Electronic Voting

Voting: When low-tech beats high-tech
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June 25, 2004—Back in the age of the dinosaurs—well, maybe a bit after that—voting was a simple exercise. It was done with paper and pencil. There were no mechanical machines, punch cards, optical scanners or touchscreens.

As a registered voter—and many people found registering more of a hassle than voting—you walked into your polling precinct and signed the registration book. A local election board worker recorded the number of your paper ballot next to your name and handed you the ballot, which you took into a both screened by a curtain (yes, the secrecy of your vote was a big thing in those days). Then you picked up a pencil and made an X in the box next to the names of the candidates and initiatives you were voting for. There was even a blank line under each of the various offices to be voted for, so if you didn't wish to vote for the candidates printed on the ballot, you could write in a name. When you were finished, you folded the ballot up to the tear-off that bore its number.

Upon leaving the booth, you handed your ballot to another election board worker who tore off you ballot's number and strung it on a string. This was an additional safeguard against there being more ballots than people who voted. Depending upon your state laws, either an election board worker deposited your ballot in a locked box or handed it back to you to deposit in the box.

At the conclusion of the voting day, the box was opened, the ballots removed and the tabulation commenced. Usually, one election board worker unfolded each ballot, looked at it, handed it to a second worker who read the votes cast, which two or more workers and any challengers present would then record on tally sheets. Members of the public could also witness the count and even keep their own tallies.

The local boards usually comprised two Republicans and two Democrats, which helped to keep them honest. Again, depending on state law, when all the votes were tabulated and the results phoned in to the county elections supervisor, the ballots, the official tabulation sheets and the string bearing the number rip-offs were placed back in the ballot box, which was then locked, and two election board workers—one from each party—accompanied the ballot box and the registration books to the office of the county supervisor of elections and thus completing the chain of custody.

Yes, depending on the length of a ballot, it was a long and tedious job for the local election board workers, who often received lousy pay to boot. Oftentimes the sun would be coming up before the votes were tabulated in primary elections, where many candidates could be vying for their party's nomination for an office and which required separate ballot boxes for the two parties.

While it was possible to steal a local, a district and possibly even a statewide election with paper ballots by either stuffing or switching the boxes—something Jersey City's Frank "I Am the Law" Hague is said to have done—the advent of the mechanical lever machines, first used in Lockport, NY, in 1892, made vote theft much easier. Stuffing ballot boxes or switching them required the complicity of the local election boards. In addition, they had to worry about whistleblowers—challengers or members of the public who had witnessed the actual tabulation.

But Americans, an impatient lot and always fascinated with building better mousetraps, fell in love with the mechanical lever machines, which first made their appearance in Lockport, NY, in 1892. Of course, it never occurred to them that their ballots were now in the hands of a private company, which made it much easier for their votes to be stolen. After all, it took just one company's serviceman to "fix" the machines. And didn't we hear tales about that over the years? Machines that malfunctioned. Votes that weren't properly recorded. Write-in tapes that vanished.

Yet, by 1996, 20 percent of Americans were casting their votes on mechanical lever machines.

Then came the punch cards, first used in two Georgia counties for the 1964 presidential primaries. By 1996, 37 percent of voters were using punch cards. Hanging chad was the least of the problems, According to James M. and Kenneth F. Collier, the authors of [Votescam: The Stealing of America](#), the equipment used to tabulate the punch cards could be set up to diddle the count. Also, machines that have a maddening tendency to foul up could jam or chew up the cards. In the case of the former, the cards had to be put through again (and maybe again to get the "proper" count?). In cases where cards got chewed up, someone had to punch new ones (exact duplicates or maybe not?).

Unlike relatively cheap paper ballots that any local printer could produce, the more expensive punch cards could only be gotten from the corporations that made the voting and tabulation hardware, because the perforations on the chad were supposed to be made to a precise tolerance for the chad to be cleanly removed by the stylus supplied the voter. We all know how well that worked. Remember hanging chad? And when the chad hung, the vote might or might not be properly counted by the tabulation equipment—i.e., if the chad didn't foul up the machine.

Californians were the first to use optically scanned ballots in a 1962 election. By 1996, 24.6 percent of registered US voters were using this system. The drawback to this method is that the voter must fill in an area next to a candidate's name—coloring between the lines, you might say. Then the ballot is fed into a computer, which may or may not see the filled in area. The vote is then recorded on the computer that, aside from the mischief someone may have done to it, is connected to a modem at some point in order to send the results to the county elections supervisor, putting the whole tally at risk of being changed by an employee of the company that supplied the equipment or a hacker.

Okay, you say, we still have those expensive pieces of paper the votes were cast on to audit the tally. Ah, but that only happens, if it happens at all, in a very close vote. After what happened in Florida in 2000, any vote theft that occurs in 2004 is likely to have a comfortable spread, thereby avoiding recounts.

In 1988, then Congressman Buddy MacKay (D-FL) considered challenging his close loss for a US Senate seat to incumbent Republican Connie Mack. MacKay believed the computers in several heavily Democratic South Florida counties had been programmed to skip every tenth vote cast for him, resulting in his less than 1 percent loss to Mack. But MacKay could not get his hands on the computer code, because the county elections supervisors "signed agreements that say the company doesn't have to show them the damn source codes."

Now comes the most easy to rig voting system of all: totally paperless computer touchscreens, also known as direct recording electronic (DRE) voting systems. In a May survey, Election Data Services found that more than 30 percent of registered voters this year will be using touchscreens. This despite all the scandals to date about DRE systems. Some think that by adding voter-verified paper audit trails the fraud can be eliminated. Wrong.

While it is unlikely that election fraud can be entirely eliminated, the only way to reduce it to a fraction is with paper ballots, pencils and honest election officials. A truly free people don't turn over their most precious right—the right to vote and have their votes counted as cast—to private corporations, which is precisely what has happened in the name of expediency and convenience. Be very suspicious of anyone who tells you otherwise, offering such excuses as ease of use, making life easier for people with disabilities, and eliminating errors people make in marking, handling and counting paper ballots.