State Revolt Appears Against Computer Voting

by Art Ticknor

Catalyzed by Presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche's campaign to ban computerized voting, expert studies documenting how serious security holes in electronic/touch-screen voting systems could be used to rig elections, and recent evidence of computer vote fraud, more elected representatives and election officials are opposing it. Two California state legislators demanded a ban on touch-screen computer voting machines, in a statement on March 11 warning that the November Presidential election is at risk. State Senate Majority Leader Don Perata (D) and Sen. Ross Johnson (R) urged California Secretary of State Kevin Shelley to decertify all paperless touch-screen voting machines statewide, and disallow their use in November. "The number of California voters who were disenfranchised during the March 2 statewide direct primary election, as a result of failure related to touch-screen voting, was both unprecedented and unacceptable," the Senators wrote to Shelley.

California Election a Mess

Perata and Johnson, the chairman and vice chairman of the California Senate election committee, cited malfunctions in the touch-screen machines that resulted in thousands of voters receiving the wrong ballot, while hundreds more were turned away in the March 2 primary. In San Diego County, a full 40% of precincts opened late due to problems with voter-card encoders, which are necessary to access ballots on the machines; the same problem occurred at 20% of Alameda County precincts.

It was even worse in Orange County, where an estimated 7,000 voters had their ballots tabulated for the wrong precinct, because the wrong ballot appeared on the computer screen. According to a *Los Angeles Times* analysis on March 9, 21 Orange County precincts tallied more ballots were cast than registered voters. These precincts counted an estimated 1,500 extra voters; tallies at another 55 polling places with artificially high turnouts, suggest that at least 5,500 more ineligible votes were cast in those precincts. Five of the county's six Congressional races, four of its five state Senate elections, and five of the nine Assembly races were affected. Orange County Supervisor Bill Campbell said he would ask for an audit, and welcome a grand jury probe.

Election officials claimed that none of the results was in jeopardy! Hart InterCivic, which manufactured Orange County's computerized voting system, said it would be im-possible to get an exact account of miscast ballots, because of measures the company had taken, supposedly to ensure voter secrecy. If Shelley declines Perata's and Johnson's request, the Senators insist they will fast-track state legislation, denying use of touch-screen voting machines in California this November.

Meanwhile, in Ohio, the Hamilton County Elections director said electronic ballots will not be used in Cincinnati in November, due to security concerns; instead, voters will use punch-card ballots. In Florida, Federal Congressman Robert Wexler (D) filed a Federal lawsuit demanding a paper-trail of all votes on computer voting machines, for possible recounts. Having no way to manually recount votes from touch-screen machines, he charged, is a violation of the U.S. Constitution.

And in Congress, a strong debate is taking place between sponsors and critics of the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA) which mandates and funds computer voting (see *EIR,* March 19). Computer voting must be banned for the November Presidential elections, LaRouche had declared on Feb. 26, in a campaign event in Los Angeles. What is required, the candidate said is "to eliminate the use of computer-controlled voting devices—*absolutely!*" Last week, LaRouche warned state legislators of 20% vote fraud in the November election, were electronic voting not banned. "What's going to happen in the election? Are we going to get the computers out of there?" he told state legislators in a private meeting on March 13. LaRouche is calling for a return to a universal use of paper ballots, which are hand-counted.

Times Sounds a Warning

The *New York Times,* at the same time, also picked up on LaRouche's warning on electronic voting fraud. The 2000 Florida election fiasco could happen again with electronic voting, the *Times* argued on March 14. It used problems with the March 9 Florida primary to show that electronic voting is not the solution it was promised to be. The "biggest danger of electronic voting," said the editorial, is that "votes, and whole elections, can be stolen by rigging the code that runs the machines. The only defense is a paper record of every vote cast. Florida has put in place a system, electronic voting without a paper trail, that threatens once more to produce an outcome that cannot be trusted."

Similarly, *Newsday* on March 14 said that nearly 50 million voters are scheduled to vote on "devices that may be worse in important ways than what they replace."

Computer experts also are escalating against electronic voting. Appearing on Cable News Network's Lou Dobbs Show on March 10, Harvard's Rebecca Mercuri called it "faith-based voting, where essentially the companies are in control." University of Maryland computer science professor Avi Rubin, who co-authored a report last July documenting security holes in Diebold machines, found that Diebold's system of tallying electronic votes was "much more vulnerable" than even he was aware, during the Maryland primary.