

Pitfalls Of Paperless Voting

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Good, fast, cheap -- pick two. When facing a problem, everyone would like to have all three. In real life you only get two.

A project done quickly can sometimes be done correctly the first time...but it will cost you. Start cutting corners and workmanship is generally out the proverbial window. Corrections, updates, retraining and a host of other expensive and time-consuming activities usually follow hard on the heels of a cheap, quick fix.

Remember the 2000 presidential election results? Torturous, right? Election Day 2004 is drawing closer and we are largely unprepared. The Help America Vote Act of 2002, though well intended, has spawned questionable results.

Getting a good, fast and affordable system in place for the next election has proven to be next to impossible. Some of the computerized systems that were recently put into use in places like Ohio, Washington State, California and Virginia are receiving poor -- if not frightening -- reviews.

All computerized systems are subject to error. Machines malfunction. Engineers and programmers make mistakes. Operators make mistakes. Sometimes honest mistakes occur...and sometimes there is sabotage. Regardless of the "new and improved" voting system your precinct may be using, it is vital that you and all of your neighbors demand a verifiable paper audit trail. Each vote absolutely must be verifiable.

Life with "chad" was aggravating enough; imagine the heartburn in Florida that would have occurred without them! Let's also remember that several states had extremely narrow margins that year and could have been called upon for a recount. Invisible electrons will not calm the masses in a disputed election. "Trust me" has become a cynical phrase in today's society with none of its former reassurance.

It seems almost too simple. There should be no argument whatsoever about the need for an audit trail with substance as well as ether, and yet many companies are selling-and selling hard-systems touted as "paperless." Woe to those public servants who have spent hard-earned taxpayer dollars on these sexy yet grossly flawed and wildly expensive schemes.

Communities that have invested in, or are considering purchasing "Direct Recording Electronic" (DRE) voting machines should think again. Most DREs look and feel just like friendly old ATM machines. Some are as small as a portable notebook, making them easy for disabled persons to use.

It is understandable that a well-intentioned election board, under pressure to upgrade their system, could be misled. The sleek touch-screens resemble technology with which we already are comfortable. The big difference is the receipt, or more accurately the absolute lack of a receipt. Those voter "receipts", aka ballots, need to take precedence over an electronic count in the event of a dispute.

All the experts are saying that this will be a close election. If election rigging is suspected (and it is always suspected!), there will be hell to pay. A complete re-vote will be required. That is not a viable option since most elections can legally be held only once.

Even if a re-vote were possible, no group would be happy with the results. The expense imposed on our communities, the ripple effect into our national economy and national morale will far outweigh any benefit of a quick-fix DRE purchase. It is essential that communities that have purchased "paperless" systems update or replace their machines.

No reasonable person believes that computers are flawless. Unseen gremlins in the quarks are ready to attack your own computer this very minute. Anyone who believes in the value of machines over mankind should read a little Asimov or have a discussion with our resident Luddite Bill Lind, who will promptly point toward the Amish as society's beau ideal.

Even with an audit system in place it is difficult to get a fair election result in some parts of the country. The citizens of Chicago and Baltimore, for instance, have reputations for voting from the grave.

Imagine the mischief that could be created in a system that is even less transparent! The amount and types of potential interference with a paperless system are almost beyond count. Various deliberate and/or accidental problems can and will emerge—from the first chip, to the first line of software code—all the way through to unplugging the machine at the end of Election Day.

Are these systems safe from outside interference? How long before someone comes up with a device that will shoot a signal and alter a voting machine's records? It is not too difficult to imagine a disgruntled programmer typing in a trap door that will permit tampering at will. Throughout all of human history there have been rogues willing to win at any price as well as those who create havoc for havoc's sake. Threats exist from within and without.

Giving weight to the expression "even a stopped watch is right twice a day" are the concerns raised by Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-OH). Watchdog groups are also airing many of the problems with the ballot-less system.

Bev Harris of Black Box Voting wisely suggests that a proper audit will compare the paper ballots against the voting machine totals. It will compare the polling machine totals against the central count machine totals. Last but not least, some sort of postal receipt should be used to compare the number of absentee ballots received with the number counted. Other steps may also be called for, but these will be a very good start.

Verified Voting is another organization that has devoted their time and talent to this issue. They are promoting as solutions:

-- Precinct-based optical scan ballots [Use a #2 pencil to color in the block. Computers count the darkened blocks.]: The CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project found them to be the most accurate at recording the voter's intent and not significantly more expensive per vote than touch-screen machines.

-- Touch screen machines that print paper ballots: Such systems would have many of the advantages of DRE machines, including potentially improved accessibility for voters with disabilities.

There is at least one such machine that is certified in several states, and we hope that all vendors of existing DRE machines could provide an option to add ballot printers (DRE voting machines in Brazil have been retrofitted with ballot printers, for example). The paper ballots must be submitted by the voters, to be available for counting or recounting and to avoid vote-selling. The votes on the paper ballots must be regarded as the definitive legal votes, taking precedence over electronic records or counts.

Concerned voters everywhere need to research this issue and then **vigorously support legislation that will secure the integrity of the election system. Paperless voting is a ticking bomb with potentially explosive Election Day results.**

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