

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Fear of Fraud

By Paul Krugman

It's election night, and early returns suggest trouble for the incumbent. Then, mysteriously, the vote count stops and observers from the challenger's campaign see employees of a voting-machine company, one wearing a badge that identifies him as a county official, typing instructions at computers with access to the vote-tabulating software.

When the count resumes, the incumbent pulls ahead. The challenger demands an investigation. But there are no ballots to recount, and election officials allied with the incumbent refuse to release data that could shed light on whether there was tampering with the electronic records.

This isn't a paranoid fantasy. It's a true account of a recent election in Riverside County, Calif., reported by Andrew Gumbel of the British newspaper *The Independent*. Mr. Gumbel's full-length report, printed in *Los Angeles City Beat*, makes hair-raising reading not just because it reinforces concerns about touch-screen voting, but also because it shows how easily officials can stonewall after a suspect election.

Some states, worried about the potential for abuse with voting machines that leave no paper trail, have banned their use this November. But Florida, which may well decide the presidential race, is not among those states, and last month state officials rejected a request to allow independent audits of the machines' integrity. A spokesman for Gov. Jeb Bush accused those seeking audits of trying to "undermine voters' confidence," and declared, "The governor has every confidence in the Department of State and the Division of Elections."

Should the public share that confidence? Consider the felon list.

Florida law denies the vote to convicted felons. In 2000 the state hired a firm to purge supposed felons from the list of registered voters; these voters were turned away from the polls. After the election, determined by 537 votes, it became clear that thousands of people had been wrongly disenfranchised. Since those misidentified as felons were disproportionately Democratic-leaning African-Americans, these errors may have put George W. Bush in the White House.

This year, Florida again hired a private company—Accenture, which recently got a homeland security contract worth up to \$10 billion—to prepare a felon list. Remembering 2000, journalists sought copies. State officials stonewalled, but a judge eventually ordered the list released.

The *Miami Herald* quickly discovered that 2,100 citizens who had been granted clemency, restoring their voting rights, were nonetheless on the banned-voter list. Then *The Sarasota Herald-Tribune* discovered that only 61 of more than 47,000 supposed felons were Hispanic. So the list would have wrongly disenfranchised many legitimate African-American voters, while wrongly enfranchising many Hispanic felons. It escaped nobody's attention that in Florida, Hispanic voters tend to support Republicans.

After first denying any systematic problem, state officials declared it an innocent mistake. They told Accenture to match a list of registered voters to a list of felons, flagging anyone whose name, date of birth and race was the same on both lists. They didn't realize, they said, that this would automatically miss felons who identified themselves as Hispanic because that category exists on voter rolls but not in state criminal records.

But employees of a company that prepared earlier felon lists say that they repeatedly warned state election officials about that very problem.

Let's not be coy. Jeb Bush says he won't allow an independent examination of voting machines because he has "every confidence" in his handpicked election officials. Yet those officials have a history of slipshod performance on other matters related to voting

and somehow their errors always end up favoring Republicans. Why should anyone trust their verdict on the integrity of voting machines, when another convenient mistake could deliver a Republican victory in a high-stakes national election?

This shouldn't be a partisan issue. Think about what a tainted election would do to America's sense of itself, and its role in the world. In the face of official stonewalling, doubters probably wouldn't be able to prove one way or the other whether the vote count was distorted—but if the result looked suspicious, most of the world and many Americans would believe the worst. I'll write soon about what can be done in the few weeks that remain, but here's a first step: if Governor Bush cares at all about the future of the nation, as well as his family's political fortunes, he will allow that independent audit.