

Democracy at Risk

By Paul Krugman, New York Times OP-ED Columnist

The disputed election of 2000 left a lasting scar on the nation's psyche. A recent Zogby poll found that even in red states, which voted for George W. Bush, 32 percent of the public believes that the election was stolen. In blue states, the fraction is 44 percent.

Now imagine this: in November the candidate trailing in the polls wins an upset victory — but all of the districts where he does much better than expected use touch-screen voting machines. Meanwhile, leaked internal e-mail from the companies that make these machines suggests widespread error, and possibly fraud. What would this do to the nation?

Unfortunately, this story is completely plausible. (In fact, you can tell a similar story about some of the results in the 2002 midterm elections, especially in Georgia.) Fortune magazine rightly declared paperless voting the worst technology of 2003, but it's not just a bad technology — it's a threat to the republic.

First of all, the technology has simply failed in several recent elections. In a special election in Broward County, Fla., 134 voters were disenfranchised because the electronic voting machines showed no votes, and there was no way to determine those voters' intent. (The election was decided by only 12 votes.) In Fairfax County, Va., electronic machines crashed repeatedly and balked at registering votes. In the 2002 primary, machines in several Florida districts reported no votes for governor.

And how many failures weren't caught? Internal e-mail from Diebold, the most prominent maker of electronic voting machines (though not those in the Florida and Virginia debacles), reveals that programmers were frantic over the system's unreliability. One reads, "I have been waiting for someone to give me an explanation as to why Precinct 216 gave Al Gore a minus 16022 when it was uploaded." Another reads, "For a demonstration I suggest you fake it."

Computer experts say that software at Diebold and other manufacturers is full of security flaws, which would easily allow an insider to rig an election. But the people at voting machine companies wouldn't do that, would they? Let's ask Jeffrey Dean, a programmer who was senior vice president of a voting machine company, Global Election Systems, before Diebold acquired it in 2002. Bev Harris, author of "Black Box Voting" (www.blackboxvoting.com), told The A.P. that Mr. Dean, before taking that job, spent time in a Washington correctional facility for stealing money and tampering with computer files.

Questionable programmers aside, even a cursory look at the behavior of the major voting machine companies reveals systematic flouting of the rules intended to ensure voting security. Software was modified without government oversight; machine components were replaced without being rechecked. And here's the crucial point: even if there are strong reasons to suspect that electronic machines miscounted votes, nothing can be done about it. There is no paper trail; there is nothing to recount.

So what should be done? Representative Rush Holt has introduced a bill calling for each machine to produce a paper record that the voter verifies. The paper record would then be secured for any future audit. The bill requires that such verified voting be ready in time for the 2004 election — and that districts that can't meet the deadline use paper ballots instead. And it also requires surprise audits in each state.

I can't see any possible objection to this bill. Ignore the inevitable charges of "conspiracy theory." (Although some conspiracies are real: as yesterday's Boston Globe reports, "Republican staff members of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee infiltrated opposition computer files for a year, monitoring secret strategy memos and periodically passing on copies to the media.") **To support verified voting, you don't personally have to believe that voting machine manufacturers have tampered or will tamper with elections. How can anyone object to measures that will place the vote above suspicion?**

What about the expense? Let's put it this way: we're spending at least \$150 billion to promote democracy in Iraq. That's about \$1,500 for each vote cast in the 2000 election. **How can we balk at spending a small fraction of that sum to secure the credibility of democracy at home?**