

Hand Counting Ballots For Accurate Election Results

by Virginia Martin

For me, election administration raises one essential question. How can I be sure that I'm certifying the correct results?

My Republican counterpart and I ask: How do we know how any of our optical scanners tabulated the votes on each paper ballot? The answer is that we really can not know.

Computerized voting machines are unspeakably complicated, and we couldn't realistically examine the half-million lines of code in a single machine, much less in all of them. Can we be sure that our machines were programmed perfectly? That there are no bugs or glitches? That nobody tampered with the code? No.

But we do know how to keep ballots safe, how to account for every single one of them, and how to count each ballot's votes. Those are simple processes—and the ordinary person can do them.

Yes, computers are modern miracles. But they can be dreadful disasters for counting votes unless we check—audit—their results. And, because how everyone votes must be secret, accuracy checks must be particularly thorough to provide the high degree of confidence that's needed in a democracy.

A robust audit via hand count is essential. Ours is 100% for many races. For some, that's overkill, but since a full audit of a local race, for example, is easy to do and easy for the public to comprehend, that's what we do. We could use some statistician's algorithm instead. But how would the ordinary voter or candidate or party member know that an algorithm is enough? They wouldn't. Understanding vote counting should be accessible to anyone—not just people with advanced degrees.

So we pay trusted local people to keep our ballots safe, start to finish, and to tally the votes. They enjoy the process. We spend less than a week doing it. We let everyone watch, and they all feel welcomed. The upshot is that everyone here is satisfied that our final result is exactly how the voters voted. And, in the grand scheme of things, it barely makes a dent in our budget.

We have a happy, if unanticipated, marriage of computer-tabulated unofficial results—available quickly on election night—with hand-counted official results, which usually track the machine results closely—all within a week. The machines have worked well, and we use their results as a baseline; when the hand-count numbers differ, we can figure out why, and

whether the differences are legitimate or reflect a hand-count error. We always certify the hand-count result once we're satisfied that it's accurate.

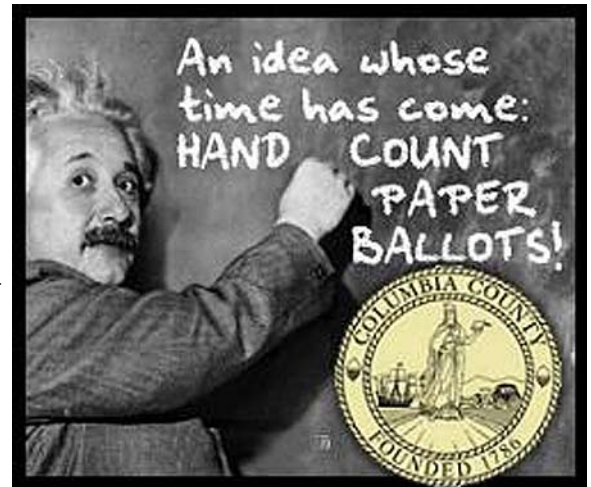
There's an important added benefit. With our hand count, we'll know if and when our aging machines start to fail.

Our process apparently is unique, although it doesn't have to be. I think it's replicable anywhere, in any sized county.

Here's what I like: When the election is over, everyone involved can get on with their lives. Nobody petitions us for a recount or accuses us of hiding anything or manipulating numbers or being unfair. They know the results are correct.

In the end, everyone's satisfied. Ours is an aspect of government that people here feel good about. What a shame it would be to wonder how your vote was counted. When all is said and done, my counterpart and I aren't the only ones that know for sure that the numbers we've certified are accurate. The voters, the candidates, and the parties know, too.

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graphic: NoMoreStolenElections

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RFK, Jr. on the Help America Vote Act

Instead of sharing culpability for the 2000 Florida catastrophe, voting-machine companies used their political clout to present their product as the solution. In October 2002, President Bush signed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), requiring states and counties to upgrade their voting systems with electronic machines and giving vast sums of money to state officials to distribute to the tight-knit cabal of largely Republican vendors.

The primary author and steward of HAVA was Representative Bob Ney, then the GOP chairman of the powerful US House Administration Committee. Ney resigned in November, 2006 after a guilty plea to charges of conspiracy and making false statements in relation to the scandal surrounding disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, whose firm received at least \$275,000 from Diebold to lobby for its touch-screen machines. Ney's chief of staff, David DiStefano, also worked as a registered lobbyist for Diebold, receiving at least \$180,000 from the firm to lobby for HAVA and other election reform issues. Ney — who accepted campaign contributions from DiStefano and counted Diebold's then-CEO O'Dell among his constituents — made sure that HAVA strongly favored the use of the company's machines. Ney also made sure that Diebold and other [election system] companies would not be required to equip their machines with printers to provide paper records that could be verified by voters. In a clever twist, HAVA effectively pressured every precinct to provide at least one voting device that had no paper trail.

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