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FROM ELECTION CURE-ALL TO NATIONAL CONTROVERSY: Century Foundation Issue Brief Offers Step-By-Step Guide to the Debate over Computerized Voting Machines

New York, May 27, 2004—Prodded by the federal legislation enacted to prevent another election debacle like the 2000 presidential contest, many jurisdictions across the country have been moving away from paper-based and mechanical methods of voting toward the use of computerized voting machines. But as we approach the 2004 presidential contest, some say that the swift move toward the so-called direct recording electronic (DRE) devices, computerized voting machines that work much like automated teller machines, could mean trading one set of problems for another.

In a new issue brief from The Century Foundation, Tova Andrea Wang, senior program officer and democracy fellow, reports that a campaign begun two years ago with a small group of computer scientists who believe that DRE systems are vulnerable to hacking and malfunction has become a national controversy. This brief uses a step-by-step, straightforward approach to explain the technical and political issues behind the debate over these voting machines.

According to Wang, the voting machine issue has taken on an urgency because the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), which was enacted in 2002, imposes a number of requirements on states with respect to voting machines, while providing federal funding for replacement of older technology. In addition, she notes that even though the law does not require that changes be made for another year and a half, the use of DRE machines will have a significant impact on this year's presidential contest. "Several states have already purchased and installed electronic voting machines for use in the presidential election this fall. About 50 million people, or three out of every ten voters, will cast ballots on DRE machines this year."

Wang reports that the DRE machines offer some important advantages over other voting machines, particularly that they can be made fully accessible to the disabled, including the visually impaired. She also notes that over time DRE machines can be programmed in many languages, would significantly reduce voter errors, and that voters reportedly find them easy to use. However, computer scientists have pointed to several flaws in the computerized voting systems, which make them vulnerable to tampering, manipulation and/or malfunction.

Wang reviews several proposals that have been made to prevent the voting machine problems computer scientists have identified. These include a voter verified paper trail (VVPT) and requiring open source code. Bills have been introduced in Congress and in sixteen state legislatures across the country to require that machines have voter verifiable paper trails. However, the original authors of the Help America Vote Act and some civil rights and civic organizations, such as the Leadership Conference for Civil Rights, advocates for the disabled, election administrators, the League of Women Voters, are opposed to the immediate implementation of a paper trail requirement because, they say, it can lead to administrative problems, is not really a check against fraud, and can not be made accessible to the disabled.

The Century Foundation publishes issue briefs to help explain and call attention to public policy issues that are worthy of discussion and debate. This and other briefs are available on The Century Foundation Website at www.tcf.org. Tova Wang is available to discuss issues related to election reform. For more information, contact Christy Hicks at (212) 452-7723 or hicks@tcf.org.

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