

Jack Harrison Pollack

# SIX WAYS YOUR VOTE CAN BE STOLEN

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## Registration frauds

Considerable vote stealing still results from spurious registration. "Ghost" voters who have died or moved, "residents" from vacant lots and abandoned buildings, and a variety of nonexistent persons still find their way onto registration rolls and vote, courtesy of party workers.

But today's election manipulators are more likely to try to "vote the books"—that is, vote in the name of properly registered persons. For example, if you haven't showed up to cast your ballot near closing time, a party hack may cheerfully vote in your name. Should you appear at the last minute, you may be greeted with, "Sorry, you've already voted," and be turned away.

Some years ago, a "voter" gave his name at the polling place as William Crosswell Doane, an eminent clergyman. "You're not Bishop Doane," said the puzzled election clerk. "The hell I ain't, you bastard," answered the impersonator.

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The machinery of democracy has always been susceptible to tampering, and despite the advent of more sophisticated voting procedures the problem has worsened. "Three to four million votes will be stolen in the November Presidential election through outright fraud and election irregularities," says George J. Abrams, for thirty-nine years chief

investigator for the Honest Ballot Association. "Election frauds are increasing not only in national elections but in those involving unions, local school boards, judges, and highways."

Pitifully little illumination has been shed on the dark side of the electoral process. Here, then, are some of the methods that election thieves rely on.

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## Paper ballot frauds

Paper ballots, still used in approximately 40 per cent of the nation's 175,000 voting precincts, are invitingly easy to tamper with. As a New Jersey Republican precinct worker observed, "It ain't how the ballots go in that counts—it's how they come out."

In most states the slightest change, mismarking, strikeover, defacement, tear, or smudge on a paper ballot invalidates it. Hence, "spoiling" paper ballots cast for the opposition is a favorite trick for stealing votes. A crooked ballot counter can conceal a piece of pencil lead—with wax to make it stick—under his fingernail, on a bandage or large ring, or in the palm of his hand. As he smooths out the ballots before counting them, he can make additional marks on unfriendly ballots, thereby voiding them.

The "slow count" of paper ballots can ensure that their manipulation is effective, especially in close contests. The counting—and altering—of ballots is delayed until early election returns are in, suggesting how many opposition ballots need to be thrown out to insure a winning margin. The importance of such chicanery is evident; in 1960, for example, the number of invalid paper ballots far exceeded President Kennedy's small national plurality.

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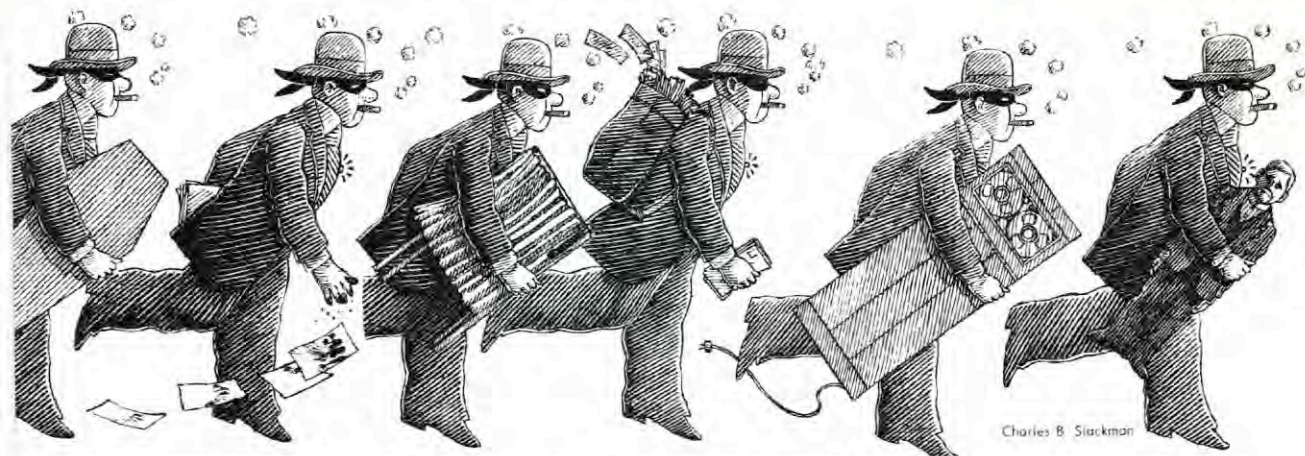
## Voting machine frauds

Though voting machines have helped to reduce election frauds, they are mandatory for general elections in only eleven states (and for the crucial primaries in only four). Manufacturers claim that their machines are foolproof, rigproof, jamproof, and that it is impossible, without being detected, to overvote or spoil ballots so they won't be counted. But there are some ingenious tricks that can defeat the machine safeguards.

Since a voting machine lever must be pushed completely down to record a vote, it is possible to wedge a matchstick (or a hairpin or a razor blade or a paper clip) under the opponent's lever so that votes for him fail to register. Or, since the machine won't record the vote unless the curtain is tightly closed, someone outside the booth can manipulate the curtain release cord so that the vote is invalidated. Or, before the polls even open, finaglers can switch the cardboard labels bearing the candidates' names, so you actually vote against your choices.

Less subtle techniques include seeing that the voting machines never reach the polling place, that the keys to unlock the machines are missing, or that the machines jam or break down.

A voting machine is as accurate as a cash register or an adding machine. But when people take over to record the totals, the figures can be deliberately transposed on fast counts, especially if there is collusion between poll watchers. Thus, 683 votes for candidate A can be called out for candidate B, and the total vote will check precisely with that on the machine.



Charles B. Slackman

### Absentee ballot frauds

### Computer frauds

### Assistance frauds

**A**bsentee ballots provide a happy hunting ground for vote stealers, and quite often decide close elections. Sometimes they are purchased for as much as \$50 apiece. More frequently, absentee ballots are issued—then used—in the names of persons who are deceased, who are not county residents, who are not U.S. citizens, or who simply never applied for an absentee ballot in the first place.

Because they are often handled and counted separately, absentee ballots provide many opportunities for manipulation. An Ohio Republican ward captain once visited an old folks home to pick up a batch of absentee ballots. "Don't bother sealing them, I'll mail them in for you," he told the aged voters.

This November, record peace-time numbers of absentee ballots are expected to be cast. The Voting Rights Act of 1970 eliminates all state requirements for reasons of absence in the Presidential election (but not in state and local elections). But by a curious twist, the well-meaning federal law may give local election officials broad powers in manipulating the vote or restricting the franchise, especially in the case of college students and overseas voters. The states have fifty different definitions of what constitutes a "resident," says the National Municipal League.

**T**he ubiquitous computer is used in elections in at least fourteen states. There are six major punch-card voting systems in which you vote by using a penlike stylus to punch a hole in a card. The punchcard is then dropped in the ballot box. After the polls close, the punchcards are transported to a center where high-speed card sorters and computers take over.

But computer systems retain many of the drawbacks of the paper ballot: cards can be "spoiled" or tampered with while they are being transported. For the sophisticated, there are reprogramming possibilities that will change the vote counts. "All it takes is one man to slip in a few punched cards and set up a loop operation that switches the vote count around," observes *Computing Newsline*.

"Skilled technicians can trigger a computer to switch a candidate tally on every tenth or twentieth ballot," noted an article in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Then there are always the mysterious quirks that machines are heir to. A defeated candidate for the Montana House of Representatives has complained that the computer results had him finish eighth in a seven-man race.

**M**ost states have nineteenth-century laws providing for "assistance" to illiterate or physically handicapped voters. Using them as pretext, some election officials offer to "help" any voter—including young and aged ones. "Would you like me to show you how to operate this voting machine?" they may obligingly ask. Sometimes they will even illegally go behind the curtain with you to vote for you. Should you balk against such helping hands they will innocently say, oh, they misunderstood your instructions.

Foreign-born voters have been traditional pigeons for this assistance. Once when a spirited Irish immigrant, a first-time voter, rebelled against such assistance in New York City, his Tammany would-be benefactor, who was a candidate for reelection, irritably snapped, "I'm from Ireland and my opponent is a dago from Italy. Are you in favor of Ireland or Italy?"

**S**till, the persistence of U.S. voting irregularities ought to be kept in perspective. George Abrams of the Honest Ballot Association is fond of a story he introduces with the deadpan assertion that the Soviet Union has a more secret ballot than we do. It seems that a Russian voter, standing in line, was holding a sealed envelope containing his ballot. Curious, he opened it, and was chided for doing so. "But, comrade, I just wanted to see how I was voting." He was informed brusquely, "You're not allowed to. This is a secret ballot election."