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Rob Zaleski

Rob Zaleski: Voting glitches haunt statistician

By Rob Zaleski
 March 4, 2005

Brian Joiner wishes he could "just get over it."

He wishes he could ignore the thousands of reported voting irregularities that occurred in the Nov. 2 election, accept the fact that George W. is going to be around another four years and just hope that we haven't created even more enemies or fallen even deeper into debt by the time 2008 rolls around.

"I'm sure the Republicans would like me to forget all that stuff, just like they wanted everyone to forget all the strange things that happened in the 2000 election," the retired 67-year-old UW-Madison statistics professor said this week.

Well, sorry guys, but he can't.

There were, Joiner says, too many things that occurred on Nov. 2 that "still don't smell right." He can't just pretend everything is rosy, he says, when he reads that Steven Freeman, a respected University of Pennsylvania professor, says the odds of the exit polls in the critical states of Ohio, Florida and Pennsylvania all being so far off were about 662,000 to 1.

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Retired UW-Madison professor and Ohio volunteer Brian Joiner. Photo by David Sandell/The Capital Times



And since no one in the mainstream media has yet to provide a plausible explanation for such discrepancies - "investigative reporting essentially is just dead in this country," he groans - Joiner and many of his colleagues are going to continue to speak out and demand that government leaders provide some answers.

So that, at the very least, we don't find ourselves in the same situation in 2008.

But if the irregularities are as suspicious and troubling as he claims, why aren't John Kerry and other top Democrats making similar demands?

"Boy, I wish I knew," says Joiner, who was a volunteer observer for the Ohio recount in early December. Because you can sure as heck bet that Republicans would be screaming and demanding an investigation if Kerry had won under similar circumstances, he says.

"I think the Democrats read the tea leaves and think that people don't want to make a big fuss over this stuff. They'd just rather be quitters and move on."


Joiner knows full well some people will roll their eyes while reading this and dismiss him as yet another shoot-from-the-hip conspiracy nut.

Not quite.

In fact, he's among a group of prominent statisticians and academicians who co-authored a recent study that refutes a report by exit pollsters Edison and Mitofsky that errors on Nov. 2 were responsible for the unprecedented 5.5 percent discrepancy between the exit polls and the official results.

About Rob

Rob Zaleski is a 30-year veteran of the news business. His columns appear on Monday and Wednesday in the Communities section.

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The study, done on behalf of US Count Votes, a volunteer scientific research project, only disagrees with the Edison/Mitofsky findings but concludes that "the possible overall vote was substantially corrupted must be taken seriously" and urges a full investigation.

Does Joiner personally believe the election was stolen?

"I don't know, that's a very tough question," he says. "But it's not clear to me it wasn't, so it's a question of where the burden of proof is."

At the same time, Joiner says, he does believe the country's making a big mistake by relying so heavily on electronic voting machines.

"It's just too easy to hack those machines," he says. "And if they are hacked, how do we ever know?"

Joiner, incidentally, isn't the least bit surprised that the study - which was released - has been virtually ignored by the media. Neither is Bruce O'Dell, vice president of US Count Votes.

"I think the mainstream media - like most Americans brought up to be proud of our Democratic traditions - simply assume that elections are honestly counted in the United States," O'Dell says. "They discount anecdotal reports of election irregularities and believe that systematic corruption could occur - even though serious, systematic vulnerabilities both in voting equipment and in counting procedures have been documented."

He notes that when reports of widespread voting problems occurred in Ukraine last year, both local and international observers quickly concluded the election had been fair.

"But when precisely the same scenario occurred here, not only were the media not alarmed, they quickly labeled those who questioned the results as conspiracy theorists."

O'Dell says US Count Votes wants to develop "a single database of nation-wide election results, along with matching U.S. Census demographic information on the type of voting equipment in use."

Its ultimate goal "is to be able to gather and analyze data as it comes in on election day and to spot vote counting problems in time for candidates to request an investigation or recount - before they concede."

And it hopes to have such a system in place by 2006.

Kjell Doksum, another UW-Madison statistician, says that if US Count Votes accomplishes just one thing, it's that there's a "paper trail" for every vote cast in 2008.

"This is easy to achieve," he suggested in an e-mail.

"Start a rumor that the Democrats have the world's best hackers and are going to hack the machines the next time."

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