

Playing Russian roulette on Election Day

By THOMAS J. FEWLASS

Russian roulette is a game of good odds but tremendous stakes. One bullet is placed in the six-chambered cylinder of a revolver, the cylinder is spun so the location of the loaded chamber is unknown, then the barrel of the pistol is placed against one's head and the trigger pulled. The odds are only one in six that the pistol will fire, but the stakes are deadly if one loses the game.

While this is not a Democratic-Republican issue, the two Republican county commissioners have decided to play a kind of Russian roulette with our voting system. The stakes are high. Some would say as high as those in Russian roulette. If we lose, we lose the most important right our country has to offer us, the right to choose those who make our laws. The odds are, of course unknowable, and there's the rub.

The problem I'm addressing is the type of voting machine now in use in Bucks County, as well as in other jurisdictions throughout the nation. Our system relies entirely on the electronic memory within the machines. Now electronic memories are great. We all know that computers never crash, data is never lost, programs never have bugs, computer programmers never make mistakes, hackers never break into ... oops!

Well, never fear. We are assured by Commissioners Jim Cawley and Charley Martin that the system is working perfectly. How do they know? President Reagan was right when he said "Trust, but verify!"

One means of verification that has been proposed by concerned voting groups, including the Coalition for Voting Integrity, is the use of an independent, non-electronic, auditable back-up system such as optical scan machines. There may be other systems available, but the important thing is that the back-up system be completely independent from any electronic system used.

To me the logic of having an independent backup system is so clear that I can't understand the resistance of Cawley and Martin. Congressman Holt of New Jersey has introduced legislation that would fund, at least partially, the purchase of independent back-up systems for voting machines. Commissioner Diane Marseglia suggested at a recent meeting that the commissioners support replacement of Danaher voting machines, if and when the State of Pennsylvania or the government of the United States passes legislation that would fully, 100 percent, reimburse all counties including Bucks County, for the cost of a paper-based voting system. Neither Cawley nor Martin would support the request. I have to wonder why. I hope it wasn't just the typical reaction of a politician who may have made a mistake but refuses to admit it because that would mean he was human like the rest of us.

In summary, I would ask that each of us who values his or her right to vote and who wants to know that that vote is actually counted and reported accurately, to notify the county commissioners that while we want to trust, we demand that we be able to verify our votes. The stakes are just too high to do otherwise.

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