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A vote to oust Bush helps democracy

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Long after becoming an adult, I still saw Election Day through the excited eyes of a girl who used to walk with anticipation to the polling place with Mom.

Even after I came to understand the endemic corruption of our politics - the insufferable ads, the poisonous money, the art of the quid pro quo that is the essential skill of a politician - I always felt the day had a cleansing value. It would wash away the campaign grime and begin a new and hopeful season.

But there is no uplift to this Election Day. It is not because I fear Osama bin Laden or the lack of a clear result in the race between George W. Bush and John Kerry. The feeling has died because democracy itself has been dying these past four years. It is choked by the autocratic impulse of the Bush White House.

It started in Miami.

I will not re-fight the battle of Florida, 2000. But when Republicans - recruited by Tom DeLay and other GOP officeholders, with expenses paid by the Bush campaign - staged a raucous, window-banging protest to shut down a recount by local election officials, did candidate Bush say this behavior is wrong in a democracy? Not then. Not ever.

This Election Day, thousands of Republicans are set to work as voter "challengers," determined to keep people in African-American - and therefore heavily Democratic - precincts in closely contested states from casting a ballot. The party says it is trying to prevent fraud. But no equal-opportunity fraud squads are targeted at white voters. The real motive is as clear as the pictures of that Miami mob.

The crisis Bush creates for our democracy is deeper even than his reliance on such campaign tactics. He has governed as if neither the people nor the Constitution have sufficient authority to check his powers.

This is not the result of 9/11 - it started much earlier. On that very morning, my own column, printed before the planes struck the towers, began with these words: "Not since Nixon." It recounted the drive toward secrecy that already was under way at the White House, extending even to an effort to block the release - mandated by a post-Watergate reform - of Ronald Reagan's official papers.

Then the terrorists struck and the noose tightened. The administration rounded up immigrants and imprisoned them, often without telling their families where they were, or releasing their names. Many were quietly deported. Like a distant country gripped by a despot, the United States had its very own "disappeared."

Bush then opened an American gulag. The holding pen at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, is supposed to be for alleged terrorists swept up on the Afghan battlefield. For nearly three years, hundreds of people from dozens of countries have been held without charge, without a showing of evidence, without effective means of communicating. The Supreme Court ruled in June that the

Guantanamo detainees are entitled to contest their imprisonment in U.S. courts. But the administration stalls and continues efforts to block their access to the legal system.

Bush also claims that he has the sole power to name even an American citizen an "enemy combatant." He says he is entitled to indefinitely imprison a citizen without charge, without a lawyer, without evidence. It is a power that used to be reserved for kings. The Supreme Court has ruled in the case of citizen Yasser Hamdi that Bush cannot reign with such unlimited authority. Yet, after finally releasing Hamdi, administration lawyers persist in maneuvers to block the release of Jose Padilla, a second citizen in custody. The president has subverted treaties to which the United States has long been bound - the Geneva Conventions and international accords against torture among them. This, too, was done in secret by White House and other administration lawyers. The Senate, which ratified the treaties, wasn't consulted. The people's representatives have no standing in Bush's monarchy.

The Republican Congress has acquiesced in this historic power grab. The White House ignores even the rulings of the Supreme Court. And so there is one last hope - a vote to remove Bush, a threat to our democracy, on this Election Day.