PART ONE

PRIVATIZED, COMPUTERIZED VOTING USHERED IN A NEW ERA OF MASSIVE ELECTION FRAUD

Sen. Huey Long was a notorious early twentieth century politician known for rigging elections, but he had to do it the old-fashioned way: small and local. Now, with the advent of computerized voting systems, a single programmer can potentially flip millions of votes and steal elections on a national scale. PHOTO: Library of Congress (PD).

It was a hot summer in 1932 when Louisiana senator Huey "Kingfish" Long arranged to rig the vote on a number of amendments to his state's constitution that would be advantageous to his financial interests. Long was no stranger to rigged votes. This time around, however, the fix delivered by his machine was blatant and sloppy: his favored amendments won unanimously in sixteen New Orleans precincts and garnered identical vote totals in twenty-eight others.

Eugene Stanley, the incorruptible district attorney for Orleans Parish, presented evidence of fraud to a grand jury. Louisiana's attorney general, the less morally encumbered Gaston Porterie, stepped in to sabotage the case for Long. Nonetheless, two judges demanded a recount, at which point Governor O. K. Allen obliged Long by declaring martial law. Intimidated jurors found themselves sorting ballots under the supervision of National Guardsmen, who stood by to "protect" them with machine guns.

When this effort failed, another grand jury was convened. Their eventual finding of a massive conspiracy led to the indictment of 513 New Orleans election officials. Once again, Long used his famous powers of persuasion. At his behest, the Louisiana legislature modified the state's election law, giving ex post facto protection to the defendants. Election rigging, Long might have quipped, had become downright exhausting. But it worked.

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From the earliest days of the republic, American politicians (and much of a cynical populace) saw vote rigging as a necessary evil. Since the opposition was assumed to be playing equally dirty, how could you avoid it? Most Americans would probably have confessed to a grudging admiration for New York City's Tammany Hall machine, which bought off judges, politicians, and ward captains, ensured the suppression of thousands of votes, and controlled Democratic Party nominations for more than a century.

By the beginning of the last century, however, sentiment had begun to shift. In 1915, the Supreme Court ruled that vote suppression could be federally prosecuted. In Terre Haute, Indiana, more than a hundred men had already been indicted for conspiring to fix the 1914 elections for mayor, sheriff, and circuit judge. The incumbent sheriff and judge went to jail for five years, and Mayor Donn M. Roberts spent six years in Leavenworth.

Roberts and his gang, declared the New York Times, had failed to grasp that "what is safe and even commendable one year may be dangerous and reprehensible the next." Almost overnight, commonplace corruption had become unacceptable, and vote rigging a serious crime. It took a strongman like Huey Long to remain an exception to the rule.

But the overall trajectory seemed to point toward reform, accountability, and security. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, seventy-two years after Elizabeth Cady Stanton first demanded women's suffrage—the right that would, in Stanton's words, "secure all others." By the 1960s, Northern Democrats abandoned their Southern allies and pushed to end the mass suppression of black votes below the Mason–Dixon line. With the Voting Rights Act of 1965, many Americans began to believe that the bad old days of stolen elections might soon be behind us.

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But as the twentieth century came to a close, a brave new world of election rigging emerged, on a scale that might have prompted Huey Long's stunned admiration. Tracing the sea changes in our electoral process, we see that two major events have paved the way for this lethal form of election manipulation: the mass adoption of computerized voting technology, and the outsourcing of our elections to a handful of corporations that operate in the shadows, with little oversight or accountability.

This privatization of our elections has occurred without public knowledge or consent, leading to one of the most dangerous and least understood crises in the history of American democracy. We have actually lost the ability to verify election results.

The use of computers in elections began around the time of the Voting Rights Act. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the use of optical scanners to process paper ballots became widespread, usurping local hand counting. The media, anxious to get on the air with vote totals, hailed the faster and more efficient computerized count. In the twenty-first century, a new technology became ubiquitous: Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) voting, which permits touchscreen machines and does not require a paper trail.

Old-school ballot-box fraud at its most egregious was localized and limited in scope. But new electronic voting systems allow insiders to rig elections on a statewide or even national scale. And whereas once you could catch the guilty parties in the act, and even dredge the ballot boxes out of the bayou, the virtual vote count can be manipulated in total secrecy. By means of proprietary, corporate-owned software, just one programmer could steal hundreds, thousands, potentially even millions of votes with the stroke of a key. It's the electoral equivalent of a drone strike.

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