The Charade of Voting Machine Demonstrations

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Voting machine demonstrations are eagerly anticipated both by voters and election workers, but many citizens leave them with real disappointment. They say the demonstrations are what the Onondaga County League of Women Voters called a “charade”—a deceitful pretense (in a letter to the Syracuse Post-Standard).

One of the main ways the demonstrations deceive is that voters go to them expecting to evaluate both kinds of voting systems authorized in New York: (1) direct record electronic voting machines [DREs], and (2) the paper ballot+ ballot marker+ ballot scanner system. However, very often the second, less expensive and time-tested system, is not really exhibited. Vendors demonstrate the paper ballot scanner equipment inadequately, if at all, and they “talk it down.” For example, since ES&S markets one of the first-developed ballot markers, the AutoMARK, its willingness to demonstrate this equipment has been one of the only ways the full system could be seen. But on numerous occasions ES&S has cancelled out—or shown up without the whole system. On other occasions it has shown no interest in selling this equipment rather than its more profitable DREs. For example, an observer of the Chemung County demonstration said: “ES&S’s scanner and AutoMARK demonstrator was AWOL for most of the time we were there—over two hours.”

Another way in which demonstrations deceive is that equipment is never displayed so as to show what it would mean to vote with the systems. This is especially true with the paper ballot scanner system, since privacy booths and ballot boxes are almost never exhibited and the ballot marker is not usually located near the scanner. Indeed, the relationship between the ballot marker and the scanner seldom is explained. Sometimes scanners are not programmed for elections, but only for counting absentee ballots; so there is no experience of the notification of overvotes or undervotes.

Vendors subtly block having voters independently test their DREs. With most such machines something like a credit card must be inserted to cause the machine to open the right ballot for the voter’s election district. Some of us have attended multiple demonstrations without ever seeing a voter access card. Vendors usually take over the process, rather than letting the voter try necessary steps.

On some occasions vendors engage in outright deceit: They say that their DRE is “not really a computer.” This is often said of the pushbutton DREs. About both kinds of full-face DREs, vendors and election workers say that it is “just like a lever machine.” The only resemblance is superficial (i.e., the full-face ballot and a curtain around the back). In addition, while vendors stress the “cost of paper” with the paper ballot scanner system, they do not mention the on-going costs with the DREs: paper rolls, ink cartridges, voter access cards, etc.

Vendors, of course, do not describe the vulnerabilities of memory cards, used with both DREs and scanners. These are like electronic ballot boxes that store the votes, to be turned in for central counting. During the primaries this past spring a number of elections were saved by the fact that paper ballots could be counted when memory cards for scanners failed or were lost.

The Syracuse demonstrations were a supreme example of one recurring deception. Newspaper articles invited the public to these demonstrations as an opportunity for the public to have input in the process of choosing a machine. But one company was invited on each of four different days in the early afternoon on an upper floor of a downtown location where one has to pay to...
park. In numerous counties the commissioners have held the demonstrations only during normal business hours when many people must work. In many cases, people have needed to return on several different days in order to see all of the machines. Those who come to these demonstrations, therefore, are not representative of the “public.”

In addition, a deception still operative even at this late date is that the machines often are not in their final form. A year after NY’s law was passed, citizens are being asked to evaluate unfinished machines. Sometimes vendors pretend that they simply did not bring or ran out of supplies for certain required features, e.g., the “sip and puff” device for mobility impairments or paper for the voter verifiable paper audit trail.

Beware of additional possible deceptions:

1. Let no one tell you that demonstrations are “mock elections” if the vendors control what is said and done. See http://www.wheresthepaper.org/WhatIsAPublicMockElection.htm
2. Never forget that the full-face DREs for NY are really prototypes. They have not been used in any elections anyplace, since NY has unique requirements.
3. County election commissioners present themselves as seeking public comment by allowing citizens to fill out questionnaires after demonstrations. But if they do not insist that all equipment is fairly and thoroughly exhibited, this is a deception.

A Cayuga County commissioner said on TV this week that they want to choose the machine that is easiest to use. Touching a screen may seem easy; but is that worth risking the security of your vote to the vulnerabilities of software? Properly set up, the paper ballot scanner system is easy, comprehensible and fast-- both for voters to use and for election workers to manage. The voter-marked paper ballots provide a critical assurance that one’s vote will be counted. What we need more than demonstrations are discussions with election commissioners of the two technologies (DREs vs. paper ballot scanner) in terms of the most important criteria: accuracy, reliability, security, verifiability, auditability, and accessibility. Such criteria are obscured at demonstrations as both vendors and election commissioners encourage attention only to ease and comfort.

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1A typical voting machine demonstration is reported here:
“*There were big crowds at the voting machine vendor demonstrations in Rockland yesterday (Mar 8). When I arrived there was a line of over 20 people just to get into the room. Lots of silver-haired poll workers. Lots of people from the Rockland Board of Elections to help people... The overall impression in the large gym-like room was that there were a lot of large computer voting machines. The scanners (there were two) are so small people couldn’t even see them by contrast. People clustered around the DREs trying them out after the demos. No-one tried out the scanners (they are so easy, nothing to really show off–you just fill out your ballot, put it in the slot. But even that was not demonstrated. No privacy booths for instance.) The Sequoia vendor was more interested in showing off the bells and whistles of the DREs, the scanner was pretty much ignored when it came time for people to try out the machines. The ES&S scanner was with the Automark demonstrator. That confused people because they don't know what the connection is, they think the Automark ballot marker is some kind of computer. Nobody tried out either device.”*