

Baltimore Sun

[How safe is your vote?](#)

[Doubts will persist until secure, accurate elections become a national priority](#)

By Steven Hill and Rob Richie

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After the 2000 presidential race, many Americans saw new voting technology as the obvious means to avoid the millions of votes lost due to voter error around the nation. Following that botched election, Georgia and Maryland were the first states to commit to a statewide touch-screen voting system.

After being the center of the 2000 controversy, Florida counties spent millions to have new touch screens, yet had major problems with their debut in the 2002 gubernatorial elections. In the hotly contested Democratic primary, Dade County's touch-screen equipment produced a higher rate of non-votes that disproportionately hurt minority voters than the old punch-card equipment. It was déjà vu all over again.

Now a burgeoning national movement questions the security of such equipment and calls for paper trails that would provide a voter-verifiable audit trail. Counties and states such as Maryland that committed to touch screens are scrambling to explore how to add a paper trail to their system.

When made fully secure and publicly accountable, touch-screen voting offers important advantages. Take Brazil's experience. A country of 180 million people, with great diversity and vast stretches of rural territory - much like the United States - Brazil has a national touch-screen system. When voters select a candidate, they see the name, party and photo of the candidate in order to verify their vote. No over-votes, no under-votes, no confusing butterfly ballots. No disfranchisement of language minorities and voters with disabilities or low rates of literacy.

There's a simple reason the United States is playing catch-up to Brazil - and most other nations - when it comes to modernizing election administration. Under our decentralized election administration regime, we have a shockingly weak national commitment to fair and secure elections. In fact, the main players in running elections are the more than 3,000 county election administrators scattered across the country.

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With the 2002 Help America Vote Act, the federal government for the first time established a few national election standards and provided some money to states. But standards are weak, and funds available for only three years. There's little training for election administrators, and too often county election chiefs are selected based more on whom they know than training and experience. There's limited guidance to assist counties when they bargain with the equipment vendors.

The vendors themselves spark questions. Three companies dominate the field: Election Systems and Software, Sequoia Voting Systems and Diebold Election Systems. They are relatively small, profit-making corporations, stretched beyond their capacities, strained by the myriad of state bodies certifying equipment. Their equipment isn't nearly as good as it could or should be.

Vendors make up for these deficits through political connections. They typically hire former election regulators as their sales representatives. Besides the government-to-industry revolving door, they have been known to give big campaign contributions. In fact, there is no firewall between the corporations who run elections and partisan politics.

Walden O'Dell, the CEO of Diebold - the company that has Maryland's contract - attended strategy powwows with wealthy benefactors of President Bush and wrote in a fund-raising letter that he is "committed to helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes to the president" - even as his company seeks to win Ohio's new equipment.

The manufacture and selling of voting equipment shouldn't be just another business. There is something special about our electoral infrastructure that cries out for a federal system with national standards and regulations. After Sept. 11, 2001, we moved to have federal workers monitoring airport security. But after Election 2000, we did nothing comparable for our elections.

Imagine an alternative reality, in which the federal government used its immense resources to invest in developing voting technologies that were truly cutting-edge and secure, with open-source software, voter-verified paper trails, national standards and the public interest incorporated without resistance. Imagine national voter registration that better ensured clean lists and a big increase in the barely two-thirds of American adults now registered to vote.

But no. Instead we are stuck with the shadowy vendors and decentralized hodgepodge that lately have made U.S. democracy a laughingstock around the world. Call it democracy on the cheap. The debate over voter-verified paper trails is a window into a far bigger problem of decentralized elections that inevitably will lead to future

debacles until corrected. We can no longer passively accept an election administration regime gone deeply awry.

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