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On the Voting Machine Makers' Tab

As doubts have grown about the reliability of electronic voting, some of its loudest defenders have been state and local election officials. Many of those same officials have financial ties to voting machine companies. While they may sincerely think that electronic voting machines are so trustworthy that there is no need for a paper record of votes, their views have to be regarded with suspicion until their conflicts are addressed.

Computer scientists, who understand the technology better than anyone else, have been outspoken about the perils of electronic voting. Good government groups, like Common Cause, are increasingly mobilizing grass-roots opposition. And state governments in a growing number of states, including California and Ohio, have pushed through much-needed laws that require electronic voting machines to produce paper records.

But these groups have faced intense opposition from election officials. At a hearing this spring, officials from Georgia, California and Texas dismissed concerns about electronic voting, and argued that voter-verifiable paper trails, which voters can check to ensure their vote was correctly recorded, are impractical. The Election Center, which does election training and policy work, and whose board is dominated by state and local election officials, says the real problem is people who "scare voters and public officials with claims that the voting equipment and/or its software can be manipulated to change the outcome of elections."

What election officials do not mention, however, are the close ties they have to the voting machine industry. A disturbing number end up working for voting machine companies. When Bill Jones left office as California's secretary of state in 2003, he quickly became a consultant to Sequoia Voting Systems. His assistant secretary of state took a full-time job there. Former secretaries of state from Florida and Georgia have signed on as lobbyists for Election Systems and Software and Diebold Election Systems. The list goes on.

Even while in office, many election officials are happy to accept voting machine companies' largess. The Election Center takes money from Diebold and other machine companies, though it will not say how much. At the center's national conference last month, the companies underwrote meals and a dinner cruise.

Forty-three percent of the budget of the National Association of Secretaries of State comes from voting

machine companies and other vendors, and at its conference this summer in New Orleans, Accenture, which compiles voter registration databases for states, sponsored a dinner at the Old State Capitol in Baton Rouge.

There are also reports of election officials being directly offered gifts. Last year, the Columbus Dispatch reported that a voting machine company was offering concert tickets and limousine rides while competing for a contract worth as much as \$100 million, if not more.

When electronic voting was first rolled out, election officials and voting machine companies generally acted with little or no public participation. But now the public is quite rightly insisting on greater transparency and more say in the decisions. If election officials want credibility in this national discussion, they must do more to demonstrate that their only loyalty is to the voter.

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