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Internet voting: The end of democracy?

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September 4, 2003—Despite inherent and increasingly blatant security risks, Internet voting companies are steadily gaining control over the U.S. electoral system and American civic life. The risk to democracy is very real.

"The voter has absolutely no control over the vote cast once it leaves his own computer system," writes Dr. Rebecca Mercuri, one of the nation's leading experts in computer voting technology. "He cannot check whether it has been subverted on the way to the count . . . (there are) problems with all forms of remote voting include the dangers of coercion, vote selling and impersonation. The Internet introduces additional authentication issues."

In the wake of recent voting machine fraud and assorted scandals, Internet voting—the most vulnerable technology to election fraud—is flying under the radar. That may not be an accident.

Neither the Federal Election Commission (FEC) nor the National Association of State Election Directors (NASSED) publicly lists one of the largest Internet voting providers, Bermuda-based Accenture (formerly Andersen Consulting of Arthur Andersen/Enron fame). This omission is alarming. Accenture's first major contract in this arena will be to count the online military vote for the Department of Defense (DOD) in the upcoming 2004 presidential election.

Also, there are no mandatory, or voluntary, government/industry standards that specifically address Internet voting technology. Even the federal standards that apply to other voting systems are outmoded and voluntary. There is no federal government authority over the elections industry. State regulations and certification hinged on industry guidelines and industry-appointed certifiers. This is an industry that is basically self-regulating.

Within the ranks of those who have voiced concerns about touch screen and optical scanning voting equipment, questions are still being raised about where is this taking democracy as we know it.

The same scientist who found serious flaws in Diebold software, also had a business relationship with a leading worldwide supplier of Internet voting technology, VoteHere. Avi Rubin, who headed the Johns Hopkins University team of investigators, recently resigned his position on the Technical Advisory Board of VoteHere and returned stock options in the company. Two years ago, Rubin participated in The National Workshop On Internet Voting. That workshop blazed the trail for Internet voting.

Today, Internet voting is being used by civic, labor, and business organizations to elect their governing bodies.

Election.com is a case in point. It has about 600 customers that use its Internet voting service, including the Democratic National Committee, the Pennsylvania State Employees Credit Union, the Sierra Club, IEEE (The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Inc.), the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Florida Bar, and AIMR (Association of Investment Management and Research).

Who owns Election.com? A majority stake in Election.com was purchased last spring by Osan Ltd, a group of Saudi investors. Meanwhile, the public sector assets of Election.com were recently bought by Accenture.

So far, the history of Internet voting has been short, but it's sure to be expanded as the new standard for "democracy."

Internet voting for political office was first used by the Arizona Democratic Party in their primary election in March 2000. Its big debut will be in the 2004 presidential election, when the Department of Defense (DOD) offers Internet voting to the military and other civilians. As many as 6 million people, that's 5 percent of the voters in the 2000 presidential election, may use the system.

Who are the largest promoters of Internet voting? The White House—and not just the Bush administration, but the Clinton White House also expressed an interest in advancing and popularizing the idea of online voting.

Late in 2000, the Clinton administration asked the National Science Foundation (NSF) to organize The National Workshop On Internet Voting, which was jointly sponsored by the NSF and The Internet Policy Institute (IPI) and hosted by the Freedom Forum in cooperation with the University of Maryland.

Who are the IPI and The Freedom Forum? The Washington-based Freedom Forum is Allen H. Neuharth's baby.

Neuharth is the founder and senior advisory chairman of the Freedom Forum, "a nonpartisan foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people," according to their website.

Neuharth is also the founder of *USA TODAY*, the former chairman and chief executive officer of Gannett Co., Inc., and the author of "Nearly One World."

Speaking at the Economic Club in Washington, October 16, 2001, Neuharth said, "Yes, there are some evil people in the world. True, we in the USA are not universally loved. But the fact is, our world has become a huge global village . . . One global village, linked electronically, via the satellite; over 5 billion villagers, most of them sharing similar problems and hopes and opportunities."

But for whose benefit?

The Washington-based Internet Policy Institute (IPI) is a consortium of network companies and non-profit organizations. According to an April 12, 1999, CNN report, The Internet Policy Institute said its founding money came from America Online Inc., the Nasdaq exchange, the Morino Institute, MCI WorldCom, Network Solutions Inc. (now VeriSign, formerly owned by SAIC), the Potomac KnowledgeWay (includes Morin Institute again) and the World Information Technology and Services Alliance, "a consortium of 50 information technology (IT) industry associations from economies around the world," according to their website.

What did "The National Workshop On Internet Voting" report say? In so many words it says, "Get ready to get on the Internet to elect your leaders."

The report says, "Poll site Internet voting systems offer some benefits and could be responsibly fielded within the next several election cycles. While many issues remain to be addressed, the problems associated with these systems appear likely to be resolvable in the near term. As such, it is appropriate for experiments to be conducted and prototypes deployed in order to gain valuable experience prior to full-scale implementation. . . . The next step beyond poll site voting would be to deploy kiosk voting terminals in public places . . . Remote Internet voting systems pose significant risk to the integrity of the voting process, and should not be fielded for use in public elections until substantial technical and social science issues are addressed."

However in a footnote, the reports says, ". . . remote Internet voting may be appropriate in the near-term for special populations, such as the military and government employees and their dependents based overseas. Such exceptions should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis."

That day is here. Internet voting is slowly being shoved down the throat of the electorate. The military are the first victims, the elderly and the disabled will be next. Our civic, labor, and business institutions are succumbing in droves.

Questions remain. Why is Internet voting being promoted by military-industrial government contractors, who have expanded their information technology (IT) business into "voting technology?" Why are computer security issues not being seriously addressed in touch screen voting machines and Internet voting?

And most importantly, who will benefit from computer voting that can be used to manipulate results and award elections to the highest bidder?

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