Election Integrity

By Roy Minet (Rev. 2022/10/15)

This column is *not* about who won the 2020 U.S. presidential election. This column is *not* about the fraud that millions of people claim plagued that 2020 election. This column *is* about the undeniable fact that there actually are millions of people who doubt the results of the 2020 election, and the considerable danger to the fabric of our country that this causes.

The winning side ridicules that very large chunk of this nation's population for thinking such things and calls them scurrilous names. That just foments further fabric fraying. And after all, it really is not their fault. The integrity of everything about elections needs to be so airtight that everyone, especially the loser, *implicitly* trusts the results. The bald fact that so many do not trust results is prima facie evidence that election integrity does not currently meet that critical standard.

Unfortunately, election integrity has deteriorated in recent years, primarily as a result of attempts to increase participation by making voting "easier" or "more convenient," and by ill-advised uses of newer technology, sometimes without sufficiently rigorous testing. Improvements made possible by new technology definitely should be implemented, but great care must be taken lest they turn out to be steps backward. Politicians must refrain from changing procedure without adequate thought and analysis.

Almost needless to say, if elections become cheating contests where the faction that cheats most effectively always wins, our republic is lost; perhaps permanently.

The difficulty of achieving the necessary level of integrity must not be underestimated. The overall process and every part of it must be carefully thought through. Every step must be engineered to make fraud substantially impossible. It must be extremely difficult and highly unlikely that election results could be nefariously controlled or influenced by any special interest group. If fraudulent manipulation should nevertheless somehow occur, its detection and correction must be virtually certain. Furthermore, the evidence required for successful prosecution of the perpetrators should be available.

It is not terribly difficult to write down the essential requirements for solid integrity.

The first requirement is that the list of citizens eligible to vote must be accurate, current and complete. Only qualified citizens can be included and those who have died or moved out of the jurisdiction must be timely removed.

Second, only those on the registered voter list can be allowed to vote once in each election. Positive identification is required. Signature verification simply is *not* reliable, even with more time and expertise than are ever available for elections. Under some circumstances, the process can even be manipulated to affect results.

Third, there must be a durable audit trail (e.g. paper ballots) which forms the legal record of voters' intents. The audit trail must be securely preserved (perhaps two or three years) to facilitate audits.

Fourth, a completely secret ballot must be guaranteed for each and every voter. There are two aspects to ballot secrecy: 1) If the voter wishes to keep how she voted a secret, that must be possible; 2) If the voter wishes to prove to anyone else how she voted, that must *not* be possible. Everyone instinctively thinks of the first aspect. The second aspect tends to be overlooked, but it is equally important. If voters can prove to someone else how they voted, they are exposed to possible vote coercion, and vote buying is enabled. When political parties are willing to spend $100 million dollars hoping to influence a single senate race, vote buying *will* happen if it is in any way possible!

Fifth, other than the brief time when voters handle their own ballots, any and all handling of ballots must be done *only* while election officials and observers from opposing factions are present and able to closely observe. This includes any sorting or tabulating operations, or just transporting ballots. Securely storing ballots between operations also is critical and problematic.

It is at least twenty years past the time to have been utilizing the power and flexibility of digital computers to automate elections. There is no reason that accurate, complete and final results couldn't be available a half hour after the polls close, including a tally of all write-in votes. Proper automation and shrinking the time frame for all critical operations reduces opportunities for fraud.

However, no one can guarantee that any machine of at least the complexity of a paper stapler will function correctly 100% of the time. Therefore, each and every output of a machine (that could affect election results) *must* be checked and verified as a part of normal procedure. Only one known system achieves this, and it awaits more thorough testing and adoption.

Finally, everything about elections should be as transparent as possible, except of course, how each voter voted.

Two observations: First, there is no way mail-in voting can come anywhere close to satisfying three of the requirements; and second, the only hope for guaranteeing completely secret ballots is for voters to vote in the privacy of a voting booth and then personally drop their ballots into a good, old-fashioned ballot box inside a properly staffed and managed polling place.

It is urgent that serious efforts be undertaken to achieve and maintain the highest election integrity. No one should think it either necessary or worthwhile to question results; certainly not millions of people.