



March 3, 2004

STATEMENT ON VOTING MACHINES

The act of voting is the cornerstone of our democracy. Americans must have confidence that their vote will be counted fairly and accurately. The 2000 presidential election exposed many of the shortcomings in our nation's elections and damaged voters' faith in how we cast and count votes. Since then, Congress passed significant, though flawed reforms in the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) and some state and local governments have taken steps to correct the longstanding problems in our nation's voting system.

Paper Trail and New Voting Technology

Common Cause shares many of the concerns of the growing number of Americans who have serious concerns about the reliability and security of new touch-screen voting machines.

We also share the concerns of those who have worked for many years to ensure that all Americans have the right to vote, have equal access to voting, and have the right to vote in private. But we believe that no one's right to vote has meaning if the voter cannot be reasonably assured that their vote was counted as cast.

Common Cause believes that the ability to verify one's vote and have a record of each vote as cast must be an integral part of voting equipment – it is important for the accuracy of vote-counting and for Americans' long-term trust in elections.

We do not believe that current touch screen technology allows the voter to verify his or her vote in a meaningful manner. The voter must have faith that the internal software is correctly tallying the vote – and there is currently no way to verify the vote independent of that software.

We believe it is critical at this point to *provide a voter-verifiable paper audit trail as one of the essential requirements of voting systems.*

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While we recognize the demonstrable problems with paper-based voting systems and support efforts to develop new technology for future voting systems, including all-electronic verification systems, we remain convinced that, for now, a paper-based verification system is the best alternative.

While we support providing a voter-verified paper trail, we know that touch-screen machines offer numerous benefits: faster counting of votes, accessibility for blind and physically handicapped voters, and flexibility for different languages and different ballot types, including alternate voting formats such as instant runoff voting. In terms of error rates, touch screen voting machines, with the assurance of a paper trail, can be the most effective method for casting and counting votes.

We challenge the voting machine industry, elections officials, and the technology community to build a new machine; to develop a voting system that will retain the many benefits of touch-screen voting, but not require voters to rely on simple faith in software that their vote will be counted as they cast it.

New technology is not the whole solution -- voting machines are only one part of a voting system. Voter education, poll worker training, especially in regard to fair and equal treatment of voters, provisional ballots, imposition of unnecessary ID requirements, polling place accessibility, and collection of data on voters' actual experience in the polling place are all important priorities.

Transparency and Accountability

Voting machine manufacturers and many elections officials have rushed to develop and put in place touch-screen machines without sufficient regard to voters' confidence in the machines and without regard to basic principles of transparency and accountability. A business-as-usual manner, careless procedures, and overtly partisan activity by some vendor executives has exacerbated voters' alarm about the new machines.

The companies that produce equipment for elections must be held to a far higher standard of accountability and transparency. State and local elections officials must be far more vigilant in their oversight of the vendors. The government, not the vendors, must be in control of our system of voting.

- Vendors should adhere to strict nonpartisan policies and practices.
- There must be a competitive and open contracting processes for purchase of voting machines.
- There must be strict conflict of interest codes for elections officials and vendors.
- Testing of machines should be done publicly and by a truly independent body. Testing should be done at every step of the process, including random testing of machines on Election Day.

Future Reform

The time for reform is not over. Our system of voting should be an ongoing national priority. Congress must not treat HAVA as a one-time reform. HAVA should be a precedent for federal funding and assistance to state and local governments that will make our system of voting the best it can be.

We will continue to work at the state and local level to ensure that HAVA is implemented fairly and fully and to fight against efforts to put up new barriers to voting.

Congress and President Bush took far too long to appoint and confirm commissioners to the Election Assistance Commission, the federal agency charged under HAVA with dispensing funding and developing new standards for voting machines. The commission has critical responsibilities and needs to meet and we will be closely watching to ensure that it operates in an open and accountable manner.

Congress and President Bush must commit to fully funding HAVA and to provide additional funding if that becomes necessary. *Congress and the president should make this a long-term federal commitment.* There are few more fundamentally important functions of the government in our democracy than providing a fair, secure, convenient and accessible voting system. Such a system will build confidence with voters and may begin to restore much of the public's loss of trust in our democracy.