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So You Think Paper Ballots Are More Secure?

By Mike Tully

I suspect that, were you to visit the residence of Kari Lake or Mark Finchem, you would notice something in common: a VCR with its clock constantly blinking, “:00.” Both seem terrified of technology, especially scanners that count ballots instead of humans. When scanners in Arizona counted more votes for Joe Biden than Donald Trump in 2020, Lake and Finchem were convinced there was a Democrat ghost in the machines.

Several audits failed to ratify their suspicion. Even the clown posse audit by the “Cyber Ninjas” failed to find irregularities. Lake, a Republican candidate for Governor, and Finchem, a Republican candidate for Secretary of State, are impervious to factual data. Their preferred candidate lost and, by God, that means the process was flawed.

They even took their suspicions to court – briefly.

“Not only do plaintiffs fail to produce any evidence that a full hand count would be more accurate,” [ruled U. S. District Court Judge John Tuchi](#), “but a hand count would also require Maricopa County to hire 25,000 temporary staff and find two million square feet of space. In fact, with the county's current employees it would be an impossibility to have the ballots counted in order to perform a canvass by the 20th day after the election, as required by law.”

Lake and Finchem ran into a pair of roadblocks: They failed to produce evidence and, even if they had, their suggested remedy was physically and logistical impossible. But they persist in blinking “zero” after the court reset their clocks.

Elsewhere in Arizona, Cochise County flirted with mandating a manual hand-count, eliminating the scanners. They backed off when the Secretary of State and their own County Attorney warned them their plan was illegal. The County Attorney was particularly persuasive. [He warned the County Supervisors](#) they could face personal legal liability if they went through with it.

The push to replace scanners with a hand-count is not limited to Arizona. [At least half a dozen states have introduced legislation](#) to prohibit machine tabulation in favor of a hand-count by humans. Voting machines are able to process thousands of ballots with remarkable accuracy and have been found reliable for years.

“Republicans are arguing that humans are more likely than machines to get the count right,” notes Charles Stewart III, [writing in the Washington Post](#). “Evidence, however, suggests the opposite: Computers — which ballot scanners rely on — are very good at tedious, repetitive tasks. Humans are bad at them. And counting votes is tedious and repetitive.” The old saying goes, “to err is human,” not “to err is machine-based.”

Maggie Astor [recently wrote in *The New York Times*](#) that “Research indicates that hand counting increases errors,” citing studies from 2012 and 2018 that found machine scanners were more accurate than humans.

“Hand counting is ‘incredibly labor-intensive, very slow and, it turns out, subject to more error than having a machine do it,’” wrote Astor, quoting Stephen Ansolabehere, a professor of government at Harvard who led both studies.

She also quoted Mark Lindeman, the policy and strategy director at Verified Voting, a nonpartisan organization focused on election technology, who said, “People who think they would have greater confidence in this process think so because they haven’t seen it. The process in real life would not inspire confidence at all on this scale.”

Consider this “process in real life” example from Lawrence O’Donnell’s book, *Playing with Fire*:

“Johnson picked up the name ‘Landslide Lyndon’ for his 1948 victory in the Democratic primary for the Senate, which he won by a mere 87 votes. That primary was a runoff, and Johnson’s opponent, Coke Stevenson, was declared the winner at first. Then came late tallies from one of the most corrupt counties in Texas, reflecting a thoroughly organized effort, throughout many counties, headed by Johnson’s campaign manager (and future Texas governor) John Connally, to falsify hundreds – some claimed thousands – of ballots, with friendly judges certifying them. One tally was hand-altered, gaining Johnson 200 votes simply by replacing the 7 in 765 with a 9.” (pp. 33-34)

A hand-count is subject to error because, as Astor notes, “Humans are bad at tedious tasks.” True enough, but hand-counts are also subject to fraud. Want to change a 7 to a 9? No problem. Change a 1 to a 4? Even simpler.

Machine counts are superior to manual hand-counts because they are faster and more reliable. Nonetheless, writes Stewart, “we can see the most active Republicans starting to support scanning bans, suggesting that Republican-led state legislatures may file bills on this issue after the midterms. Bills have already been filed in Arizona, Missouri and New Hampshire.”

Why would politicians want to replace a reliable vote counting method with one that can be manipulated?

Maybe that’s the idea.