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After the 2000 Florida election debacle, the public wanted to fix the way votes are counted. In response, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act, which President Bush signed into law on Wednesday. It will direct the lion's share of almost \$4 billion to replacing old punch-card and paper-ballot systems with computerized "touch-screen" machines. Most of that money will flow to three corporations closely associated with the Republican Party, two of which have been caught bribing state election officials to win contracts. Their high-tech voting machines are easily hacked and, worse, prevent manual recounts or independent verification of election results. In trying to "fix" hanging chads and butterfly ballots, Congress is giving a trio of well-connected corporations \$4 billion of scarce public money to make it easier to rig elections.

The American vote count already is controlled by three corporations: Diebold is an Ohio-based, publicly traded maker of automatic teller machines and other self-service electronics. Its CEO, Wally O'Dell, has been a major fund raiser for President Bush, and wrote recently that his company is "committed to helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes to the president next year." ES&S is a closely held Nebraska-based maker of voting machines whose former chair, Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE), retains a million-dollar stake in the company. ES&S, which counted the votes for Hagel's first senatorial

election, is bankrolled by investor Howard Ahmanson, a member of the Council for National Policy and a board member of Chalcedon Foundation, which supports establishing the United States as a Christian theocracy. Two years ago, a top ES&S executive was caught bribing an Arkansas election official. Sequoia Voting Systems, an Oakland-based subsidiary of the British firm De La Rue, markets automated "tamper-proof" technology and also prints currency for 125 countries. A top Sequoia executive was indicted in Louisiana recently for "conspiracy to commit money laundering and malfeasance" in relation to bribing officials there. (A fourth company entering the computerized voting industry, SAIC, is a frequent competitor of DynCorp and KBR for classified government contracts of all kinds. The joke about SAIC has always been: spell it backwards.)

The technological problems with touch-screen systems fall into two main categories. First is security. A study this year by Johns Hopkins University found computerized voting machines childishly easy to hack. Secondly, the machines, as currently configured, produce no paper records. This means that in the event of a close election or suspected hacking, investigators have no means of independently verifying or recounting votes. And election officials are contractually forbidden to examine the machines' internal workings or software because those constitute proprietary trade secrets.

Already, odd returns have surfaced in elections conducted with touch-screen voting. In the 2002 mid-term elections, districts in Georgia, Texas, Alabama, Florida, and California reported such anomalies as last-minute, double-digit, pundit-befuddling, and results-changing vote swings; vote counts exceeding the number of registered voters; and traditionally Democratic districts voting

unexpectedly Republican. In every case, Republican candidates were the beneficiaries of the anomalies.

People have long had reason to be cynical about the influence of money in American politics. But until 2000, it never occurred to most of us that our votes might not get counted, or that elections might be rigged. The Help Americans Vote Act was meant to bolster confidence. The cure, however, might prove worse than the disease. The concentration of so much public trust into three corporations' hands, to institute a voting system that is opaque to scrutiny, unverifiable, and subject to both blunder and abuse, is scary. It recalls Joseph Stalin's famous dictum that "Those who cast the votes decide nothing. Those who count the votes decide everything."

This strikes me as a story akin to the one we did about Kellogg, Brown & Root – introducing the reader to politically connected corporations operating in the shadows. As I did with KBR, I would trace how vast amounts of power and public money are finding their way to a handful of corporations – with records of demonstrable bias and, in some cases, criminal activity. I would explore why Congress did not insist that touch-screen machines produce a paper record of votes. I would show how the decisions were made not to keep such records. I would document the record of touch-screen voting so far.

Although the British press has covered the changeover to touch-screen voting in the U.S. and its implications, few American publications have directed their attention to it. (Wired has had a couple of short pieces on the technology.) We have an opportunity here, as we did with KBR, to bust the story open. I could deliver the story by early January, in time for the kickoff of the primary season.