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GAO SLAMS ELECTRONIC VOTING MACHINES

Evanston IL, October 22, 2005 The U.S. Government General Accountability Office (GAO) released a report highly critical of Electronic voting machines and systems on October 21, 2005. The report, entitled "Federal Efforts to Improve Security and Reliability of Electronic Voting Systems Are Under Way, but Key Activities Need to Be Completed" (GAO-05-956) was undertaken by the GAO at the request of members of the House Government Reform Committee, House Judiciary Committee and the House Science Committee.

Ranking Member of the Government Reform Committee, Henry A. Waxman (D-CA), said, "The GAO report indicates that we need to get serious and act quickly to improve the security of electronic voting machines," said Rep. Waxman. "The report makes clear that there is a lack of transparency and accountability in electronic voting systems - from the day that contracts are signed with manufacturers to the counting of electronic votes on Election Day. State and local officials are spending a great deal of money on machines without concrete proof that they are secure and reliable. American voters deserve better."

In it's key findings, the GAO listed some examples of voting system problems and vulnerabilities:

- Cast ballots, ballot definition files, and audit logs could be modified.
- Supervisor functions were protected with weak or easily-guessed passwords.
- Systems had easily picked locks and power switches that were exposed and unprotected.
- Local jurisdictions misconfigured their electronic voting systems, leading to election day problems.
- Voting systems experienced operational failures during elections.
- Vendors installed uncertified electronic voting systems.

Rep. Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY) said, "I wholeheartedly endorse the GAO recommendations, which underscore the need for the Election Assistance Commission and the National Institute of Standards and Technology to continue their work to establish standards and testing procedures for voting equipment. This work must move ahead on an ambitious schedule."

Rep. John Conyers (D-MI), ranking minority member of the House Judiciary Committee, a tireless champion for election reform and leading force behind the landmark report "*Preserving Democracy: What Went Wrong in Ohio 2004*", has expanded comments on the report. He says the report ". . . lends important credibility to the cause of election reform generally, and more specifically to requiring that every machine have a voter verified paper ballot that is used in election days audits and, if discrepancies are found in those audits, becomes the official record for the election."

"Despite the many official assurances that the problems of the past elections were isolated and few," Conyers said, ". . . the election system is indeed riddled with problems and flaws."

The "bottom line," says Conyers, is that until these matters are seriously addressed, and "significant security and controls" are put in place with our voting machines, "American citizens have no reason to have complete confidence in our democracy."

Conyers further enumerate a list of notable and troubling security shortcomings identified by the GAO:

- Some electronic voting systems did not encrypt cast ballots or system audit logs, thus making it possible to alter them without detection.
- It is easy to alter a file defining how a ballot appears, making it possible for someone to vote for one candidate and actually be recorded as voting for an entirely different candidate.
- Falsifying election results without leaving any evidence of such an action by using altered memory cards.
- Access to the voting network was easily compromised because not all direct recording electronic voting systems (DREs) had supervisory functions password-protected, access to one machine provided access to the whole network.
- Supervisory access to the voting network was also compromised by repeated use of the same user IDs combined with easily guessed passwords.
- The locks protecting access to the system were easily picked and keys were simple to copy.
- One DRE model was shown to have been networked in such a rudimentary fashion that a power failure on one machine would cause the entire network to fail.
- GAO identified further problems with the security protocols and background screening practices for vendor personnel.

"We welcome the timeliness and findings of the GAO report," said Bob Wilson, chairperson of the Illinois Ballot Integrity Project's Suburban Cook County Chapter. He continued, "This should give pause to officials in the City of Chicago and Cook County who plan to buy some \$50 million in electronic voting machines and systems, none of which have yet been certified under 2002 HAVA (Help America Vote Act) standards."

"The fact that the GAO Report drew such immediate and overwhelming bi-partisan support in both its title and conclusions points up the fact that election reform is not an issue for Republicans nor Democrats, but one that all Americans should embrace," said Wilson. "The Report covers in detail many aspects of the problem that we have been trying to bring to the attention of the Illinois State Board of Elections and election officials in Cook County and the City of Chicago," he concluded.

GAO reported that voluntary standards for electronic voting adopted in 2002 by the Federal Election Commission contain vague and incomplete security provisions, inadequate provisions for commercial products and networks, and inadequate documentation requirements. GAO also found that tests currently performed by independent testing authorities and state and local election officials do not adequately assess electronic voting system security and reliability

The GAO report indicated that national initiatives to improve voting system security and reliability of electronic voting systems either lack specific plans for implementation or are not expected to be completed until after the 2006 election. According to GAO, "Until these efforts are completed, there is a risk that many state and local jurisdictions will rely on voting systems that were not developed, acquired, testing, operated, or managed in accordance with rigorous security and reliability standards - potentially affecting the reliability of future elections and voter confidence in the accuracy of the vote count"

Sources:

Full Text of Congressional News Release Attached

Full GAO Report: http://www.lootingofamerica.com/GAO_Report_10-21-2005.pdf

The Case Against DREs: http://www.lootingofamerica.com/DRE_10-15-05.pdf

Why Sequoia Systems Are Wrong for Illinois:

http://www.lootingofamerica.com/Sequoia_Cook_County.pdf

The Illinois Ballot Integrity Project is a non-partisan public interest group that seeks to protect American democracy by promoting election transparency and counting every vote.