carried by small margins—Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Exit polls are extremely accurate when conducted properly, because they eliminate the major uncertainty of conventional surveys—determining who will actually turn out—since they sample voters as they leave the polling place. As the results of the exit polls commissioned by AP and the television networks began to circulate, reported Robert Parry of www.consortiumnews.org, citing sources within the Bush campaign, top Bush aides were initially convinced that he was losing the election.

The most critical state was Ohio, where the Republican Party, in the weeks leading up to the election, made repeated threats to mount a large-scale voter-suppression campaign with challengers in hundreds of precincts in black and other working-class areas compelling voters to cast provisional ballots, whose validity would be subject to post-election scrutiny. The bulk of the 155,428 provisional ballots cast—more than Bush's margin of 136,000 in the state—were in heavily Democratic areas.

Besides the provisional ballots—whose tabulation is still going on—there were several well-publicized vote-tallying anomalies in Ohio, many of them documented by Professor Bob Fitrakis of Columbus State Community College, editor of the Columbus *Free Press*:

* Over 92,670 ballots in Ohio registered no presidential vote. The state is one of a handful that retains large numbers of punch card voting machines, like those which contributed to the Florida election debacle in 2000.

* Ohio state election officials—all Republican loyalists—reportedly cut back the supply of voting machines for inner-city precincts as much as 40 percent (i.e., three machines for precincts which had five in 2000), leading to long lines that discouraged many people from voting. This would have a disproportionate impact on low-income and minority workers, whose work schedules tend to be more strictly enforced.

* An electronic voting machine in Franklin County, Ohio (Columbus) added 3,893 votes for Bush. (It recorded 4,258 votes for Bush from 638 voters).

* At a precinct in Youngstown, Ohio, an electronic voting machine initially recorded a negative 25 million votes for Kerry.

* Officials of Warren County, Ohio, a heavily Republican area north of Cincinnati, decided to exclude observers and reporters from the vote-counting area. They sought to justify this flagrantly illegal action by citing warnings from the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security on alleged threats of terrorism.

In Florida there has been little evidence so far of specific acts of voter suppression or vote-tampering, but several statistical analysts have questioned the credibility of the overall vote totals, which showed a staggering increase of more than one million votes for Bush, compared to the 2000 election. In Florida, the Democrats posted their largest gain in total votes of any state, more than 700,000, but still lost Florida by nearly 300,000.

A study by the Quantitative Methods Research Team at the University of California at Berkeley—a group of sociology students and faculty headed by Professor Michael Hout—released results November 18 concluding that anomalies between Florida counties using touch-screen voting and those using other methods could not be explained statistically. Noting the higher-than-expected votes for Bush in three large Democratic counties, Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach, Hout said there were strong suspicions of vote-rigging.

"No matter how many factors and variables we took into consideration, the significant correlation in the votes for President Bush and electronic voting cannot be explained," he said. "The study shows that a county's use of electronic voting resulted in a disproportionate increase in votes for President Bush. There is just a trivial probability of evidence like this appearing in a population where the true difference is zero—less than once in a thousand chances."

A separate analysis of the county-by-county vote totals in Florida, by Utah mathematician Kathy Dopp, has been widely cited in Internet publications and blogs. Dopp's analysis also challenges the plausibility of the Bush vote totals, but draws exactly the opposite conclusion from the Berkeley study, finding that counties with optical scanners showed disproportionately higher Bush margins than counties with electronic voting.

Both www.consortiumnews.org and www.globalresearch.ca, the publication of Canadian professor Michel Chossudovsky, have noted that many Florida counties with lopsided Democratic majorities in terms of voter registration reported huge margins for Bush in the presidential vote. This objection carries little weight, however, since these counties are in the northern panhandle of the state, where the voting patterns are similar to elsewhere in the Deep South: the majority of voters are registered Democrats and elect Democrats for local office, but elect Republicans in statewide and federal elections. These same counties showed large majorities for Bush in the 2000 presidential election and for Republican Governor Jeb Bush in 2002.

Several readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* have sent letters citing these critical accounts of the 2004 vote and asking for our opinion. We do not dismiss such claims or deride them as "conspiracy theories," as the corporate-controlled media does. (The *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*

© World Socialist Web Site

and the *Washington Post* have all published prominent articles purporting to debunk the suggestions of vote fraud as baseless).

There is nothing illegitimate about suspecting illegal or even criminal activity on the part of an administration which came to power as the product of a political conspiracy in the 2000 elections and the anti-democratic intervention of the Supreme Court in the Florida election crisis, and has ruled by methods of conspiracy and provocation ever since.

The Bush White House seized on the September 11 terrorist attacks—in which the role of US intelligence agencies has still not been seriously investigated—as an all-purpose pretext to implement a right-wing agenda, and above all as the basis for wars in Afghanistan and now Iraq. A dirty tricks campaign in the 2004 campaign, or even systematic manipulation of electronic voting and computerized vote tabulation, would be entirely consistent with this political record.

In the 2000 election crisis, the WSWS was at the forefront of the struggle to expose the Republican theft of the elections and to condemn the capitulation of the Democratic Party to the unconstitutional and antidemocratic intervention by the US Supreme Court to suppress vote-counting in Florida, which would likely have proven that Al Gore had defeated Bush in that state, winning the Electoral College in addition to his victory in the popular vote.

The WSWS published dozens of articles examining the issues in the post-election struggle in Florida. Despite fundamental political differences with the Gore campaign, we called on working people, as a matter of principle, to oppose the awarding of the presidency to Bush on the basis of a Supreme Court decision which trampled on basic democratic rights—spearheaded by Justice Antonin Scalia, who flatly declared that the American people had no constitutional right to vote for president at all.

To prove charges of a stolen election in 2004, however, requires more than combining references to 2000 with allegations of undetectable computer manipulation or vote-tampering. There must be a serious and independent investigation of the entire vote. The WSWS will report on whatever findings emerge from ongoing efforts in that direction. But to this point, we find the claims that the election has been stolen unpersuasive. At best, a case can be made that Bush actually lost Ohio—the vote tally there will not be even be finalized until December 6—leaving him an Electoral College loser but a winner of the popular vote, with a majority of over three million. Under those conditions, to declare that John Kerry should rightfully be installed in the White House would be a political travesty.

In our view, those who seek to center their political assessment of the 2004 elections on charges of fraud are clutching at straws. We have no reason to question the sincerity of their opposition to the Bush administration. But they are shying away from the bitter truth: a majority of those Americans who voted in the November 2 election cast ballots for George W. Bush. This included tens of millions of working people. The task of opponents of Bush's policies of imperialist war and reaction is to conduct a serious political autopsy of this event, which represents, above all, a colossal political failure of the Democratic Party.

On November 23, the *New York Times* published results of the first major post-election survey of American public opinion. While such polls give only a distorted picture of the thinking of broad masses of working people, the findings of the *Times* poll confirmed one indisputable fact: Bush won reelection despite the opposition of the majority of Americans to his policies on virtually every major issue. The *Times* stated: "The poll reflected the electoral feat of the Bush campaign this year. He won despite the fact that Americans disapproved of his handling of the economy, foreign affairs and the war in Iraq."

It would be more fitting to turn this assessment around, and use the poll results to measure the utter fiasco of the Kerry-Edwards campaign. The Democratic Party contrived to lose the presidential election to a man who, in addition to waging an unpopular war, alienating the vast majority of the people of the world, and presiding over the weakest four-year period of job growth since the Great Depression, is perhaps the most ignorant and intellectually limited individual to occupy the White House in nearly a century.

Bush won reelection, not because of a charismatic personality or mass support for his party and program, but because the so-called opposition party essentially defaulted. The Democratic Party campaign offered nothing that would rouse the masses of working people against the Bush administration. Kerry, married to a billionaire heiress, declared himself a capitalist and boasted of his opposition to wealth redistribution. His "jobs" program consisted of a few tax breaks to American corporations, and even this was to be subordinated to the preeminent Democratic Party demand: balancing the federal budget.

On the most critical issue in the election campaign, Kerry backed the continued US occupation of Iraq and criticized Bush more from the right—not sending enough troops, backing off from the initial assault on Fallujah last April—than from the left. Far from waging an intransigent struggle against a bankrupt and criminal administration, Kerry even banned most criticism of Bush at the Democratic National Convention which formally nominated him.

The result of this refusal to conduct any serious fight was demonstrated on November 2, when 40 to 45 percent of the population did not vote, even in an election supposedly characterized by high turnout and widespread voter interest. Tens of millions remain alienated from the electoral process.

Most of those who voted for Kerry did so, not out of any enthusiasm for the Democratic candidate and his program, but to express hatred for Bush and opposition to the war in Iraq. Some 56 million voted against Bush, but their passions found no echo in the Democratic Party leadership, which has few significant differences with Bush's policies.

In fact, if one reviews the whole course of the presidential election campaign, it is clear that the Democratic Party was deeply ambivalent about conducting any struggle at all. Only the emergence of Howard Dean as the early frontrunner, on the basis of opposition to the war in Iraq and a posture of open hostility towards Bush, convinced the Democratic Party leadership that it had to make at least a pretense of a serious effort.

In the course of December 2003 and January 2004, the Democratic Party establishment, backed by the media, moved swiftly to derail the Dean campaign and shift the nomination to Kerry, viewed as the safest alternative among the candidates then trailing Dean in the polls. After Kerry's victories in Iowa and New Hampshire, he became the frontrunner. From that point on, he dropped any flirtation with an antiwar posture—briefly adopted to combat Dean—and reverted to the position he had taken in the runup to the invasion, in which he backed the Bush administration's drive to war while calling for more efforts to win international support. In other words, Kerry supported the crime, but sought additional accomplices to ensure success.

Those who focus exclusively on the events of November 2 lose sight of the far more important political fact: the presidential election was manipulated by the US ruling elite, not merely on Election Day, but throughout the whole period leading up to it.

Kerry was installed as the Democratic nominee for one principal purpose: to insure that the legitimacy of the Iraq war would not become an issue in the presidential election. This proved largely successful. Kerry tried his best to avoid any discussion of the war, only turning to the question in mid-September, when the Democratic campaign faced a collapse in the polls which would have utterly discredited both the party and the entire electoral process.

The Democratic and Republican parties are not merely collections of like-minded individuals or associations of politicians seeking public office. They are, in a real, practical and not merely rhetorical sense, institutions which serve as instruments of the American ruling class. This

© World Socialist Web Site

class, which comprises less than one percent of the American population, exercises an effective political monopoly.

The central task confronting working people in the United States—to which the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party are devoted—is to break out of this political straitjacket and develop an independent mass movement to defend their own class interests. This necessarily requires a break with the Democratic Party and the building of a new political party of the working class, based on a socialist and international program.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site