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MAKING VOTES COUNT

The Disability Lobby and Voting

Two obvious requirements for a fair election are that voters should have complete confidence about their ballots' being counted accurately and that everyone, including the disabled, should have access to the polls. It is hard to imagine advocates for those two goals fighting, but lately that seems to be what's happening.

The issue is whether electronic voting machines should provide a "paper trail" — receipts that could be checked by voters and used in recounts. There has been a rising demand around the country for this critical safeguard, but the move to provide paper trails is being fought by a handful of influential advocates for the disabled, who complain that requiring verifiable paper records will slow the adoption of accessible electronic voting machines.

The National Federation of the Blind, for instance, has been championing controversial voting machines that do not provide a paper trail. It has attested not only to the machines' accessibility, but also to their security and accuracy — neither of which is within the federation's areas of expertise. What's even more troubling is that the group has accepted a \$1 million gift for a new training institute from Diebold, the machines' manufacturer, which put the testimonial on its Web site. The federation stands by its "complete confidence" in Diebold even though several recent studies have raised serious doubts about the company, and California has banned more than 14,000 Diebold machines from being used this November because of doubts about their reliability.

Disability-rights groups have had an outsized influence on the debate despite their general lack of background on security issues. The League of Women Voters has been a leading opponent of voter-verifiable paper trails, in part because it has accepted the disability groups' arguments.

Last year, the American Association of People With Disabilities gave its Justice for All award to Senator Christopher Dodd, an author of the Help America Vote Act, a post-2000 election reform law. Mr. Dodd, who has actively opposed paper trails, then appointed Jim Dickson, an association official, to the Board of Advisors of the Election Assistance Commission, where he will be in a good position to oppose paper trails at the federal level. In California, a group of disabled voters recently sued to undo the secretary of state's order decertifying the electronic voting machines that his office had found to be unreliable.

Some supporters of voter-verifiable paper trails question whether disability-rights groups have gotten too close to voting machine manufacturers. Besides the donation by Diebold to the National Federation of the Blind, there have been other gifts. According to Mr. Dickson, the American Association of People with Disabilities has received \$26,000 from voting machine companies this year.

The real issue, though, is that disability-rights groups have been clouding the voting machine debate by suggesting that the nation must choose between accessible voting and verifiable voting.

It is well within the realm of technology to produce machines that meet both needs. Meanwhile, it would be a grave mistake for election officials to rush to spend millions of dollars on paperless electronic voting machines that may quickly become obsolete.

Disabled people have historically faced great obstacles at the polls, and disability-rights groups are right to work zealously for accessible voting. But they should not overlook the fact that the disabled, like all Americans, also have an interest in ensuring that their elections are not stolen.

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