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Out-Of-State Corporation Offered Wisconsin Election Clerks a Deal on Touchscreen Voting Machines That Make Election Results Impossible To Verify

"A touchscreen failure in North Carolina led to an unrecoverable loss of 4,400 votes. These lost votes were within the margin of error for several races, creating a serious problem and they illustrate the fatal weakness of touchscreen voting machines."

Jeffrey S. Chase , Department of Computer Science, Duke University

At a time when upcoming elections are projected to cost Wisconsin taxpayers millions of dollars, Command Central—a private vendor headquartered in St. Cloud, MN—has offered many small municipalities a very curious deal. Command Central is offering to trade two "re-conditioned" Edge touchscreen voting machines (also known as DREs) for each of the municipality's Opti-Scan vote-counting machine *at no charge*. A short while ago, Command Central had offered some municipalities the same model for \$2,250 each. *Why* some municipalities were offered a swap and others a sale is unclear but Wisconsin citizens concerned about election integrity have found that many municipalities *have accepted it or are still* considering it.

At first glance, this deal would appear to offer welcome economic relief to small municipalities which would otherwise have to carry the expense of printing paper ballots and get software programmed for each election. But studies have shown that the touchscreen is actually more costly in the long run. Worse yet, touchscreens also have a long and documented history of malfunction and of serious vulnerabilities to hacking.

Last week, Election Defense Alliance (EDA)—a national, non-partisan, non-profit organization dedicated

to improving the security of all elections—intervened in Wisconsin in an attempt to dissuade clerks from buying the touchscreens. In a letter to over 600 Wisconsin city and town clerks, EDA shared information on the touchscreen machines. They identified a variety of issues concerning both the reliability and security of the touchscreen machines, most significantly that *neither election officials nor the Wisconsin citizens have the means to independently verify that the vote totals from such machines are correct.*

“Election results from a touchscreen machine are 100% unverifiable,” said Sally Castleman of EDA. “How can we have a democracy if we have no way of knowing if the announced election outcomes are what the voters really voted?” The national trend is strongly away from touchscreen voting. Many states (e.g., New Mexico, Iowa, Virginia, Maryland, New York, and Florida) have either outlawed the use of touchscreen machines or simply refused to buy them because they provide no way to independently verify the machine-reported vote counts. These machines do not require paper ballots. The nominal “paper trails” that some touchscreens create have a long documented history of unreliability and illegibility. They have frequently been referred to as a “toilet paper” roll because the paper is so flimsy. In fact, the touchscreens render a recount of a close election virtually impossible. According to Jeannie Dean, national election activist, “Voting systems must be accountable and elections must be verifiable. When they’re not, you have nothing more than faith-based elections.”

Many citizens in Wisconsin are concerned that touchscreens will eliminate the need for paper ballots. EDA and most professionals involved in preventing election fraud consider hand counting hand-marked paper ballots the requisite standard for democracy. Currently Wisconsin *forbids* any municipality larger than 7500 registered voters to hand count ballots without express permission of the GAB.

Grant Petty, an election observer affiliated with Wisconsin Citizens for Election Protection noted, “In an election year that has millions of dollars of corporate money pouring into the state of Wisconsin, and with the stakes so high, it is foolhardy to entrust the counting of the votes to a private vendor that is unaccountable to the voting public.”

The motive behind Command Central's offer to swap or sell used machines that were rejected by other states remains murky. It is not clear what Command Central stands to gain from this deal, although some speculate that at minimum there could be lucrative programming and service fees associated with the reconditioned machines. Command Central will presumably be the vendor that provides maintenance and technical support on Election Day.

In a letter obtained by EDA containing the sales pitch to municipalities, Command Central failed to mention the advanced age of the touchscreen machines they are offering. As with all electronic voting machines, there is a scheduled obsolescence built in which translates to undisclosed costs for municipalities in the future.

Bev Harris, a leading national expert who is also founder of Black Box Voting, states, “The touchscreen machines cause much longer lines than optical scan machines, for the simple reason that the voter has to occupy a machine for the whole time they are voting. An optical scan machine is only occupied for a hot second while you stick your ballot in.” High wait times at polling places can be considered a form of voter suppression.

Jonathan Simon of EDA noted, “Concealed vote counting—either by Opti-scan or, still worse, by touchscreen machines—is an open invitation to wholesale election rigging.” Over the past decade many documented studies, from Princeton University to the federal Government Accountability Office have

shown that vote-switching is shockingly easy to program into all electronic election equipment. None has been shown to be safe from hacking; the touchscreens have proven to be the worst. Since electronic voting machines have spread throughout the country, more and more states have learned the risks of using touchscreens and have abandoned them, often following disastrous experiences.

“This technology, that has been rejected by state after state and decried by every election integrity expert and advocate, is a step backward and antithetical to democracy,” said national election advocate and journalist Brad Friedman. “It is surprising that additional touchscreens would be introduced into a forward-thinking state like Wisconsin.”

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For further information on this topic, please visit these links:

<http://ElectionDefenseAlliance.org/files/SCIENTIFICSTUDIES.pdf>

<http://www.bradblog.com/?p=6373>

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