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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Saving the Vote

By PAUL KRUGMAN

**E**veryone knows it, but not many politicians or mainstream journalists are willing to talk about it, for fear of sounding conspiracy-minded: there is a substantial chance that the result of the 2004 presidential election will be suspect.

When I say that the result will be suspect, I don't mean that the election will, in fact, have been stolen. (We may never know.) I mean that there will be sufficient uncertainty about the honesty of the vote count that much of the world and many Americans will have serious doubts.

How might the election result be suspect? Well, to take only one of several possibilities, suppose that Florida - where recent polls give John Kerry the lead - once again swings the election to George Bush.

Much of Florida's vote will be counted by electronic voting machines with no paper trails. Independent computer scientists who have examined some of these machines' programming code are appalled at the security flaws. So there will be reasonable doubts about whether Florida's votes were properly counted, and no paper ballots to recount. The public will have to take the result on faith.

Yet the behavior of Gov. Jeb Bush's officials with regard to other election-related matters offers no justification for such faith. First there was the affair of the felon list. Florida law denies the vote to convicted felons. But in 2000 many innocent people, a great number of them black, couldn't vote because they were erroneously put on a list of felons; these wrongful exclusions may have put Governor Bush's brother in the White House.

This year, Florida again drew up a felon list, and tried to keep it secret. When a judge forced the list's release, it turned out that it once again wrongly disenfranchised many people - again, largely African-American - while including almost no Hispanics.

[Yesterday, my colleague Bob Herbert reported](#) on another highly suspicious Florida initiative: state police officers have gone into the homes of elderly African-American voters - including participants in get-out-the-vote operations - and interrogated them as part of what the state says is a fraud investigation. But the state has provided little information about the investigation, and, as Mr. Herbert says, this looks remarkably like an attempt to intimidate voters.

Given this pattern, there will be skepticism if Florida's paperless voting machines give President Bush an upset, uncheckable victory.

Congress should have acted long ago to place the coming election above suspicion by requiring a paper trail for votes. But legislation was bottled up in committee, and it may be too late to change the hardware. Yet it is

crucial that this election be credible. What can be done?

There is still time for officials to provide enhanced security, assuring the public that nobody can tamper with voting machines before or during the election; to hire independent security consultants to perform random tests before and during Election Day; and to provide paper ballots to every voter who requests one.

Voters, too, can do their bit. Recently the Florida Republican Party sent out a brochure urging supporters to use absentee ballots to make sure their votes are counted. The party claims that was a mistake - but it was, in fact, good advice. Voters should use paper ballots where they are available, and if this means voting absentee, so be it. (Election officials will be furious about the increased workload, but they have brought this on themselves.)

Finally, some voting activists have urged a last-minute push for independent exit polling, parallel to but independent of polling by media groups (whose combined operation suffered a meltdown during the upset Republican electoral triumph in 2002). This sounds like a very good idea.

Intensive exit polling would do triple duty. It would serve as a deterrent to anyone contemplating election fraud. If all went well, it would help validate the results and silence skeptics. And it would give an early warning if there was election tampering - perhaps early enough to seek redress.

It's horrifying to think that the credibility of our democracy - a democracy bought through the courage and sacrifice of many brave men and women - is now in danger. It's so horrifying that many prefer not to think about it. But closing our eyes won't make the threat go away. On the contrary, denial will only increase the chances of a disastrously suspect election.

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