

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,
analysis and investigations on issues affecting
African Americans and the African world.

www.BlackCommentator.com

June 21, 2012 - Issue 477

How Hard Can It Be to Count Marks on a Piece of Paper? Solidarity America By John Funicello BC Columnist

There are alarms being raised about the integrity of the computerized voting system that the country has moved toward at a rapid pace.

Tests have shown that the systems can be hacked and all traces of the hacking can be programmed to disappear after the hack has done its work. But nobody seems to be listening, at least, not very attentively.

In a democratic republic, people tend to rely on the democracy part, which means that all of the participants in a given election need to feel secure that their votes count. More importantly, they need to feel secure that the votes count exactly as they were cast.

For a long time, the American electorate used paper ballots to cast their votes and that method lasted over the generations. Then, along came mechanical methods of "pulling the lever" in the voting booth and the machine counted the ballots. In the computer era, we have moved along to touch-screen machines, which count the votes without either a mechanical number or a paper ballot.

Therein lies the problem. In the early days of the touch-screen voting machines, there was no record of the votes, except the totals for the various candidates. The inner workings of the machines were proprietary, which means that the manufacturer did not need to reveal how the machines worked, even to the election officials, who just had to take the word of the company that the machines gave true results for each elective office.

We know now that this just was not true. There were, and are, myriad ways that the machines can be manipulated. Rick Holmes, opinion editor at *MetroWest Daily News* in Framingham, Mass., asked in a recent column "...Can an election be fixed? The answer to that is an easy yes." He explained that machines could be set so that Candidate A starts off the voting with 10 extra votes. Or, every tenth vote for Candidate B can be cast for Candidate A. Those who are familiar with the use of computers know how easy it can be for experts to manipulate the machines.

Here's just one example that Holmes cites: "Internet voting, touted by some as the next modernization on the way, is even more vulnerable. When the District of Columbia invited hackers to test the security of an online voting test run in 2010, it took less than two days for a team from University of Michigan to break in and throw the mayor's race to Master Control Pro, with HAL 9000 elected council chairman. For good measure, they made the election office computers sing the Michigan fight song."

If Americans expect to retain the semblance of democracy that now exists, these problems are going to have to be addressed immediately. Preferably, before the election this fall. There is plenty of evidence that voting machines have been tampered with, and it is not known how many elected public officials are serving today, having been defeated in the actual voting. And, we are not speaking about the 2000 election in Florida, in which the U.S. Supreme Court granted the office of the presidency to George W. Bush.

What we have today in the U.S. is "voting irregularities," the same kinds of problems that developing countries have and which the "international community" tries to minimize by sending in election monitors. It doesn't make the elections perfect to have foreigners peering over your shoulder, so to speak, to ensure valid elections, but it makes them less likely to be stolen outright.

Unfortunately, the direction in which the U.S. is headed is to remove every last shred of guaranteed integrity in the electoral process, especially the voting, itself. It's one thing to have thugs from one party or another harassing or threatening voters (killing them in many elections), or stuffing the ballot boxes (when we had them), or otherwise keeping them from exercising their franchise; it's another to have a system of elections based on machines that are under the control of private companies, with the results tabulated by those same

companies and election officials and voters kept in the dark about the process.

But what takes the cake in the U.S. electoral process is the hysteria, by Republicans, over alleged voter fraud and the subsequent passage of laws in various places to force photo voter identification cards. For many, even though they have voted for decades, in every election, it was difficult or impossible to get a government photo ID. And, where there is a charge for such an ID, as much as \$20 or \$50, many poor or elderly simply cannot afford to buy one.

One of the great hoaxes perpetrated by a political party, this time the Republicans, was the accusation that ACORN, one of the oldest grass roots community organizations in the country, was perpetrating voter fraud. That accusation, prompted by a phony "news crew" working for a now-deceased right-wing trickster, raised enough hysteria in Congress and the mass media to cause them to lose their funding. For decades, ACORN was the champion of the poor and inner city Americans, in everything from housing, to education, to voter registration.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., environmentalist and son of the late senator, and Greg Palast, investigative reporter, had to say about the ACORN debacle, in October 2008, on CommonDreams.org:

"Jailed GOP activist Jack Abramoff and his fellow convict, Congressman Bob Ney, wrote the most sinister provisions of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) which Congress passed in 2002 creating a series of diabolically cunning new voting impediments. HAVA, for example, allows state voting officials to purge tens of thousands of voters from the polls using algorithms and voter ID requirements that disproportionately disenfranchise black, Hispanic and minority voters, and other Democratic demographics including senior citizens and young people."

"In 2004, highly organized GOP tacticians helped disenfranchise no less than 2.7 million American voters. Almost a million of them were African Americans. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission has found black voters were nine times more likely to have their votes discarded than white voters and that over one-third of the million provisional ballots cast in 2004 - ballots handed disproportionately to African Americans - were never counted but simply thrown into dumpsters.

“In a technique known as ‘caging’ RNC operatives send millions of first class letters to black voters across the country marked ‘do not forward.’ Republican operatives armed with lists then invade black precincts on Election Day to challenge those voters whose letters were returned to the RNC because the voter was not home to sign when the mail arrived. That tactic deliberately targets black voters, resurrecting Old Dixie’s Jim Crow procedures designed to rid the lists of black voters and create long lines in black precincts.”

That may sound familiar, but not because it is a recitation of historical fact. That kind of thing happened historically, of course, but it has happened in recent elections, as well, and it is likely to keep happening. For example, not enough voting machines, so long lines snake out of polling places, especially where there are lots of black and other minority voters and especially where they may tend to vote for Democrats. Ever since Reconstruction, black voters have had difficulty (sometimes endangering their lives) trying to cast a ballot in a free election. Now, vote suppression is happening in many places in the country.

Our political system, itself, may be the reason that fewer than half of eligible voters even bother to go to the polls in recent decades. They don’t feel that voting for one or the other party will make a difference in their lives. Add to that negative attitude about democracy in the U.S. the intentional problems that have been created (purges of hundreds or thousands of names from the rolls and photo ID laws) for voters and it’s easy to see why millions have given up on the exercise of their franchise.

Even though we know that voting itself does not prove that we live in a democracy, refusing to vote should not be the end of a citizen’s attempt to participate in the democratic structure that remains in America. And even though one of the most dynamic organizations dedicated to participation in democracy, ACORN, was cynically destroyed by right-wing elements of government and Corporate America, it remains for the people to find a way to make democracy work. It will not happen by waiting for “leaders” from those two sectors of the nation.

What to do? First, in elections, how about paper ballots for presidential elections and those for the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives for starters? The Election Defense Alliance has suggested such a radical solution. They can be found at

www.ElectionDefenseAlliance.org. Secondly, vote! Even though it may seem irrelevant to you, **demand** the right to vote in the face of all odds. Do not leave the polling place until your right to vote has been honored. Anyone who has trouble voting should call 1-866-OUR-VOTE for assistance...immediately. If the election officials or poll watchers do not know the law, the group at this phone number will assist them.

Repairing the broken system that we have is a long-term project, but it has to start somewhere. Exercising your franchise to vote is a good starting point. Voting may not suddenly bring us a crop of high quality candidates, but our involvement in the entire process will surely improve the lot of them.

And, in the choice over whether we use the private-company-owned touch-screen voting machines or paper ballots, we don't want to be answering the question of the wag who was observing America at the polls in recent years, by asking, "Which candidate did your machine vote for?"

BlackCommentator.com Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funciello.



Copyright © 2002-2012
www.BlackCommentator.com
All Rights Reserved