

OPEN VOTE

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

Some issues facing the open source community are difficult to explain to outsiders, but some are problems the whole world faces. One issue most people care about is the right to vote. What does the right to vote have to do with open source software?

The Open Voting Consortium (OVC) is a group of experts devoted to ensuring that electronic voting systems remain auditable and open in future elections. This mission is actually

quite consistent with the open source movement's focus on alerting the world to the problem of private companies controlling critical segments of the economy through proprietary software. In the case of the voting machine business, a few companies control a large portion of the industry, and no one really knows if their software has problems or not, since it isn't freely available for public review. And, as is often the case within the closed circles of closed source, proprietary hardware requires proprietary software, perpetuating a cycle of dependence that keeps the vendor in control.

The OVC identifies the following problems with the electronic voting industry:

- **Black Box Secrecy:** Computer programs that run election machines and tabulate results are secret and cannot be checked by the public. This invites corruption, and there is currently no way to assure accountability.
- **Corporate Control:** Large corporations like Diebold and ESS dominate electronic voting machine sales and control our voting software. These companies have a strong influence over processes for approving machines, and they often control whether testing results are even shared.
- **No Paper Trail:** Electronic voting terminals became popular after the hanging chad scandal in the 2000 US presidential election, but many machines purchased since then have no paper ballot, which makes accurate recounts impossible. Of votes cast in the November 2004 election, 30% were on machines that couldn't be audited.
- **No Consistent Data to Check Results:** In the US alone, there are 185,000 voting precincts and 800,000 voting machines. Most systems consist of technology cobbled together to minimally meet a patchwork of inconsistent requirements.
- **Limited Access:** Older style voting terminals posed major problems for the handicapped or the sight impaired.

Touch screen voting systems partly remedy this problem but introduce a host of other problems.

The OVC proposes a comprehensive approach to addressing these issues. They have devised a complete system for fair and free electronic voting, and they have even built a prototype voting machine that embodies the project goals.

The open voting machine prints a summary paper ballot for every vote cast electronically. Voters can review their choices in the summary, and those who have difficulty reading can even listen to a spoken version of the summary (generated electronically and played through headphones). The summary paper ballots are placed in a secure ballot box, where they will serve as a cross-check and permanent record of the electronic tally.

Most important, the software used with the system is all open source. It will be subject to public review, it will be freely available to anyone who wants to use it, and it won't be controlled by proprietary interests.

The OVC is headed by a team of computer scientists. I have always thought it was quite a red flag that so many highly qualified professional computer experts are so decidedly under-enthusiastic about the whole concept of electronic voting, and yet, all too often, the warnings of these experts go unanswered. The well-known fiasco of the 2000 US presidential election and the more recent fiascos of the 2004 vote count in Ohio <http://www.openvoting.org/files/Conyersreport.pdf> make it obvious that something needs to happen – not just in the US, but in every democracy that depends on electronic voting devices.

I encourage anyone who embraces the ideals of freedom and open source software to visit the Open Voting Consortium at <http://www.openvoting.org>.

Joe

Linux Magazine is proud to be part of an international group of Linux publications founded in the early days of the Open Source movement.

Our team includes authors, editors, and Linux specialists producing nine magazines in six languages. Our goal is to provide our readers with useful, hands-on information on working with Linux.

As a reader of Linux Magazine, you are joining an information network that is dedicated to distributing knowledge and technical expertise to Linux users around the world.

