



FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20463

October 28, 1988  
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**PRESS ADVISORY**

**SUBJECT: INTEGRITY OF THE VOTE COUNT PROCESS**

In recent weeks, a few alarmists have claimed that elections in this country can be massively defrauded by a mere handful of technicians tampering with the computerized vote counting devices now widely used throughout the nation. The National Clearinghouse on Election Administration of the Federal Election Commission feels strongly that such unsubstantiated, sensationalist claims constitute a disservice to the democratic process by groundlessly undermining public confidence in the election system. Voter turn-off is already a matter of great concern. We therefore wish to draw attention to a series of facts which, taken together, demonstrate the virtual impossibility of such wholesale fraud.

Several media reports have left the impression on the American public that there is one computer program governing the tally of at least one third of the votes cast in America. This is simply not the case.

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The electoral process in this country is highly decentralized. It is governed by 50 different sets of state laws and procedures and is administered by over 10,000 local jurisdictions with ballots being cast and, in many cases, counted in over 180,000 precincts. Almost 3 million men and women are involved in administering our elections and safeguarding their integrity.

The systems used to record and count ballots vary from state to state and even within each state. Although approximately 60% of all ballots cast are counted by computer, there are three general types of systems: punchcard, optical scan and direct recording electronic. There are distinct variations within each type, marketed by over a dozen independent companies. Even for the same system from the same company, there are diverse design versions of the same software.

The coding of these systems is based on the specific content and format of the ballots in each precinct. Ballot contents and formats vary, sometimes dramatically, from county to county and from precinct to precinct, depending on the number and types of candidates or measures to be chosen by the voters.

In addition to built-in electronic safeguards and the physical security accorded to these systems, there are important institutional measures designed to guarantee the integrity of the count. These include:

- the active involvement of representatives from both political parties at every stage of the process;
- the openness of the process to public scrutiny and challenge (and, hence, the possibility of recounts);
- the extensive testing of the systems before, during, and after the election, as well as audit and examination by independent testers;
- the redundant counting of ballots on separate machines and the hand counting of ballots in order to verify computer results;

It is evident from the inherent complexity of our election process that any attempt at large scale fraud would require a conspiracy of such magnitude as to be readily detectable. This detection would be all the more certain if the results were at substantial variance with historical patterns or results anticipated by the media, the parties, and political analysts.

In brief, the claim that American elections can be massively defrauded by a handful of cunning technicians is dangerously misleading. It is our sincere hope that you would exercise caution in dealing with this delicate issue and that you would question carefully any assertions made by those who would claim expertise in the field of computer security in elections. Above all, talk with your state and local election administrators for more detail about how they ensure security and accuracy.