Chain Voting

Douglas W. Jones

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Taxonomy

Retail, vote buying, or voter intimidation.

Applicability

Paper ballot systems (hand counted or mark-sense).

Method

The perpetrator must begin by obtaining a valid blank ballot for each precinct under attack. The perpetrator may counterfeit a ballot, steal a ballot before the election, smuggle a legitimately issued ballot out of the polling place instead of voting on it, or use an absentee ballot.

The perpetrator then repeats the following cycle: Mark the ballot for the desired candidates, find a subverted voter, and require that the subverted voter take the ballot to a polling place, exchange the pre-marked ballot for the blank ballot issued to that voter at the polling place, and return the blank ballot to the perpetrator to enable the next cycle.

Chains can also be run among subverted voters who have requested absentee ballots (or have been induced to request them for the purpose of participating in a chain). In this case, the initiator of the chain marks his or her absentee ballot and then gives it to a subverted voter in exchange for a blank absentee ballot, continuing to build the chain until the deadline for returning an absentee ballot, at which point the initiator marks and votes the last ballot in the chain.

Voters expecting payment receive their payment after returning the new blank ballot to the perpetrator. Voters are typically subject to punishment if they do not return the blank ballot.

Resource Requirements

Each perpetrator must have access to a pool of subvertable voters willing to vote in return for payment or unable to complain if threatened. Employees, tenants, and those with similar dependency relationships are particularly vulnerable.

Potential Gain

One vote per subverted voter.

Likelihood of Detection

The likelihood of detection depends on the degree of dependency linking the perpetrator to the subverted voters. Chain voting is fairly safe for the perpetrator where he is in a position to offer protection to voters in desperate circumstances. Examples include: protecting their jobs in times of high unemployment, or their leases in times of housing shortage, or their access to essential government services.

Countermeasures

Preventative Measures

Ballot Distribution Security:
> Strictly account for all ballots printed, with the requirement that all ballots not packaged for delivery to the polling place be destroyed. Multiple witnesses must be present at every stage of ballot processing to assure that no ballots escape. When the polls open, election workers must verify that the inventory of ballots delivered matches the manifest for the polling place.

Absentee Ballots:
> Mark absentee ballots distinctly to distinguish them from ballots voted at the polling place.

Prevent Ballot Counterfeiting:
> Use special inks and papers to deter counterfeiters.

Serial Number Ballots:
> Each ballot should have a unique serial number printed on a tear-off stub. When the voter signs in to vote, this serial number should be recorded. When the voter returns his or her ballot to be deposited in the ballot box, this number should be checked to verify that the voter is voting the same ballot they were issued. If the stub is already torn from the ballot or if the stub number is wrong, the voter should be subject to investigation and possible arrest. To protect voter privacy, the ballot should be contained in a privacy folder that exposes only the ballot stub and serial number, and the stub should be removed before the ballot is slid from the privacy folder into the ballot box. Alternatively, using serial numbered ballots: Note the time of issue of each serial numbered ballot, without noting the identity of the voter to whom that ballot was issued, and use this to enforce time limits on how long a voter may take to vote a ballot.

Detection Measures

Detection is difficult if markings on the ballot are made with pedantic attention to the ballot marking instructions, for example, by exactly darkening the ovals or making

perfect X-marks with exactly the recommended type of pen or pencil. However, if someone has been marking many ballots, they are likely to develop a fast marking technique that may be visibly distinctive enough to be recognized from ballot to ballot. This has led, in the past, to detection of a "single hand" that marked many ballots.

Citations

Joseph P. Harris, Election Administration in the United States, The Brookings Institution, 1934. Chain voting is described on page 373. The use of serial numbered tear-off stubs is described on page 40. The potential use of absentee ballots to start a chain is described on pages 298 and 299. The risks of postal voting discussed on pages 301 to 303 do not include the applications of chains in this context, but they are fairly obvious.

Harris considers chain voting to be worthy of defending against, but he notes that it was secondary to other types of fraud that were, at the time, easier.

Retrospective

Despite the fact that the defense against chain voting was well understood and published in 1934, many states have not adopted these defenses and rely on inferior defenses. In several cases, states are still using methods that Harris explicitly criticized as being weak and ineffective such as having poll-workers initial or sign each ballot.

Prevention of ballot counterfeiting is far more difficult today than it was in 1934! Computer typography and the widespread availability of photocopy shops with a good supply of paper make most classical ballot security measures pointless. Many vendors of mark-sense voting systems claim that their ballots must be printed on special paper with special ink, but in the late 1990's, I disproved one vendor's claim by manufacturing counterfeit ballots at a neighborhood copy shop that neither the vendor's representatives nor their machine could distinguish from authentic ballots.

Some counties have apparently posted, to the web, the actual PDF files from which the official ballots were printed. This is easy, but it makes things very easy for a counterfeiter. I collected one such ballot from the web soon after Election 2000.