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The Case for Hand-Counted Paper Ballots

By Jana Nestlerode

There is no foolproof system of voting. But in a country that prides itself for "honoring the will of the people", the means of determining the will of the people should be guarded zealously. While our ballots must be cast in secret, the counting of our ballots must be done in public, transparently, in full light and under the watchful and suspicious eyes of voters, candidates and reporters. Ballot counting should never be contracted out to private corporations with ties to political parties, vested interests, and profit motives. Further, counting the ballots via secret software is antithetical to an open and legitimate election.

The gold standard for elections in a healthy democracy is hand-counted paper ballots. In fact, most of the world's democracies use paper ballots. In Canada, a country with a population of over 21 million registered voters and over 50,000 precincts, paper ballots are counted by hand at the precinct level on election night. Normally, the counting is completed within four hours of poll closing. When electronic voting machines were challenged in Pennsylvania, Commonwealth Court Judge Dan Pellegrini stated "the provisions of the Pennsylvania Constitution provide that utilizing paper ballots that are counted manually is the default method of voting and computing votes." There is an excellent reason for this ... it is simply the most reliable system ever devised for secure elections. But there is even more to be said for hand counting paper ballots at the precinct level.

First, hand-counted paper ballots is the system which inspires the greatest voter confidence. Voters, with good reason, tend to trust their fellow citizens more than machines or private corporations. Ballot counting would take place in a public arena, under the watchful eyes of cameras, candidates, and voters.

Second, this system uniquely builds a sense of community, civic responsibility and participation. In many precincts that use this system, vote counting is witnessed in a spirit of communal democracy. The voters know their pollworkers and provide them with support, encouragement, and even refreshments. It becomes a community event, and creates a true participatory democracy.

Third, the preparation and training of pollworkers is minimal. Pollworkers need only know how to count. There is no sophisticated training required to learn computer or machine operation and protocols, to address computer problems or anomalies on election day. There is no need to deal with such mundane problems as power surges, mishandling of delicate machines, heat or humidity issues or the scores of problems that can arise on election day when dealing with technology.

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Fourth, the state/county/precinct is not vendor-dependent. It is not tied to an expensive contract with a vendor who offers only proprietary products, is often the only source of expertise when problems arise, or who simply disappears.

Fifth, the county or precinct can use local businesses to print the ballot each election cycle. This not only supports local businesses, but adds to the sense of community and participatory democracy.

Sixth, hiring pollworkers, even at minimum wage, to count ballots on election day results in the productive employment of county residents. Oftentimes our pollworkers are senior citizens who can use the supplemental income and who enjoy being an integral part of a community endeavor. In the alternative, volunteers from the community can be solicited.

(My own suggestion to change to hand-counted paper ballots made to my county Voter Services Commissioner was met with summary rejection. She indicated that it was hard enough to find volunteers to staff the precincts on election day. She further asserted that it would be next to impossible to find enough volunteers to count ballots after the polls had closed. I asked her how she solicited volunteers to work in the precincts on election day, and she responded that she goes to the local Republican and Democratic party leaders to seek help.

In my view, the LAST place to go for election workers is the political parties. Instead, community groups, civic organizations, clubs and religious institutions should be contacted. Public television seeks volunteers from local industry to man phones during fundraising weeks. The same could be done to find ballot counters. The Kiwanis, the Rotary Club, the Masons, churches, synagogues, mosques, community centers, charitable groups all should be solicited to help further the democratic progress. College sororities and fraternities and other university student groups could be solicited. Many colleges are requiring students to include volunteer or civic work as part of their general education curriculum, and this is one way students could fulfill that requirement. In England, they use bank tellers to count the votes.)

Seventh, hand counting paper ballots is the least expensive of all voting system options. There are no expensive machines to buy, no fragile machines to protect from heat, humidity or careless handling, no ongoing maintenance issues, no vendor-dependent service issues, no extraordinary transportation costs, no secure storage costs, and fewer security issues.

Eighth, a Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Report found that "manually counted paper ballots have the lowest average incidence of spoiled, uncounted and unmarked ballots". Other voting systems, according to the report, including touchscreens, "had significantly higher average rates of spoiled uncounted and unmarked ballots than of the other systems."

Several groups who are proponents of hand-counted paper ballots offer valuable information on specific protocols for ensuring accuracy and legitimacy.

VII. CONCLUSION

No valid objections to hand-counted paper ballots have been raised. Paper ballots are easily preserved, easily read by the greatest number of citizens, do not need extraordinary storage or handling protocols, do not require extensive training for pollworkers, and are inexpensive. Those who claim that handling paper is "inconvenient" have no appreciation for the importance of open and fair elections in a healthy democracy. Our ballots should be cast in secrecy; but the counting of our ballots **MUST** be done openly and with full transparency for democracy to survive.