

The Right to a Secure, Secret, Straight Vote

On election day, I spent more than 10 hours in Marlborough New Hampshire's only polling place...the Community Center on Main Street. I was there to monitor the voting for Swing the Vote. I was given a seat right next to the two election officials who took voters' names and handed out the ballots. I was about 10 feet from the voting booths, about 25 feet from the ballot box, and about 25 feet from the new voter registration table. Election day was run by the Town Moderator who is also the town barber. The votes in Marlborough were cast by paper ballot.

Marlborough had a huge voter turnout and a very large number of new voter registrations. One Town Official told me that he had not seen anything like it in 30 years. Marlborough conducted its election flawlessly, with good humor and great patience. I believe I saw in Marlborough that day the answer to America's voting problems: paper ballots; more polling places; an adequate number of voting booths; televised vote counting; voter registration up to and including election day; random audits.

Americans have the constitutional right to cast a secret ballot, they have a right to have that ballot accurately counted and counted in public. Under certain circumstances, they have the right to a recount.

A short history of voting systems in America:

Originally, only white, male property owners were eligible to vote in this Country. Votes were cast by voice or paper ballot. Early paper ballots contained only the candidates from one party and were called "party tickets". After the Civil War, the "Australian" or "blanket ballot" was adopted which contained the names of candidates from all parties.

Along with paper ballot, "gear" or "lever" voting machines made their appearance in the 1920's and for the next 40 years these voting systems enabled the American people to determine the course of their democracy.

In the 1960's, the first computer-read ballot systems appeared and they involved the now infamous stylus or punch card ballot. Computer touch screens made their first appearance in the 1990's.

In 2002, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act ("HAVA") which, among other things, provided Federal funding for optical scanning machines and direct recording electronic voting systems.

For a good summary of the history of computerized election fraud in America, see Victoria Collier's article in Truthout at http://www.truthout.org/docs_03/102503C.shtml. Collier directs a non-profit organization and is the editor of <http://www.votescam.com>. Truthout also has a section devoted to voting issues on its website, go to <http://www.truthout.com> and click on "Voter Rights" at the bottom of the page.

Beverly Harris has written a book entitled “Black Box Voting: Ballot Tampering in the 21st Century” which is worth reading and can be found on the internet. Harris’ website is <http://www.blackboxvoting.org>. (Her site should not be confused with blackboxvoting.com.). Harris’ website contains updates on many of the election challenges that are ongoing throughout the country.

Another book worth reading is “Stealing Elections: How Voter Fraud Threatens our Democracy” by John H. Fund.

For folks who are more computer literate than I am, there are two websites worth visiting: A John Hopkins University Study published in May 2004 entitled “Analysis of an Electronic Voting System” which can be found at <http://www.avirubin.com/vote.pdf>; and Dr. Rebecca Mercuri’s website at <http://www.notablesoftware.com/evote.html>.

Finally, another website called Democratic Underground (<http://www.democraticunderground.com>) has been carefully monitoring voting irregularities in connection with the 2004 election and has a forum specifically devoted to this.

The sources that I have listed above only really scratch the surface of the computerized voting problems that we have in this country but they are a good start.

Below are the problems that have developed with increasing frequency with the use of computerized voting systems along with some proposed solutions:

- software programming errors and accountability for these errors (at least we can identify our election officials...we don’t know the programmers
- pushing the screen button for one candidate and getting another
- votes which are not lost, just not counted
- more votes than there are voters
- accountability and impartiality of the companies that make the machines and the voting software
- vulnerability of the main computer to tampering and loss of voter privacy
- loss of the transparency of the vote count

Proposed solutions include:

- the Collier Method: paper ballots (not to be confused with paper receipts) and old fashioned hand counts in public

- better monitoring of voting machines
- audits and background checks of all companies involved in voting systems
- bring back transparency in vote counting
- more spot audits at the polls
- the Mercuri Method: electronic voting machine prints a paper ballot which can be verified by the voter and which then drops into the ballot box.

A final note: there are some people who believe that electronic voting is the wave of the future and that this country will never go back to a uniform, nationwide paper ballot system. These folks suggest that we accept the inevitable and work to create a uniform, reliable, verifiable electronic voting system. They may be right!

Jane Pitt, Dec. 3, 2004