

ELECTION CONTROVERSY 2000: MEDIA COVERAGE OF VOTER PURGES IN FLORIDA

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While most Americans learned all about butterfly ballots and hanging chads following the 2000 election, very few have heard the story of large numbers of voters wrongly purged from the voter rolls. The story is particularly important both because the wrongly purged voters could have swung the election several times over and because the purge disproportionately disenfranchised African American voters. The purge went largely unreported in the United States. Why didn't the media bring this issue to the attention of the American people? In this article, I explore the media's (in)actions through the lens of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's media filtration theories.

The Story

Florida law states that those convicted of felonies within Florida lose their voting rights permanently. The results of the 1997 Miami mayoral election were overturned when it was discovered that large numbers of felons (as well as many non-residents) had voted. Florida passed legislation at that time requiring the state to hire a private contractor to make a database of all felons within the state and use it to purge the voter rolls.¹ These lists not only included felons but also other voters in the county based on the same (or similar) first and last names, birth dates, and genders.² The lists also included the felons' and non-felons' race and the felons' conviction date and state. These lists were distributed by Governor Jeb Bush's office to local election officials a few months before the 2000 election with instructions to remove these voters from the voter registration rolls.

Many local officials started noticing errors on the lists, for example a conviction date listed in the future. Some used the lists as they were, some tried to verify them, and others discarded them altogether.³ Following the 2000 election, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sued Florida, alleging that Florida had violated the voting rights of African Americans.⁴ The United States Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) opened an investigation into the matter and six months later published a report of its investigation, which was largely condemnatory of Governor Bush's office.

Beyond these basic facts, the story is mired in controversy. What is clear, however, is that large numbers of voters who had every right to vote ended up on these lists and off the voter rolls.

The Coverage

The big story of the Florida felon purge is that it did not become a big story. The most

aggressive investigator of the issue, independent journalist Greg Palast, claims that the mainstream U.S. media simply ignored and dismissed it. I did my own research into the matter, which largely confirmed Palast's assertion.⁵ I searched the articles of two of the nation's most reputable newspapers, *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, using a *LexisNexis* search engine.⁶

From what I have been able to find, *The New York Times* scarcely mentions the issue of voter purges in the months directly following the election. A *LexisNexis* search for the word "purge" turns up next to nothing in the Times, and even the extremely broad search using "African-American" or "black" and "Florida" for the time period between October 2000 and April 2001 yields few results, most of which refer to black leaders and generic allegations of problems at the polls. I found coverage of the specific issue of the felon purge in an op-ed article by Bob Herbert and a news article by Katharine Seelye months later, *after* the USCCR report on the subject was made public.⁷ Seelye's article appeared on page 16, and both in title and content focuses not on the fact of the matter--whether large numbers of legitimate voters were denied their right to vote--but instead on the politics of the panel and its report (A16). The article also pairs the majority opinion of the commission with opposition statements from dissenters on the panel and in the Governor's office.

Similar searches of the *Washington Post* yield two articles with more substantive coverage printed more prominently on pages one and three. Both articles were published, however, at roughly the same time as Seelye's article in the *Times* (May 31 and June 9, 2001), that is, at the time of the release of the USCCR report (Pierre, "Botched Name," "Rights Panel"). My searches found no mention of the issue until more than six months after the election. *The Post* does report the important (and by this time widely confirmed) fact that Florida purged at least 2000 felons whose voting right had been automatically restored by other states, a fact not mentioned by the *Times*.⁸ Neither paper reported that the Florida Supreme Court had twice warned Jeb Bush's office that it was not allowed to deny these out-of-state felons their voting rights.

The felon purge story was more fully investigated by local Florida papers, but for the most part they also published their findings long after the election. During the time that the nation waited for the outcome of the election, we saw story after story about hanging chads, recounts, and butterfly ballots. But no one was reporting on voter purges. No one except Greg Palast.

Palast is an American reporter who was working in the U.K. at the time of the Florida election. Almost immediately following the election, he began investigating and writing stories about the felon purge and other voting irregularities that disproportionately affected black voters (who in Florida voted 90% Democratic). His stories were published on the Internet at *Salon.com* and released in both print and television in the U.K., causing a sensation among the European public.

Palast's stories, collected and expanded upon in his book, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*, go beyond just what happened with the voter purges. He also investigated evidence that Jeb Bush and the Florida State Republicans knew that the purge was denying innocent citizens their voting rights ahead of time, that these officials were aware of the disproportionate effect of these

errors on African American (and hence Democratic) voters, and that they intentionally promoted more errors for this reason. Simply put, Palast argues that Jeb Bush rigged the election for his brother.

In *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*, Palast provides several examples of evidence that no American media sources discuss. For example, Palast obtained a copy of the contract Florida signed with Database Technologies (DBT) to assemble the purge lists (this document was originally confidential). DBT was paid \$2.3 million a year for a job which had previously been done by another firm for \$5700 (*Democracy* 44).⁹ The higher cost was supposedly justified because of rigorous verification done by calling all the individuals on the list to make sure they were being correctly matched. As officials at DBT would later admit to the US Civil Rights Commission and the *Washington Post*, this procedure was never done, and all checking was left to local election officials. According to Palast, DBT was told by the state that the cross-checks for which DBT was paid for were not needed (*Best Democracy* 53). Palast concludes from this evidence that the Governor's office wanted error-prone lists. He argues that since anyone could see at a glance that over 50% of those on the list were African Americans, the large numbers of incorrectly identified individuals would probably be Democratic voters. To give an idea of the accuracy of the lists, Palast states that the one county that went to the trouble of verifying the 694 names on its list was only able to confirm 34 as actual felons (*Best Democracy* 46).¹⁰

The evidence that Palast uncovered did not become widely known until after the USCCR released its report and even then, most people never heard the full story. Furthermore, even in those sources which did eventually cover the issue, no one but Palast considered whether the wrongful purges were mistakes or intentional election manipulation. Why didn't the American print media pick up Palast's stories? Why didn't they question the motives or honesty of Governor Bush and the Florida Republicans? Why were we left in the dark about an issue which could have determined our presidency? Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's media filtration theories provide one possible explanation.

The Theory

In their critique of the American media, *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky argue that five filters shape and restrict the range of the news in ways that serve the interests of ruling elites. The third of these filters, "the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and 'experts' funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power" (2), implies that it is very difficult for reporters to significantly challenge or criticize the government and its important figures.

Herman and Chomsky argue that the government is automatically considered a reliable source and regularly provides large amounts of information that the news media need. This means both that media have strong incentives to develop good relationships with the government and avoid antagonizing them and that other sources must go much farther to establish themselves as

credible. Material from outside sources is not automatically trusted. Media outlets must do careful checking and costly research to establish the credibility of such sources. Furthermore, “[c]ritical sources may be avoided not only because of their lesser availability and higher costs of establishing credibility, but also because the primary sources may be offended and may even threaten the media using them,” with libel lawsuits or denial of access (22). For all of these reasons, Herman and Chomsky argue, “Non-routine sources must struggle for access, and may be ignored by the arbitrary decisions of the gatekeepers” (22).

How much can Herman and Chomsky’s theory tell us about Florida in 2000? Did the story of voter roll purges and disenfranchisement of black voters get filtered from these media sources because of the media’s dependence on the government as a primary source?

The Evidence: Palast

The process of news filtration described by Herman and Chomsky and the motives behind that process match perfectly Palast’s account of the coverage of the alleged disenfranchisement of African American voters through felon purge lists during the 2000 presidential election in Florida. According to Palast, the European media jumped all over his discovery of voter purges and higher ballot rejection rates among African American voters. The liberal magazine, *The Nation*, printed one of his stories on February 5, 2001 (“Florida’s Disappeared Voters”) after serious fact-checking, but none of the mainstream news sources would touch it until after the publication of the USSCR report. Palast asserts, plausibly, that they were waiting for this *government source* to confirm his findings. In fact, Palast even claims that after his initial story hit the Internet, a CBS producer called him wanting to run the story. The next day, however, the producer called him back: “I’m sorry but your story didn’t hold up. . . . We called Jeb Bush’s office” (*Best Democracy* 15).

It is easy to see why depending on government sources when investigating allegations of government misconduct is problematic (juries are usually a bit skeptical when the defendant says, “I didn’t do it”). But to air such charges as Palast was making would require “a reporter to stand up and say that the big-name politicians, their lawyers and their PR people were *freaking liars*” (*Best Democracy* 15, emphasis in original). As Herman and Chomsky state, “It is very difficult to call authorities on whom one depends for daily news liars, even if they tell whoppers” (22).

Unfortunately, all this analysis of the media filtration process relies on trusting Palast’s account of the mainstream media’s behavior and his assumptions about their motives. Although many aspects of the source filtration theory would lead to ignoring “less credible” sources such as the rogue reporter Palast, there are other ways and reasons that someone such as Palast could be marginalized. He could be a reporter who was known to do shoddy or misleading reporting. He could have been engaging in methods deemed unethical. Furthermore, it may be that his claims were simply not correct and that it was not dependence on the government that made them difficult to back up but their lack of accuracy. These alternative explanations for dismissive treatment of Palast’s reporting are difficult to explore directly.

The Evidence: Analysis of Mainstream Newspapers

Herman and Chomsky's media filtration theory implies that media sources avoid doing research or investigative reporting that requires significant expenditure of time, money, or manpower and frequently quote from the research done by others. Did the mainstream media fail to cover the felon purges in order to avoid costly research? The evidence suggests that this is not the case.

Both the small and large newspapers engaged in extensive and costly research. Eight large news organizations, including both *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, formed a consortium and paid for services to re-examine all of Florida's disputed votes.¹¹ But particularly surprising was independent research done by the local Florida papers, especially the exhaustive study completed by *The Miami Herald* staff, *The Miami Herald Report: Democracy Held Hostage*.

During my research I heard this source mentioned more than once but was unable to find the article until I realized that it wasn't an article at all but a several hundred page *book*. This book investigates at least seven different aspects of voting irregularities and goes to great length to independently verify and investigate many of the controversies of the 2000 election. There are at least 70 pages of charts showing county by county breakdowns of votes and a chart of undervotes.¹² In the "Acknowledgements" section, the author mentions the names of reporters "who spent long days reviewing ballot after ballot in the farthest reaches of the state" (Merzer, et al. vii). Furthermore, he compliments a staff that "redoubled its efforts" after other papers had "packed up and went home" and "shouldered tedious and rigorous investigations and a statewide, county-by-county ballot review" (vii). Finally, he thanks his publisher and his parent company's chairman, who found resources for the project and continued to support it "even when the expense accounts began arriving" (vii).

Although this book is a self-report, looking at the book for even a few minutes makes it hard to dispute that *The Miami Herald* expended significant time, money, and energy in the independent research that led to it. This hardly matches the picture of a lazy, dependent media who do no investigation of their own. Furthermore, this research comes from a local newspaper. Its conclusions are quite different from Palast's (for reasons I will discuss later), but *The Miami Herald* obviously put money and effort into investigating them.

Though nothing in comparison of scope to the *The Miami Herald Report*, *The Palm Beach Post* also did significant independent research into the disenfranchisement of Blacks in Florida. Take, for example, this description of their research methods from "Felon Purge Sacrificed Innocent Voters":

To find disenfranchised voters The Post used a computer program to compare the state's "felon list" with a list of all the voters in Florida registered by Election Day. The Post first identified all the purged voters by finding people named on the felon list that did not appear on the November voter rolls. The Post then searched among the purged voters for

those that did not match perfectly with a felon—that is, they had a different name or race or birth date—and for voters with convictions in states that automatically restored voting rights to felons. (Hiaasen, Kane, and Jaspin)

This searching method (which has problems Palast persuasively points out¹³) yielded rather exact results, including 108 non-felons cleared only after the election, 996 out-of-state felons who should have had the right to vote, and 6,500 who were convicted in a county other than where they voted.¹⁴

Furthermore, *The Palm Beach Post* seems to have tracked down a significant number of these voters, as its numerous interviews with them and quotes suggest: “‘I’m madder than hell,’ Mayville said”; “‘I was devastated,’ said Floredia Walker.” Moreover, Matt Frost was an innocent businessman linked to a felon’s nickname. *The Palm Beach Post* conducted its own, somewhat limited, but definitely investigative, inquiry into the voter rolls and came up with its own account of the story as well as its own count of the numbers of voters wrongly allowed and disallowed from voting.

Interestingly, the Dissenting Opinion of the USCCR Report actually quotes from the research of both *The Miami Herald* and *The Palm Beach Post* to support their arguments (Part VI, 3). This is a rather startling inversion of the pattern Herman and Chomsky describe of the media relying on the government as a source. One can only conclude from their extensive research that, at least in this case, the two Florida media sources listed had sufficient independence from the government to investigate the issue for themselves and draw their own conclusions, contrary to Herman and Chomsky’s thesis.

What is interesting, however, is *what* they chose to investigate with this independence and *which sources* they chose to trust; these two aspects of the coverage correspond well with Herman and Chomsky’s theory. In *The Miami Herald Report*, far more effort, energy, and pages were devoted to issues related to counting and voting machine errors than to voter disqualification. In *The Palm Beach Post*, much investigative effort was put into identifying who on the purge lists was or was not eligible. But both newspapers based their conclusions about who was *actually a felon* on databases provided by the state government¹⁵ and on the methodology of match by exact name, date of birth, race, and gender, both of which Palast contests based on his skepticism towards the government. Though these media sources showed that they weren’t *dependent* on the government in this case, much evidence suggests that they may have been very *trusting* of them. This trust goes deeper than just using the government’s information. The clearest distinction between the independent journalist Palast and the mainstream print media is that Palast calls into questions the motives and character of powerful public officials, and the mainstream print media do not.

Was It Deliberate?

In the introduction to his chapter on the voter purges in Florida, Palast argues that a large number of Floridians were wrongly denied the right to vote. The US Commission of Civil Rights, *The Palm Beach Post*, and *The Washington Post* eventually came to agree with him about this occurrence, if not the number of cases. These reports vary in degree of detail, amount of original research, and final counts. But perhaps the clearest and most important distinction is that Palast aggressively and overtly questions the motives of Governor Bush and the Republican leadership of Florida. For Palast, “the Big Question” is “Was it *deliberate*, this purge so fortunate for the Republicans? Or just an honest clerical error?” (*Best Democracy* 13, emphasis in original). This question was rarely asked and was not investigated by the American print media sources I examined.

The Florida Local Papers

The Palm Beach Post’s article by Scott Hiaasen, Gary Kane, and Elliot Jaspin reported “at least 1,100 eligible voters” wrongly purged from the rolls. It immediately calls these voters “collateral damage from an aggressive and ill-conceived plan to prevent felons from voting.” The term “collateral damage” clearly implies an unintentional side consequence of an effort with seemingly understandable motives. Even though the article says in the next sentence that these voters “could have swayed the election” for Al Gore, nowhere in the entire article do the authors even raise the question of whether the mistakes associated with the list could have been made intentionally in order to yield more votes for Bush.

The article does, however, characterize administration actions in a way that suggests motives. The article states that election officials were “too cavalier.” The state’s plan was called “aggressive and ill-conceived,” and in explaining “[h]ow the state purged innocent voters,” the government is described as “desperate to prevent convicted criminals from voting.” These characterizations of the state government make them sound well-intentioned, tough on crime, and committed to preventing the voter fraud in Miami that led to the legislation requiring the purges in the first place.

“Why were the officials so “determined to let no felon slip by” (Hiaasen, Kane, and Jaspin)? Was it because they were extremely concerned about the voter rolls accurately reflecting eligible voters? This would be hard to argue given that the article itself cites numerous instances when the state government asked DBT to “broaden its scope” and use inexact matches, even though they were warned that this “would yield more ‘false positives.’” Does it stand to reason that Governor Bush’s office would be overzealous to find felons because felons by wide margins tend to vote Democratic in Florida? To raise a question like this would not necessarily imply that the Governor’s office had tried to fix the election. After all, if large numbers of disqualified felons voted for Gore, this could *illegitimately* give the state to Gore. But it definitely suggests that Bush’s office was more eager to cut out illegitimate Gore voters than to protect the legitimate

rights of others. Furthermore, if those others were evenly split between Republicans and Democrats (as random chance would likely distribute them), then this “sacrifice” of even amounts of legitimate voters to weed out disproportionately Gore-supporting illegitimate voters would in some ways make the election *more* reflective of a “proper” vote. But if there is evidence that those who would *incorrectly* be disqualified would be Gore supporters, then one could reasonably view this as election fixing. Does the investigative work of anyone other than Palast test whether the wide net cast by Governor Bush was due to overzealous fulfillment of duty or intentional election manipulation?

Hiaasen, Kane and Jaspin once mention dishonest motives, stating that “[c]ivil rights groups saw it [the purge] as a deliberate attempt to disenfranchise black-voters,” but they quickly dismiss this notion. They state that “a review of state records, internal e-mails of DBT [the private purge company] and testimony before the civil rights commission and an elections task force showed no evidence that minorities were specifically targeted.” This dismissal is important in two ways: first, *The Palm Beach Post* takes as evidence for the motives of government officials their own records, the e-mails of a company they hired, and their public testimony before a panel that would crucify them if it found that they had targeted minorities. Presumably, people in high places who would try to fix elections would not make official memos saying “the goal of this measure is to wrongly target African Americans for disenfranchisement,” nor would the people they hire, nor would they likely admit this in front of a civil rights panel. This is yet another instance of news media relying on government and business to determine the motives of government and business.

The second reason that *The Palm Beach Post*’s limited and superficial inquiry into motives is important for my analysis is that by discussing (and dismissing) only overtly *racial* motives, the authors assume that the only way that Governor Bush could have sought to influence the election was by specifically targeting African Americans. If he had targeted out-of-state felons who had every right to vote, the result would have also worked to his brother’s advantage. In fact, the evidence which *The Palm Beach Post* itself cites states that his office did intentionally act to purge out-of-state felons, even though in most cases their rights had been restored and *the Florida Supreme Court had specifically told him he could not interfere with their voting (see Hiaasen, Kane, and Jasper; Palast, Best Democracy)*. As *The Palm Beach Post* reports, Janet Keel, a Florida official, issued a requirement that even felons who had automatically been given back their rights to vote by other states would have had to go through the lengthy and difficult process of applying for clemency in Florida. It is difficult to imagine a motive for this requirement that does not imply that Florida officials were trying to limit the voting of out-of-state felons who had every right to vote. The fact that two Florida Supreme Court cases had ruled that the state government should not do so and must stop makes the excuse of accidental error seem a ridiculous stretch.

To raise these kinds of questions about the motives of Governor Bush and his administration, reporters would have had to make the same kinds of inferences and hypotheses as Palast. For

example, one would have to ask whether, after discovering mistakes that were disproportionately leading to opposition supporters losing their vote, a government official would seek to correct the errors or take steps to create further errors. If an individual were trying to fix the election, he or she would clearly do the latter. And *The Palm Beach Post*'s own account shows that this is exactly what Governor Bush's office did. Though overzealously disqualifying legitimate voters to catch illegitimate ones is bad enough, it would be easy enough for Florida Republicans to look at the error-ridden list, observe that it was more than half black, and conclude that more than half of the people wrongly on the list would also be black and also be likely voters for the Democrats. But to raise this issue is to call into question the motive and character of important political figures, something which Palast, but not *The Palm Beach Post*, is willing to do. This is not to say that Palast is correct, only that he is far more willing than *The Palm Beach Post* to raise publicly an "ugly" question, a finding completely in line with Herman and Chomsky's theory.

To Palast, the most important question of the election was, "Was it *deliberate*, this purge so fortunate for the Republicans? Or just an honest clerical error?" (*Best Democracy* 13). If *The Palm Beach Post* fails to raise the question or investigate it, what about other media sources who covered the issue, bearing in mind the lack of coverage of the issue at all by most media sources?

The Miami Herald in its exhaustive report has nothing to say about this question. In the introduction, it lays out the important questions of the election that its report seeks to answer: "What happened in Florida? What went wrong there? Who actually attracted the most votes in the decisive state in the closest presidential election in 124 years?" (Merzer, et al. 4). These questions do not include "did someone try to fix the vote?" But perhaps as telling as this omission are the assumptions about motives inherent in the authors' language: "What went wrong there?" The words "went wrong" clearly imply an accident. The idea that to the contrary, everything went according to plan, isn't considered. Instead, they prominently quote an election official who talks about "failure in voter technology and failure in training the voters in technology and a failure in administration" (4). The assumption of accident is echoed on the same page when they say that their investigation uncovered "the deficiencies of a system mirrored by most others in the nation" (4). Not only do they attribute the result to "deficiencies," they imply that this was really no different from anywhere else in the country. But while disqualified ballots were common across the country, a computerized purge of large numbers of voters was not. The notion that what happened in Florida was similar to what one would find anywhere in the country is particularly striking given that *The Miami Herald Report* itself points out that internal e-mails from Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris' office showed that her aides "could hardly contain their partisan zeal" (6).

The repetitive assumption of error rather than intent by *The Miami Herald Report* seems rather ironic given their past work. More than once in the book they reference their "investigation of voter fraud," which "overturned a corrupted city election in 1998" and won *The Herald* a Pulitzer Prize (105). "Fraud" and "corrupted" have quite a different ring to them than "deficien-

cies” and “went wrong.” Indeed, because they believed the election “merited intense scrutiny,” Merzer, et al. report that they embarked upon a “comprehensive, impartial investigation to *determine what went wrong and how the system could be improved*” (5, emphasis added). It is unclear why a group that had aggressively investigated fraud at a city level would assume error at the state level. It may be that after weighing the evidence they actually came to the conclusion that error was more likely than malicious intent, though that seems unlikely given the lack of mention of evidence which would disconfirm the notion of intentional manipulation. Perhaps the newly elected city government officials were not sufficiently powerful or established to worry *The Miami Herald* staff. Perhaps they had specific reasons to distrust those officials or specific reasons to trust Governor Bush’s administration. There may be more subtle reasons relating to who the “victims” were that I will return to later. While this instance does match Herman and Chomsky’s explanation of news media not attributing negative motives to powerful government or business figures, the inconsistencies in behavior cloud the issue.

The National Newspapers

The coverage was no better in the larger national print media. As mentioned earlier, *The New York Times* barely covers the issue, even after the USCCR report, and when it does so it actually covers the report rather than the issue itself. The *Times* does not raise the issue of intentional versus accidental disenfranchisement, nor does it comment on whether disenfranchisement actually took place as opposed to its just being reported in a contested report. Of course, since it does not raise the issue, it does not weigh evidence on it either. The *Times* article does mention that the commission reports “said it ‘did not find conclusive evidence that the highest officials of the state conspired to produce the disenfranchisement of voters’” but that Governor Bush and Katherine Harris “chose to simply ignore the mounting evidence” that voters were having problems (Seelye A16). It didn’t find “conclusive” evidence? Doesn’t that suggest that it found some evidence of some sort, perhaps some evidence worth investigating or reporting? Does it seem newsworthy that Governor Bush and Katherine Harris chose to “ignore the mounting evidence” of problems with an election? The *Times* article does tell us on the same page, however, that the Governor’s office was itself “unable to find any evidence of intentional discrimination in the conduct of the November election” (A16). Somehow, that doesn’t seem surprising.

The coverage in *The Washington Post* follows similar patterns. Like *The Palm Beach Post* and *The Miami Herald*, *The Washington Post* characterizes the events by words of accident: “*Botched Name Purge*” (Pierre headline, emphasis added), “snafus” (Pierre, “Botched Name Purge”), and so forth. Like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* only raises questions of motives indirectly, quoting “widespread perception among blacks” (Pierre, “Botched Name Purge”). It carefully notes, and rather immediately, that Governor Bush and Katherine Harris “maintain that problems encountered by voters were unintentional” and quotes Bush saying that he “takes seriously the alleged inefficiencies and bureaucratic errors identified in the commis-

sion's statement." It seems that the reporters at this news source, like the three others explored, are only willing to state that other parties have raised questions about the motives of government figures; they are not willing to raise the questions and investigate them. The article gives us much information later (much of it the same as *The Palm Beach Post's*) that if examined together certainly suggests motives. But the article states that "[n]o one has proven intent" and leaves any inferences about circumstantial evidence to the careful reader.

This pattern of avoiding character charges and claims of negative motives displayed by mainstream news sources starkly contrasts with independent sources on the Internet or in foreign news media. As just one small example, the online journal *The Orlando Weekly*, reporting about the same matter, contends that "the state's Republican-led executive offices seem to have masterminded a plan to keep African American voters—a group that voted overwhelmingly for Al Gore—out of the voting booth" (Hinton).

You don't have to suspect a vast right wing conspiracy to be suspicious that Governor Bush may have tried to fix the election for his brother. And if there was evidence that he did so, that would certainly be a big story. Herman and Chomsky's source filtration theory offers a plausible explanation of why mainstream print media in America did no investigation to confirm or disconfirm this suspicion: media workers must cultivate good relationships with the government figures they rely on regularly for news and have reason to fear the consequences they would face if they seriously harmed the reputation of such figures. Mainstream media, therefore, have strong incentives to avoid stories which would reflect badly on important government or business figures, to couch all discussion of such potentially damaging material in the most positive possible light, and particularly to avoid attributing bad motives to those in power.

Directions for Further Research: Alternative Explanations

Though Herman and Chomsky's source filtration theory provides a useful and plausible explanation of the coverage of the Florida voter purge, it is only one of several plausible explanations. Might the reason for the type and amount of coverage in America of this issue be due to the tendency of the media to conform to the sympathies, biases, and stereotypes of their audience? The group who was without a doubt victimized was out-of-state felons with voting rights. Perhaps the news media are not interested in drawing attention to the problems of such a clearly unsympathetic group.¹⁶ In fact, the media may knowingly or unknowingly wish to prove to the majority of its audience that they were the real victims.¹⁷

Another possibility is that subtle negative stereotypes of African Americans resulted in quick dismissals of their grievances. For example, much of the coverage of the high rates of spoiled ballots in precincts with large numbers of African Americans focuses on low levels of education among the population and large numbers of first time voters. These reports say little about the fact which Palast uncovered and others later verified: that many voting machines in heavily black areas were not set to return invalid ballots for correction while in heavily white areas they returned

the ballots to give voters a “second chance.” Does this suggest that the news media were intentionally or unintentionally playing to a stereotype of African Americans as unintelligent or ignorant?¹⁸ Did few people take seriously the allegations that blacks were disproportionately put on the felon list mistakenly because of the stereotype that black people probably are criminals? Do the media act to perpetuate a stereotype that most allegations of discrimination by minorities are politically motivated or imagined? Some evidence I encountered during my research leads me to believe that the answers to many of these questions may be “yes.” Unfortunately, examining these questions is beyond the scope of my article, though such an examination of these issues could be the starting point for further research.

Conclusion

It is difficult to say if analyzing American media coverage of the Florida purge gives us reason to be optimistic or pessimistic about public discourse in America. On the one hand, the media demonstrated that they are far more independent in their research capabilities than Herman and Chomsky suggest. But at the same time, they display a consistent pattern of trusting government sources or at least of failing to question and investigate their motives. Indeed, Herman and Chomsky’s analysis implies an institutional and, therefore, deeply entrenched problem.

If the investigative potential of the media is not directed towards questioning the claims and character of the powerful, then the public will not be able to hold those in power accountable. In fact, instead of acting as a check on government power, the media will instead further legitimize that power. If the media reports what the government says as true, they create an “echo chamber.” This functions much the same way rumors do: if three people repeat a false rumor, an outsider audience will perceive this as confirmation, even if all three heard the rumor from the same dishonest source. Likewise, if the media simply restates the government’s press release, it provides a source of “outside confirmation” for the position the government wants to put forth. Perhaps this echo effect more than anything implies the need for the burgeoning internet media and independent media sources and journalists like Palast, without whom this issue may never have gained attention. Independent news sources who do not depend so heavily on those in power for their information and who do not face the pressures of daily for-profit publication may be able to ask the questions mainstream sources are afraid to or break the stories so that the major print media can eventually report them when they feel safe doing so.

Epilogue

Perhaps there is a silver lining on this cloud. During revision of this article, I searched the internet for news about the upcoming (2004) presidential election in Florida, having heard that the state was again embarking on a computerized voter purge this year. I discovered that CNN filed a lawsuit against the Florida state government to force them to make the purge lists public before the election (Florida officials claimed that it could keep this information secret from anyone

except local election officials). After CNN won its lawsuit, several local Florida papers, including *The Tampa Tribune*, *The Sun Sentinel*, and *The Miami Herald*, thoroughly examined the purge lists and discovered numerous and serious errors.

Among these “errors” was the near total exclusion of Hispanics from the lists. Only 61 Hispanics appeared on the list while over 22,000 blacks were slated for purge, numbers which don’t quite match the prison population proportions. Apparently, Hispanics had “accidentally” been excluded from the matches. In 2000, Hispanics in Florida voted predominantly for Bush, while blacks voted overwhelmingly for Gore (Kane). Another error discovered by the investigation was that 2100 felons who had had their voting rights restored were nonetheless slated for purge. Most of the 2100 were black Democrats (Kane). After the errors were made public by the Florida papers, the Florida Secretary of State announced that the lists would not be used this year. Perhaps there is hope for the media after all.

Notes

¹ The election’s being overturned was largely the result of investigative work by *The Miami Herald*, for which it won a Pulitzer Prize.

² Examples from the felon purge lists are available on the internet at <http://www.gregpalast.com/detail.cfm?artid=122&row=1>

³ According to journalist Greg Palast, “Madison county’s elections supervisor Linda Howell refused the purge list after she found her own name on it” (“Great Felon Ex-Con Game”).

⁴ The NAACP asserted that African Americans were more likely than their white counterparts to be incorrectly disenfranchised. The connection between the issue of felon purges, a Republican victory, and African American outrage lies in this charge, but the claim is hotly contested, and weighing the evidence of the case is beyond the scope of this paper. For compelling evidence and analysis, see Chapter 1 of Palast’s *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*.

⁵ It is difficult to prove a negative; though it seems unlikely, it is possible that there were articles published on the issue in sources I searched but did not find.

⁶ *LexisNexis* is an academic search engine which allows users to search for articles in newspapers and journals based on keywords, authors, dates of publication, and so forth.

⁷ Because the subject of this inquiry is the news pages of print media sources, I will not discuss at length the limited coverage found on the op-ed page. However, it seems significant to me that Bob Herbert, the one regular African American op-ed writer for *The New York Times*, is the only one mentioning this story. He actually mentions Palast’s research in his piece, “In America; Keep Them Out!” Furthermore, touching on a point I address later in this piece, he is the only person I found who directly challenges the motives and character of Florida Republicans, leveling an accusation of intentional disenfranchisement. It is not surprising that the only one who seemed to take the allegations by the African American community seriously was himself an African American.

⁸ Because of the full faith and credit clause of the U.S. constitution, Florida cannot take away a civil right granted by another state; felons who arrive in Florida with their voting rights retain them.

⁹ See also Palast, “Great Felon Ex-Con Game.”

¹⁰ See also Palast, “Great Felon Ex-Con Game.”

¹¹ For the findings of this consortium, see Keating and Balz. For discussion of the spin applied to the consortium’s findings by those who funded it, see, for example, <http://www.consortiumnews.com/2001/111201a.html>.

¹² Undervotes are ballots which have been cast but show no clear selection in a given election race.

¹³ Palast notes that the Florida newspapers once again used state felon databases (without regard for how or if they were verified) and used matches based only on name, gender, birth date, and race to test the accuracy of voter rolls. As he points out, this is exactly how people were incorrectly disenfranchised in the first place! In addition, in a large state, there will most likely be more than one black man named Jimmy Jackson (Palast’s example) born on the same date. Furthermore, if two innocent men, one white and one black, had the same name as an African American felon, *The Palm Beach Post’s* search (and likely a voting official) would count the white man as an error, while the black man would be considered a match. It is easy to see, therefore, how African Americans were more likely to be *mistakenly* matched to a list on which roughly 50% of individuals were listed as African American. For a more thorough explanation of these methods and their problems, see the entire first chapter of Palast, *Best Democracy*.

¹⁴ This last figure is painfully ambiguous. The dissenting opinion in the USCCR report cites this figure from *The Palm Beach Post* as the number of actual felons who were mistakenly allowed to vote. But the paragraphs immediately preceding the number in “Felon Purge” state, “Controversy aside, most of the people the state *prevented from voting* probably were felons” (emphasis added). And “[o]f the 19,398 voters *removed from the rolls*, more than 14,600 matched a felon by name, birth date, race and gender” (emphasis added). Immediately following is the statement that “[m]ore than 6,500 were convicted in counties other than where *they voted*” (emphasis added), suggesting *they would not have been found* by local officials without the DBT list. Most of these contextual clues suggest that these voters were “found,” “removed from the rolls,” and “prevented from voting.” But the quote says “counties other than where they voted,” implying that they voted. Which is it? Perhaps they meant other than the counties where they had voted in the past, since the section was titled “Felons *had been voting*” and refers to several instances of individuals who had been voting for years, despite not actually having the right, but then this year were stopped (emphasis added). If this interpretation is correct, then both the USCCR dissenting opinion and *The National Review* (who quote the dissenting opinion’s quote) were 180 degrees off in using this as evidence for their cases. But much like a hanging chad, it’s hard to judge.

¹⁵ In fact, these may actually be the same databases used by the private firm in the first place.

¹⁶ This would certainly explain *The Miami Herald’s* inconsistency regarding investigations of potential city-level election fraud vs. potential state-level election fraud. In Miami’s overturned election, felons were the culprits who “stole” the election from law-abiding citizens. In the Florida state-wide election, however, large numbers of the victims were out-of-state felons or in-state “probable felons.” In fact, much of the discussion of the purges talks about how “filthy” the rolls were or “cleaning” them; this rhetoric implies a very unsympathetic and derogatory attitude toward felons voting.

¹⁷ The dissenting opinion of the USCCR panel, for example, uses faulty reasoning to conclude that whites were actually twice as likely as blacks to be mistakenly placed on the purge list. This argument sounds suspiciously similar to the conservative charge that because of programs like Affirmative Action, it is white people who are the victims of discrimination. (The evidence the claim is drawn from is the fact that those who successfully *contested* their placement on the list were twice as likely to be white than black). See United States Commission on Civil Rights, “*Dissenting Opinion* Part VI pg. 2.

¹⁸ Palast certainly thinks so. He cites a report on *Nightline* which states that “ballots are complex and Blacks are not well educated about voting procedures,” which he interprets as a not-too-subtle message that “*Blacks are too frigging dumb to figure out how to vote*” (Best Democracy 18).

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