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Worst Voter Error Is Apathy Toward Irregularities

By Donna Britt

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Is anyone surprised that accusations of voter disenfranchisement and irregularities abound after the most passionately contested presidential campaign in memory? Is anybody stunned that the mainstream media appear largely unconcerned?

To many people's thinking, too few citizens were discouraged from voting to matter. Those people would suggest that not nearly enough votes for John Kerry were missed or siphoned away to overturn President Bush's win. To which I'd respond:

Excuse me -- I thought this was America.

Informed that I was writing about voter disenfranchisement, a Democratic friend admitted, "I'm trying not to care about that." I understand. Less than two weeks after a bruising election in a nation in which it's unfashionable to overtly care about anything, it's annoying of me even to notice.

But citizens who insist, election after election, that each vote is sacred and then shrug at hundreds of credible reports that honest-to-God votes were suppressed and discouraged aren't just being hypocritical.

They're telling the millions who never vote because "it doesn't matter anyway" that they're the smart ones.

Come on. If Republicans had lost the election, this column would be unnecessary because Karl Rove and company would be contesting every vote. I keep hearing from those who wonder whether Democrats are "too nice," and from others who wonder whether efforts by the mainstream media to be "fair and balanced" sometimes render them "neutered and less effective."

Perhaps. But the much-publicized voting-machine error that gave Bush 4,258 votes in an Ohio precinct where only 638 people cast ballots preceded a flood of disturbing reports, ranging from the Florida voting machine that counted backward to the North Carolina computer that eliminated votes. In Ohio's Warren County, election officials citing "homeland security" concerns locked the doors to the county building where votes were being counted, refusing to allow members of the media and bipartisan observers to watch.

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Bush won the county overwhelmingly.

Much of the media dismisses anxiety over such irregularities as grouching by poor-loser Democrats, rabid conspiracy theorists and pouters frustrated by Kerry's lightning-quick concession. Some of it surely is.

But more people's concerns are elementary-school basic -- which isn't coincidental since that's where many of us learned about democracy. We feel that Americans mustn't concede the noble intentions upon which our nation was founded to the cynical or the indifferent. We believe in our nation's sacred assurance that every citizen's voice be heard through his or her vote.

The point isn't just which candidate won or lost. It's that we all lose when we ignore that thousands of Americans might have been discouraged or prevented from voting, or not had their votes count.

If it were us, we'd be screaming bloody murder.

Yesterday, Lafayette Square was the scene of a lively rally at which dozens of upbeat, mostly older-than-25 protesters organized by ReDefeatBush.com heard democracy-praising singers, rappers and speakers. Protester Susan Ribe, 33, a Wheaton tax researcher, said that though she's "open-minded" to the possibility that election results might be correct, she believes that reports of irregularities suggest "there's the need for a serious investigation."

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