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EDITORIAL

Machines Too Can Lie

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"It's not the voting that's democracy; it's the counting," says a character in Tom Stoppard's play "Jumpers." The character wasn't referring to the Florida recount debacle three years ago, or to the 2002 law aimed at preventing future electoral traumas by funding local efforts to replace antiquated voting equipment. The character's point, however, should be foremost in Congress' mind as it works to implement the Help America Vote Act.



On Wednesday, the Senate decided to delay funding for new voting devices because of partisan disagreements over unrelated issues in the budget bill. The delay gives legislators a chance to condition future funding for the act on reforms that would fix its numerous flaws.

Legislators should begin by passing a bill by Rep. Rush D. Holt (D-N.J.) that would require the new machines to provide a paper receipt to each voter — much like the "voter-verified paper audit trail" that California Secretary of State Kevin Shelley will require electronic voting machines to produce by July 2006.

Beyond not requiring receipts, the Help America Vote Act has an even bigger and more troubling shortcoming: It fails to include any meaningful regulation of voting system manufacturers and vendors. The act does not require the companies to reveal their software coding to outside, independent reviewers.

That's a potential problem because computer security experts have identified numerous flaws in the systems made by industry leader Diebold Election Systems Inc. that could allow vote tampering. Rebecca Mercuri, a computer scientist at Harvard University, was one of many experts expressing deep concerns about the nation's lax regulation of the new machines at a symposium on electronic voting systems this week in Gaithersburg, Md.

"There are literally hundreds of ways to embed a rogue series of commands into the coding," Mercuri said, "and nobody would ever know because the nature of programming is so complex. The numbers would all tally perfectly."

In addition, Diebold's chief executive, Walden O'Dell, hasn't done much to inspire faith in his impartiality. An ardent Bush supporter, O'Dell wrote an Aug. 14 fundraising letter to Ohio Republicans, saying, "I am committed to helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes to the president next year."

Voters' rights cannot be guaranteed merely by installing jazzy machines with shiny new buttons. One doesn't have to be a conspiracy theorist to recognize that the gadgets — as well as the people who build,

program and operate them — need vigorous oversight.

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