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To the Editors:

George Soros ("My Philanthropy," New York Review of Books, 5/23/11) paints a discouraging picture of an America in thrall to the Orwellian "Newspeak" now peddled to seeming perfection by the GOP. Citing Karl Rove's reported claim that he "didn't have to study reality; he could create it," Soros attributes the GOP's "competitive advantage in electoral politics" to the "adoption of Orwellian techniques [by] the Republican propaganda machine." He goes on to caution that "[a]lthough democracy has much deeper roots in America than in [Weimar] Germany, it is not immune to deliberate deception," and that the idea that America will cease to be a democracy and an open society is "a very likely prospect." This seems about as far as any alarmed observer is willing to go in adumbrating the causes for the strange, perplexing, and seemingly inexorable veer to the right America has taken over the past decade, Obama's election notwithstanding.

But why should "creating reality" draw the line at Newspeak and propaganda? Why not, with privatized and partisan control of the voting apparatus itself, far more reliably and tidily "create the reality" of electoral victory in the darkness of cyberspace?

The advent and proliferation of computerized voting has created, over the past decade, opportunities for outcome-determinative electoral manipulation on a mass scale. The vulnerabilities have been documented by top-line researchers from Princeton to Johns Hopkins to the Congressional GAO. The far right-wing pedigree of the major voting equipment vendors and servicers is no secret. And the "red shift" (vote counts to the right of exit polls, tracking polls, and hand-counts) has been consistent and pervasive in competitive elections since 2002--including the Democratic victories of 2006 and 2008, where 11th-hour political developments turned close elections into manipulation-masking blowouts.

Americans, and particularly the American media, seem content to ignore all this and blithely place full and unquestioning faith in secret vote counting and the fait accompli of computerized tabulation. The towering never-happen-here wall of denial ("America is the beacon of democracy!") sustains this weird credulity in the face of cheating scandals in virtually every sport and throughout the financial world. But American elections are the highest stakes "game" of all and, if Soros is to be taken seriously, America is already a long way from the beacon of democracy we have all taken for granted. We have observed highly unethical tactics (e.g., sending out thousands of flyers to African-American homes stating that the election is Wednesday) employed in plain view and with increasing frequency to create the "reality" of electoral victory.

Is there really a bright ethical line between sending out "Vote Wednesday" flyers and just flipping votes inside an optical scanner?

Perhaps the American public is less susceptible to right-wing Newspeak than Soros laments. Perhaps millions more than we are led to believe see through the lies and propaganda and cast their votes accordingly. And perhaps those votes, counted in secret (how is what we do any different from handing our votes to a little man who retreats behind a curtain and emerges to tell us who won?), are not counted as cast. Unless we return to observable, public vote counting--which necessarily means by humans--how will we ever know?

Do we truly deserve a democracy if we are not willing as a citizenry to reassume the very modest burden of counting our own votes? And are we, George Soros included, comfortable with even the possibility that our democracy, in thrall to Election Night convenience and the reality creation of ends-justify-the-means true-believers, will fall to such a cheap trick?

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