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Election Technology: Rise of the Voting Machines

By Thomas Eldredge

The year 2008 is a great year to be an American voter. It's an even better year to be an American voting machine. The voting machine is the backbone of our democracy, and it's time these noble beasts are given due recognition.

Without these machines, by the time the results were released, most people would have forgotten all about the election, if the candidates hadn't already died of old age. American democracy would be lost without the voting machine. America without the voting machine would be like the Roman Empire without the Segway® scooter.

Human beings are incapable of collecting or counting votes as quickly or as accurately as machines. Though the well-celebrated acts of John Henry, Neo, and Sarah Connor proved that an exceptional human could occasionally kick a machine's ass, we still can't count like them. Modern elections require a great deal of counting. Without today's voting machines, we would be forced to surrender our democracy to a tyrant for the sake of expediency and convenience.

The increasing size and complexity of a modern election requires precision, speed, and accountability beyond what humans alone could manage without exerting ourselves more than we really want to. Technology is the savior of democracy, as it has been since the moment we became overly reliant upon it.

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Throughout history, democracies have utilized the latest in technological assets to strengthen and empower the voice of the populace. Thousands of years ago, the Athenians practiced a form of direct democracy in which most adult male citizens could debate and vote on government decisions. The Athenians used the most advanced technologies of the day: yelling at each other, counting how many people raised their hands to vote, and sprinting in sandals to convey information about government business. Though highly functional for the time, these rudimentary techniques certainly could not work in the modern era.

Though not a true democracy, the Roman Republic also faced the challenge of holding large-scale elections. Ancient Rome contributed innumerable technological advancements to the world. Many of these contributions were created by direct necessity of maintaining a republic. Perhaps the most innovative election technologies employed by the Romans were the blade, poison, and a pioneering use of political graffiti.

Early in history, our own democracy was subject to difficulties brought on by a lack of sufficient technology. The earliest American elections relied on small, box-shaped devices that provided no electronic backups or printed receipts. The potential for catastrophic box malfunction was an ever-present threat. Even if the ballot box did not fail structurally, counting ballots by hand opened the door to fraud and human error.

In essence, democracy itself is a technology developed to mitigate the effects of human error. With luck, the average of everyone's judgment is better than the average individual's judgment. A representative democracy such as ours is a more efficient application of democratic technology, in that it allows us to elect leaders to make decisions in our name.

The founding fathers' ambition was to create a democracy based on reason. The framework they created was based on what they had learned from history, with reasonable expectations for the future. The founding fathers did not expect universal suffrage, population growth to over a quarter-billion citizens, or campaign budgets that rival the U.S. gross domestic product at the time of the ratification of the Constitution. America grew quickly, and it took time for technology to catch up to the ambition of the founding fathers.

The first radical change in election technology came with the invention of the incandescent light. The light bulb finally allowed citizens to cast their vote after sunset. This innovation was critical to the rise of the American Vampire Party. Before this time, the American Werewolf Party was the predominant organizational force in politics. After some struggle, the Vampires and Werewolves struck an accord that solidified the coalition of monsters constituting today's two-party system.

American election technology accelerated quickly in the 20th century. Emerging communications technologies made elections more engaging by providing quick election results, and more expensive and ever more well-rehearsed campaign theatrics.

While paper-ballot technology persists even to this day, box

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technology has grown by leaps and bounds. From wood to metal to space-age plastic, ballot-box implosion, self-incineration, and mechanical failures are things of the past. Ballot boxes are now 100% as reliable as the people running the election.

Election technology is on the cusp of another breakthrough. Decades ago, digital technology vastly improved the function and proliferation of banking and financial services. It may eventually do the same for American democracy.

The stalwart and reliable ATM is the frontline soldier in today's fast-paced economy. At great expense and with cooperative commercial effort, these devices have been honed to a fine degree of mechanical reliability, stability, and security.

The analogous advancement that is leading us into the modern age of voting is, of course, the voting machine. While distinctly less reliable than ATMs, we put our republic in the hands of these temperamental creatures as a testament to our faith in technology. Technology has become the representative of capitalism, and capitalism is the badass grandmother of democracy.

The ATM is the hard-working, older sibling of the promising, though petulant and immature, voting machine. Unlike the well-standardized ATM, voting machines are manufactured with a wild variety of operating principles, requirements, and sophistications. Machines may collect votes using optical scans, punch cards, buttons, levers, touch screens, printers, tactile genital analysis, or any combination thereof.

Voting machines are exotic and strange, and yet they are becoming more familiar to us with each election. They hide behind curtains in school and church gymnasiums, quiet and unassuming, watching and waiting. They are much like the engine that lurks under your hood, the humble server racks diligently delivering your favorite web page, or the graceful satellite silently imaging your house and thoughts from geosynchronous orbit.

Voting machines have become a foundation of democracy, and I want to go on record as being the first to publicly congratulate them. If these machines ever become sentient and want to be a part of the political process, I'll sell out like a dancing monkey, and I suggest you all do the same – otherwise, it might piss off the ATMs.

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This article was originally posted on November 07, 2008



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