

Speech on Voting Machines

"How votes are counted, and who counts them, are as important as who votes." These words are taken from a Smithsonian exhibition on the history of voting systems in America, and it's absolutely true: all of these issues are central to the legitimacy of our government. For if we are to accept our elected leaders, and their enormous power to change our lives, we must be able to trust that they were in fact elected, in a fair and open voting process, by the will of the people.

So, how do we know that a fair and open election process has occurred? How do we know that we can trust the results of an election? These questions essentially ask, how do we know that our elected leaders are really our legitimate leaders?

First we need to have confidence that every person who was eligible and who intended to vote was able to do so. This means that African Americans, for example, are not harassed away from the polls, as used to happen on a regular basis some 50 years ago. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed specifically so that this kind of influence on elections would cease; this law is universally recognized to be critical to the continued functioning of our democracy.

But at least as important as the ability for eligible citizens to vote are the problems of how the votes are counted and who does the counting—the mechanics of elections. These issues can seem technical, boring and remote—they're hard to get excited about—but they are every bit as important to our democracy as the question of who votes. As I discovered last Tuesday when I served as a poll worker for the first time, there are traditionally a lot of safeguards in place to assure that the voting is not tampered with. Many of these safeguards are complicated and seemingly arcane, like the requirement that two people must accompany the election results to the central tabulation center. These safeguards are intended to ensure that the results of an election are never trusted to any single person. They are also intended to ensure that the process of counting votes is open to public scrutiny, so that when necessary, votes can be counted in more than one way and it can be made certain that the counting adds up. Without these procedures, the opportunity for fraud or for mistakes is simply too great. The legitimacy of our government is too important for us to simply hope that nothing bad happens. We must be able to make sure of it.

Yet no number of complicated or arcane procedures at the polling place can EVER overcome the problems posed by the electronic voting machine. The public cannot

see inside these machines; we cannot verify that we have not been defrauded. This is because electronic voting machines are computers whose codes and programs are kept secret from us by the corporations that manufacture them. Of course any system for voting is potentially vulnerable to fraud and mistakes. But in terms of the quest for fair and open elections whose results we can trust, electronic voting machines represent a step backwards. Because they leave no paper trail—no hard and fast evidence about how each citizen voted—we can have no public assurance, no matter how careful we are, that the results of an election are legitimate. We must be able to challenge the results of an election, to demand proof that it was fair and truthful and represented the intentions of the voters. With electronic voting machines, we cannot demand this, because there is no way to ensure that a given vote was recorded correctly inside the machine.

Creating a good voting system is an enormously cumbersome proposition; any legitimate system must be not only made accessible to all who wish to vote, but the manner in which it records votes must be private for each individual voter, as well as extremely accurate and secure. On top of all that, this must be done in a speedy and efficient manner. Until now, the history of voting in the United States has been a continual process of improvement. Two hundred years ago, only white male property-owners could vote, and votes were cast in public and stuffed into boxes that were vulnerable to hacking. Then, as minorities and women fought for and won the right to vote, the voting mechanism also improved—mechanical machines were introduced which ensured privacy and which made the voting process less susceptible to fraud and mistakes. But the people who fought for these improvements would turn over in their graves if they saw us today, voluntarily throwing away the integrity of our elections.

For electronic voting machines are doing just that. They are not secure—because they are entrusted to a single private corporation and because they are easily hacked by people with knowledge of computers. They are not accurate—or at least there is no way for the public to verify their accuracy. And they are not private—this issue has not been touched on much, but the CVCC has received complaints about a lack of privacy in the voting booth. As one of them puts it, “I can clearly see what anyone else is voting, and mine can be seen as well.” Now it may be true that electronic voting machines offer some gains in efficiency, although those gains are slight in comparison with the optical-scan system. But in every other way, electronic voting machines have an abysmal record for ensuring fair and open elections. Our democracy deserves better. Thank you.