Looking Ahead

Counting Correctly

Like bright autumn leaves on maple trees, election season brings talk of voting reform. The overwhelming majority of U.S. elections run smoothly and honestly, but ever since the hubbub in Florida flung the 2000 presidential election into turmoil, hands have been duly wrung at regular two-year intervals.

The piecemeal reforms enacted so far by the federal and state governments have not done away with the possibility of another election-day meltdown. While issues related to registration, fraud, and voter identification perennially deserve attention, no aspect of election procedure requires more pressing reform than the technology used in casting ballots. One effect of the 2002 Help America Vote Act has been to largely eliminate pull-lever machines and punch-card ballots, ushering in the widespread use of touch-screen voting machines in their place. These new touch-screen machines were widely praised for their speed and accuracy; their adoption was supposed to forever banish the prospect of election workers gawking at hanging chads. That scene of painful uncertainty would be replaced with the soothing assurance of precise, electronically-tallied votes.

But just a few short election cycles after touch-screen systems were widely introduced, some states have begun to revert to optical-scanned paper ballots and other manual methods. The touch-screen systems, it turns out, are expensive, they are occasionally confusing to voters (although perhaps not as confusing as ill-designed paper ballots can be), and their workings are obscure: ordinary voters and precinct monitors cannot readily check the software on which these systems depend. Most importantly, some of the touch-screen systems leave no "paper trail"—no printed record of every ballot cast, letting voters verify the accuracy of their vote and enabling recounts when necessary.

Many states have now shifted to a hybrid computer-paper system that allows for both the speed of computer tabulation and the transparency and verifiability of paper. But nineteen states still don't legally require paper records. And of the thirty-one states that do require some sort of paper trail, only eighteen actually mandate audits of the paper records to ensure that they match the machine totals.

Nothing touched by the hand of man is perfect; no voting system will ever be totally accurate or unassailably secure. But the hand that casts the ballot performs democracy's critical act. Our system of government depends upon its integrity—and upon our *trust* in its integrity. States should move quickly to ensure that there is a paper record of every vote and that the paper records are audited. Democracy demands no less.