

Electronic Voting Machines: New, High-Tech Ways to Disenfranchise African-Americans

The rise of electronic voting has created new ways to disenfranchise African-American voters – through high-tech ethnic profiling, inequitable allocation of equipment, and discrimination against non-computer-users and the elderly.

The solution? Prohibit the use of electronic voting systems, and replace them with voter-marked paper ballots, optical scanners, and stringent audits – a combination that provides the most secure safeguards available today and in the foreseeable future.

The opportunity to ban electronic voting is before Congress now. HR 811, the “Voter Confidence and Increased Accessibility Act of 2007,” does not prohibit electronic voting but must be amended to do so, in order to protect the voting rights of African-Americans.

“Many national organizations are pushing electronic voting machines, in spite of evidence that the machines are disenfranchising African-Americans and other minorities. Everyone must take a closer look at this – and soon.”

~ Velmanette Montgomery, New York State Senator

Disproportionate Numbers of African-American Votes are Lost

Far from reducing the disenfranchisement of Florida’s African-Americans, electronic voting violates their civil rights in new ways. The 2002 debut of electronic voting machines in Miami-Dade Florida was a fiasco. The Florida ACLU studied 31 precincts with the highest numbers of ‘missing votes’ and compared the problem rate in precincts with majority African-Americans vs. majority Anglos. The Florida ACLU reported:¹

Not only are there a significant number of missing votes, but there's also an alarming racial disparity in the errors that occurred during the last election.

That the African American community was disproportionately affected on September 10th is particularly egregious after the well-documented disparities of November 2000.

There was a 15% problem rate in non-black precincts versus a 28% problem rate in majority black precincts. The probability this could have occurred by chance is infinitesimal – 0.00055. ... Poverty was not a factor that mattered, race was.

Machine Allocation Discriminates Against African-American Voters

In the 2004 Ohio election, the inequitable distribution of electronic voting machines caused long waits in African-American precincts, and many voters had to leave without casting a ballot. Franklin County, for example, provided only one machine per 324 registered voters in predominantly African-American precincts, while in other precincts the ratio was one machine per 262 voters.² On election day, 39 of the machines destined for inner city precincts either were not delivered or were never activated, and officials had no explanation.³

A 2005 study commissioned by the State of Georgia, which uses electronic voting machines exclusively, reported that “poorer communities and communities inhabited mostly by nonwhites experienced higher levels of undercounts....”⁴ The study also found disproportionate wait times: an average of 30 minutes reported by whites, and an average of 56 minutes reported by non-whites.⁵

Digital Divide Shuts Out African-Americans, Decreases Confidence

The digital divide is a reality in poor African-American communities. Inner city schools and community centers often don't have computers, so residents are often unfamiliar with and intimidated by the technology.

Before the 2004 election, Joanne Bland, African-American Director and Co-founder of the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute in Selma, Alabama, warned that the new computerized voting machines would intimidate black voters and suppress their vote in the November presidential election.

*"The computers really terrify me. The electronic voting -- the new machines -- I think it will turn off a segment in my community, particularly the elderly. We are not as technically savvy, and we are afraid of machines like that, and they (African-Americans) probably won't go [to the polls] and they probably won't ask for assistance."*⁶

Velmanette Montgomery, New York State Senator, agrees. In her January 2007 newsletter, this African-American leader stated:

*"[W]e believe that electronic voting machines will diminish citizen participation in the electoral process. This is especially true among minority voters, senior citizens, and those who are not computer savvy."*⁷

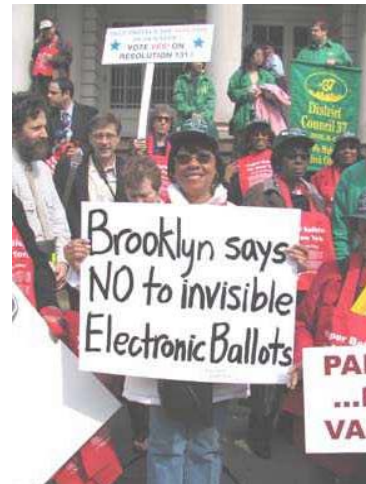
The 2005 State of Georgia study showed that, understandably, African-American voters lack confidence in the accuracy of the new voting systems. The study found that only 39% of African-American voters in Georgia had confidence in their Diebold electronic voting systems to count their votes as cast, as opposed to 76% of white voters.⁸

The Solution: Paper Ballots, Optical Scanners, and Rigorous Audits

Voting on paper ballots helps to prevent long lines, since voters don't have to wait for an available machine before they can mark their ballots. Scanners read each ballot in a few seconds, and if the scanner breaks down, voting can continue and ballots can be scanned later.

Only one optical scanner is required in each polling place to serve the same number of voters as ten to twelve electronic voting machines. Observers can monitor one machine more easily than ten; the process of tabulating paper ballots is observable; and meaningful audits of the paper ballots can confirm that the machines are tabulating correctly.

With paper ballots and optical scanners, the community can understand election procedures, participate fully, and ensure honest elections.



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¹ http://www.acluf.org/news_events/archive/2002/racialimpactrelease.cfm.

² <http://www.usenix.org/events/evt06/tech/slides/mebane.pdf>, Slide 40.

³ <http://www.votersunite.org/article.asp?id=4197>

⁴ <http://www.cviog.uga.edu/peachpoll/2005-03-10.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.cviog.uga.edu/peachpoll/2005-03-10data.php>

⁶ <http://www.cnsnews.com/ViewSpecialReports.asp?Page=%5CSpecialReports%5Carchive%5C200409%5CSPE20040930a.html>

⁷ <http://www.wheresthepaper.org/VelmanetteMontgomeryPR070122.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.cviog.uga.edu/peachpoll/2005-03-10.pdf>