

Module 17



Count the Votes Yourself

Voting machines aren't secure, often do not count accurately, and fail to allow ordinary citizens to oversee or authenticate the election. Sometimes use of voting machines results in a complete fiasco. Can We, the People, offer any other solutions?

Perhaps. We were never asked if we wanted to abandon hand counted paper ballots. There has been no public dialog, no town meetings, no vote on this. American citizens have not been privy to any real problem-solving attempts to see if hand counting is feasible in modern election environments. We've simply been told that wiser minds have looked at it and others have decided it is no longer possible. This is a propaganda technique known as "Foregone Conclusion."

Officials from the state of New Hampshire have been willing to take a second look at hand-counted paper ballots, and with your leadership and action, other areas might also want to take a new look at this solution. Thanks to efforts by Democracy for New Hampshire and others, new solutions are being offered that may bring the idea of hand counted paper ballots back in style.

Let's develop Plan B: Hand Counted Paper Ballots

Goals:

Help citizens and local officials prepare for the catastrophic failure of computerized voting. If you doubt that this can happen, take a look at the May 2006 election in Cuyahoga County Ohio, where not a single one of the 17,000 absentee ballots could be read by voting machines. Or Allamakee County Iowa in November 2000, where 300 ballots were fed into the machine and four million came out.

Plan B, hand counts, became a reality in Pottawattamie County when the elections chief noticed something wrong and found out, after counting by hand, that the machines gave a different result and a different winner. When hurricanes destroyed voting equipment, elections officials – feeling they had no other option – decided they might have to cancel or postpone elections.

The goal of this module is to restore the reputation of hand counted paper ballots as a viable form of running an election.

Obstacles to hand counted paper ballots

Some countries, like Canada, quickly hand count the ballots for a whole nation. Why are they able to do it but not the U.S.?

- Many ballot questions – The hand counted ballot in Canada doesn't have lots of races and issues – just one or two. If it takes four hours for a nation to count just three ballot questions, will it then take 12 x 4 hours to count 36 ballot questions? If the math works like this, no one can blame elections officials for avoiding 48-hour marathon vote counts.
- Many ballot styles – Some jurisdictions have hundreds of different ballots. Because of overlapping boundaries for water districts, school districts, and odd-shaped congressional districts, your ballot may differ from your neighbor's, even if you live just down the street. Hand counters would need a way to separate out all the different ballot styles to count them efficiently.
- Not enough ballot counters – Elections officials have trouble getting enough poll workers for computerized voting, which is less people-intensive than hand counting. Poll workers already put in a long day, and shouldn't be expected to hang around for several more hours to count ballots. This means a separate team of counters needs to be brought in, which requires even more people.
- Project management skills – Managing an election has already become almost a heroic event, especially in large, densely populated jurisdictions with complex boundary lines. Adding recruiting, training and management of ballot counters presents challenges that are overwhelming to many elections officials.
- Disabled voters – The Help America Vote Act was designed to allow disabled voters to vote independently and privately. Does going back to hand counts roll back the rights of disabled citizens?
- Fraud – Hand counted paper ballots have been a target for fraud, like the "short pencil" technique where a piece of lead is hidden under the fingernail of the counters, used to double-mark (and invalidate) ballots, and/or to vote for undervoted races.
- The "elections industry" and its support industries – Entire lines of business have sprung up surrounding the voting machine industry. It isn't just voting machine vendors we're talking about, though they've been hunting like dogs in a pack to bring down some \$4 billion in projected revenues for selling their machines to American

elections officials. And that's just the U.S. market. They want to dominate international markets as well.

- Other lines of business include testing and certification, election "auditing", election consulting businesses, printing businesses, database management and data mining operations, "voter education" projects to teach people to use the new machines, large grants to scientists to study computerized voting, and grants to public interest group to watchdog and lobby for improvements. If we go back to hand counted paper ballots, a lot of people who have carved out a niche for themselves become irrelevant and lose revenue.

These obstacles are real. Unfortunately, a solution was forced on the American public to accept computerized voting solutions, with millions spent on studies and recommendations but almost no input from the public. Had an equivalent amount of money and effort been spent on seeking solutions while keeping low-tech voting, might there be more options?

We think so. Thanks to the efforts of ordinary citizens and some unusually independent-thinking public officials in New Hampshire, many of the obstacles now have solutions. What remains is to educate others about this and practice using the system, refining it as needed.

MANUAL COUNTING OF PAPER BALLOTS

Relying on voting machines carries inherent risk to the republic, for the following reasons:

- They are insecure, and cannot really be made secure, due to their complexity and therefore, the number of attack and failure points that exist.
- Shoddy products and unreliable have passed certification and have been purchased, and are not de-certified or recalled even when they are found to be defective
- Neither poll workers nor voters can be adequately "trained" to use them on short notice. In addition, new systems are being put into large-scale deployment without first achieving bug-free pilot testing in smaller locations, and elections are a mission-critical endeavor that is almost impossible to redo or repeat.
- They are not cost-effective and are economically unfeasible due to the inherent life-cycle issues of software products; and
- They can not ever be truly "certified" or properly tested.

Soon to be released from the New Hampshire Secretary of State's office is the *New Hampshire Election Procedure Manual*.

The manual will define the preferred method of hand counting used by the Secretary of State's office for all manual recounts, which are large scale operations requiring maximum efficiency. The ballots receive multiple redundant reviews, are quick, efficient, and trusted.

The report includes the following descriptions of hand counting methodologies used in New Hampshire elections (*i.e.*, the tally method, is seen in the Wilton and Lyndeborough videos, and the sort/stack method in the State Recount video – (The “We’re Counting the Votes Kit (“Kit”) and Videos can be found here: <http://www.democracyfornewhampshire.com/>)

Counting methodologies

One of the methodologies described in the New Hampshire Election Procedure Manual is the "Ballot by Ballot Tally Method." This method is more time consuming than the second method, but is traditionally used by many hand counters.

More time consuming, creates more errors:

- One member of a two-person team reads the ballot, declaring those legal votes apparent from the voter’s marks.
- The second team member places a mark on his/her tally sheet for the candidate receiving a vote.
- This method involves the possibility of a mistake because the ballot is examined only once or a mistake because only one person is doing the tallying.
- Since this method commonly involves reading through the entire ballot, the ballot reader's eye and brain are not focused on looking for a single type of data, and thus the reader must expend mental effort to distinguish among the contests in which choices are made.

Faster, fewer errors:

The second method described in the manual is the "Ballot Pile Method." This is the method used by the New Hampshire Secretary of State for all of its manual recounts.

- Use of ballot sorting and piles – speeds counting and reduces errors.
- One member of a two-person team picks up the ballots and places them in piles corresponding to each choice in a particular race.
- The other team member observes each ballot as it is placed in a pile.
- After the sorting process is complete, one team member counts each pile in stacks of 25 and then the other team member recounts each stack. This process enables at least two persons to simultaneously examine each ballot at least once, and to keep things simple by identifying choices in a single race at a time. If one person makes a mistake, the other can catch it.
- This method is often modified so that each ballot is rechecked during the stack-counting process. Hence, each ballot can be seen two times by each member of the team, for a total of up to four views of each mark on a ballot in each race.

- The ballot sorting and pile method, which involves as many examinations of the same ballot as there are contests, is noticeably faster than the ballot reading and tally mark approach.

According to Voting Rights advocate, Catherine Ansbro of Ireland, who played a role in stopping the use of electronic voting machines in that country and the continued use of hand counts instead: “The sort and pile method, with double-checked counting and public observation throughout, is what is used in Ireland. It is fast and accurate.”

Other suggested approaches to overcoming obstacles:

- Multiple ballot questions: Limit precinct size to around 1,000 voters. Using the sort and pile method, it takes approximately one second for each ballot per race/ballot question. For 1,000 ballots, this works out to 60 per minute, or 600 races sorted in 10 minutes. Counting an entire precinct with 1,000 ballots can be done in less than 20 minutes. To count 10 races will take approximately three hours; Four counting teams can count 40 races in three hours.
- Many ballot styles – Some jurisdictions have hundreds of different ballots. Count at the precinct. Each precinct has only a small number of ballots styles (often only one). Use the sort and pile method to first separate ballot styles, then count them. For precincts with 1,000 voters, this will add 20 minute in counting time for ballot style sort.
- Not enough ballot counters – If we can check a box to volunteer as organ donors when we apply for a driver's license, we can check a box to volunteer to hand count when we register to vote. Elections officials will then have a sufficient pool of counters, who need not be paid. Counters will be called for duty, much like jury duty. Also like jury duty, there will be some questionnaires and preliminary screening activities needed to make sure the counters can follow instructions and are able to count and sort accurately.
- Project management skills – Software and training programs for project managers have improved greatly over the past few years. Make use of the same kinds of event management technologies that are used to manage massive undertakings like the Olympic Games. Don't re-invent the wheel, borrow tools from others who have to do the same kind of deadline-driven, mission critical project management.
- Disabled voters – Make use of tools like Vote-Pad and/or provide DREs with verified paper trails for the disabled. The small number of paper trails can be hand counted quickly.
- Fraud – The number of attack points available for hand counted paper ballots at the precinct is quite small. Develop attack trees and mitigations like requiring a large mark for a vote choice, making it more obvious if a poll worker is marking it.

- The "elections industry" and its support industries – Consider the removal of the vast sums of money going into these businesses to be government cost-saving and use this cost saving to pay a penny or two on the national debt.

What citizens can do RIGHT NOW:

- Sign up for the National Hand Counted Paper Ballots Registry:

<http://www.bbvforums.org/cgi-bin/forums/board-profile.cgi?action=register>

- Identify locations that may be willing to try the hand count procedures, starting with small population jurisdictions. Pilot test on a smaller scale, then try on progressively larger population bases.
- Volunteer for recounts that involve hand counting. Document the procedures on video, identify obstacles, and share information with others.
- Pay for a recount and hand count. Videotape it and make the case using real ballots in a real election.

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Your Own Additions to the Count the Votes Yourself Module

You can share your ideas by sending to crew@blackboxvoting.org



What worked well?

What new ideas did you come up with?

Was there anything that didn't work very well?
