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MAKING VOTES COUNT

Setting Standards for Fair Elections

The much-delayed work of setting federal standards for electronic voting machines is speeding up, and there is reason for concern. Voting machine companies and their supporters have been given a large say in the process, while advocates for voters, including those who insist on the use of voter-verified paper receipts, have been pushed to the margins. Election officials and machine makers may be betting that after the presidential election, ordinary Americans have lost interest in the mechanics of the ballot. But Americans do care, and it is unlikely that they will be satisfied by a process in which special interests dominate, or by a result that does not ensure vote totals that can be trusted.

The No. 1 goal of the new standards should be ensuring that the machines will not, by accident or design, produce false vote totals. It is increasingly clear that voters want electronic, A.T.M.-type voting machines that produce verifiable paper records, or other systems like optical scan machines, where votes are cast on paper as a check on the reliability of machines. California, Ohio and other states require paper trails by law, and New York appears poised to join them.

The Election Assistance Commission, a federal body set up after the 2000 election mess, has created a group called the Technical Guidelines Development Committee to propose federal electronic voting standards to Congress this spring. This committee includes outspoken supporters of electronic voting without paper trails, including Britain Williams, a retired Kennesaw State University professor who has worked closely with Georgia on its controversial adoption of Diebold voting machines. But disappointingly, the commission did not include any of the many respected computer scientists - such as Prof. Aviel Rubin of Johns Hopkins, Prof. David Dill of Stanford or Dr. Rebecca Mercuri - who have been warning about the unreliability of electronic voting in its current form.

The election commission is expected to rely heavily on standards being developed by a nonprofit association of engineers, computer scientists and other professionals with the unfortunate acronym of I.E.E.E., which develops technical standards for such things as wireless communications. But the voting machine industry plays a disconcertingly large role in this organization. The chairman of the working group preparing the standards for voting machines is a top executive of Election Systems and Software, a large and controversial voting machine maker. The head of the committee that oversees the working group has a seat on the election commission's voting machines standards committee. He is a consultant

who has been hired in the past by companies in the elections field. Because of the insular nature of the engineering panel's meetings, ordinary voters - who have an important stake - have had little chance to participate. Over the objections of some members of the working group, the current draft of the election-machine standards merely makes voter-verified paper trails optional. The draft's scope is also too narrow: it fails to address many ways in which vote totals could be rigged.

The Election Assistance Commission has a chance to lead the nation to a new generation of technology that voters can trust. But if it fails, there are other routes. California has developed its own state standards for machines with paper trails, and other states could do likewise. And some of the nation's leading election reform advocates, election officials and voting machine makers are forming a new group, called Voting System Performance Rating, that hopes to develop standards in a more inclusive way. Whoever sets the standards, the process and the result need to give voters complete confidence that their votes will be accurately counted.

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