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The Pentagon's Troubling Role

Barely two months before the presidential vote, Missouri's secretary of state has suddenly announced that he will allow military voters from his state - one of the most pivotal in the election - to e-mail ballots from combat zones to the Defense Department. E-mail is far too insecure to be used for voting. Missouri and North Dakota, which announced a similar rule yesterday, should rescind these orders right away. Missouri's action also sheds light on the Defense Department's role in administering federal elections, a troubling situation that needs far more scrutiny.

The Missouri secretary of state, Matt Blunt, decided last week that military voters in combat zones will be able to e-mail their ballots to the Pentagon, which will then send them to local Missouri elections offices to be counted. This system, which has not been used before, is rife with security problems, including the possibility of hacking the e-mailed ballots, which will not be encrypted. Earlier this year the Defense Department scrapped a pilot program to allow the military to vote over the Internet, after concluding that it could not "assure the legitimacy of votes" cast online.

There is more cause for concern after the ballots arrive at the Pentagon. E-mail voters will be required to sign a release acknowledging that their votes may not be kept secret. When the people handling ballots know who they are cast for, it is not hard to imagine that ballots for disfavored candidates could accidentally be "lost." And because the e-mailed ballots arrive as computer documents, it is possible to cut off the voter's digitized signature, attach it to a ballot supporting another candidate, and send that ballot on to the state to be counted.

It is unclear how good the protections are to guard against tampering. The e-mailed ballots will be handled by a contractor, Omega Technologies, hired for this purpose, at the company's offices and without the election observers who are present at normal polling places.

E-mail voting by military personnel also opens the door to coercion. Many soldiers may have to vote on computers in places where their commanding officers may be present. They may also be reluctant to vote their conscience if they know that the Defense Department could be reading their ballots.

The Missouri and North Dakota announcements call attention to the larger issue of why the Pentagon is directly handling so many presidential ballots. The Federal Voting Assistance Program, a unit of the Defense Department, is charged with helping not only military voters, but all eligible voters overseas, a total of about six million people. But it is a fundamental aspect of the American election system that

handling and counting of votes is supposed to occur at the local level. The Defense Department should stop handling actual ballots, and instead help military and other overseas voters send them directly to local elections officials.

In the 1960 election, there was widespread skepticism when Mayor Richard Daley waited until hours after the polls closed to release the Chicago vote, and it turned out to be almost precisely what was needed to put Illinois in the Democratic column. It invites cynicism about our democracy to operate a system in which employees who answer to the secretary of defense could control the margin of victory in a close presidential election.

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