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A Brief History of Vote-Rigging

Election-rigging is nothing new. We've been conducting elections for more than a dozen centuries, and at one time or another, every system ever designed has been rigged.*

We're a flawed species. The best in us shows up in our desire to make our government "of the people, by the people and for the people." The worst in us shows up when, no matter what the system, somebody figures out how to cheat.

How to rig paper ballots: Because at first there was little voter privacy, candidates tried to pay people to vote for them. People used to wander around town with their ballots, where the slips of paper got into all kinds of trouble.

Similar problems can crop up with absentee voting. In the 2000 presidential election in Oregon, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, "unidentified people carrying cardboard boxes popped up all over Portland, attempting to collect ballots. One group set up a box at a busy midtown intersection. Outside the Multnomah County election office, a quartet of three women and a man posted themselves in the middle of the last-

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* Douglas W. Jones, a University of Iowa associate professor of computer science, deserves more than a footnote here. We all know that election-tampering is a political reality, but it was not easy to find any authoritative information on specific techniques. Much of the material in this chapter was found by perusing Dr. Jones's work. [1]

minute rush of voters. The county elections director says she was in-credulous when she spied people gathering ballots. Nobody knows what happened to the ballots after that. [2]

The Australian paper ballot system, which keeps all ballots at the polling place, sets a very high standard: privacy, accuracy and impar-tiality when properly administered. It's difficult, but not impossible, to rig this system. Here's how you can manipulate this system:

(1) Create a set of rules for which votes "count" and which do not.
(2) Make sure your team is better trained — or more aggressive — than the other team.
(3) Fight against miniscule flaws on ballots for your opponent and defend vigorously the right to count your own candidate's ballots.

According to the 1910 *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry for voting ma-chines, a really well-coached vote-counting team used to be able to ex-clude as many as 40 percent of the votes. For this reason, some states insist on written standards for counting paper ballots.

Another way to rig paper-ballot elections is to gain unauthorized ac-cess to the ballot box. These boxes are supposed to be carefully locked, with an airtight chain of custody. Typically, sealed ballot boxes must be transported with a "chain of custody" form that includes the signatures and times in which they are in the custody of each official. However, chain of custody sometimes mysteriously disengages, and the "seal" is a little twisty-wire that does not take a master burglar to penetrate.

In San Francisco, ballot box lids were found floating in the bay and washing up on ocean beaches for several months after the November 2001 election.

"Beachcombers find them on sand dunes west of Point Reyes. Row-ers come upon them bobbing in the bay. The bright red box tops that keep washing up around the Bay Area are floating reminders of a prob-lem in San Francisco, the remnants of ballot boxes that somehow got beyond the control of the city's embattled Department of Elections," reports the *San Francisco Chronicle*. [3]

According to a San Francisco citizens group that publishes reports under the name "First Amendment Defense Trust," the June 1997 vote on the 49ers football stadium was well on its way to losing.

The defeat could not be announced, however, until after the "extremely

late delivery of over 100 ballot boxes which turned out to have an abundance of 'yes' votes." The delay was attributed to ballots that somehow got wet and had to be dried in a microwave oven, causing great suspicion. When the tardy ballots showed up, so dramatic was the shift to "yes" that the bond, worth $100 million to contractors, was passed by a narrow margin. [4]

The most famous person caught tampering with paper ballots was President Lyndon Johnson, who defeated the popular former Texas governor Coke Stevenson in the 1948 Democratic Senate primary. Johnson trailed Stevenson by 854 votes after the polls closed, but new ballots kept appearing. Various witnesses describe watching men altering the voter rolls and burning the ballots. Finally, when 202 new votes showed up (cast in alphabetical order), Johnson gained an 87-vote margin and was declared the winner.

LBJ's campaign manager at the time, John Connally, was publicly linked to the report of the suspicious and late 202 votes in Box 13 from Jim Wells County. Connally denied any tie to vote fraud. [5]

Lever machines: These are being phased out. They are not particularly accurate, and they are unauditable and cumbersome, but they are not easy to tamper with. One inhibiting factor is their sheer size. It is impossible to tote one of these big metal contraptions around unnoticed, and the job of moving them is so immense that it happens only at election time and requires several beefy guys and a truck. Private access to lever machines is not easy to come by, but it can be done.

To rig a lever machine, you buy off a technician or one of the caretakers who has custody over the machines. Just file a few teeth off the gear that matches the candidate you don't want, causing the machine to randomly skip votes, and you'll improve your own candidate's chances immensely, though not precisely.

Lever machines are not complex and tampering is not invisible, but if no one looks for it, tampering sometimes goes unnoticed for years. At least lever machines cannot be rigged on a national scale. Their problems are confined to small geographic areas.

Punch Cards: One way to rig a punch card system is to add punches to the cards with votes for the undesired candidate. The double-punched cards become "overvotes" and are thrown out.

In the 2000 general election in Duval County, Florida, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, "a remarkable 21,855 ballots were invalidated

because voters chose more than one presidential candidate." [7] These overvotes were never examined in the Florida recount, and they came primarily from a handful of black precincts.

Another way to rig punch cards is to find a crooked card printer. Printing companies sometimes get both the punch card order and the printing contract for ballot positioning. If they can print punch card batches that are customized for each area, an unscrupulous card manufacturer can rig the cards. There are two ways to do this, and it is difficult to detect either method without a microscope:

(1) Adjust the die that cuts the card so that perforations make the favored candidate easier to punch out, or the undesired candidate's chads hard to dislodge. It is possible to die-cut the favored candidate so that his chads can be dislodged with a strong puff of air.
(2) Affix an invisible plastic coating to the back of the undesirable candidate's chads. They will not dislodge easily and may even snap back into place after being punched.

Another way to rig the punch card vote would be to tamper with the automated counting system.

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These methods are clever, but computerized methods are more elegant. Using computers, you can manipulate more votes at once.