

How to Steal an Election

(NC ballot)

Preface – how many votes would you need?

The closest recent state-wide vote was in 2008 when Barak Obama won by about 14,000 votes out of over 4 million. Almost 50% more people voted in the 2016 presidential primary. For a similar hair's breadth, you would need over 20,000 additional votes statewide. (The numbers for a US Senate race are much higher.)

First method – stuff the box with actual votes

Step 1 – register ineligible (fraudulent) voters

What does it take to register to vote? Fill out a form and mail it in.

You can get the registration form from many government offices such as libraries, schools, the DMV, and public assistance agencies. Or someone with a clipboard can stop you on the street and help you fill it out. You can even print the registration form off the internet and mail it in.

The only thing keeping you from entering inaccurate information is a notice that it is a Class I Felony to do so. There is no requirement to verify identity or citizenship with the form although you will be required to show an ID at your first election. It is necessary to have a valid physical and mailing address that the post office will not return your voter card to the Board of Elections.

By the way – registering eligible voters is called “campaign diligence”; not “voter fraud.”

Step 2 – buy the votes

Now some person has to actually vote for your candidate. You can send people out to vote your ineligible registrations. Just remember that they will have to show some ID when they do so. This is not the ID requirement that the courts have recently blocked, but one verifying their mailed-in registration. That's 20,000 to 50,000 names and addresses on utility bills or bank statements. And you can't have the same person show up at the same polling place twice.

You could also try to find people who are actually registered but not planning to vote and convince them to do so. But how do you find that many people to commit a felony without stumbling on one who would report you to authorities.

Step 3 – Ensure their vote increases your total

A major tenet of the American system is the secret ballot. Just because you bribed a voter doesn't allow you to be in the booth with them. They may take your money and not vote, or even vote against you.

While there is no way to verify the secrecy of a mail-in absentee ballot, they do face a stricter confirmation of the identity of the voter. Both the request and returned ballot must be accompanied by ID details. Further, the ballot must be witnessed and the witness IDs also must be verifiable. All of these details can be examined for anomalies that would suggest widespread tampering. In addition, votes could be audited for internal anomalies such as identically voted ballots.

By the way – assisting eligible voters all the way to the voting machine is called “campaign diligence”; not “voter fraud.”

Second method – stuff the box with phantom votes

Bypass the need to find thousands of actual people to cast your votes. Just compromise a few precinct workers to slip an extra vote or two in while no one else is watching.

“Cast votes” for no voter

It would be easy for the person who activates the machine to add a few ballots for your candidate between voters. However, there are multiple records of the number of voters who made it behind the curtain. These counts must balance before the precinct workers can go home for the night.

“Cast votes” for no-shows

Voting for actual voters who did not make it to the poll allows the appropriate paperwork to be generated. However, since you don't know who will be a no-show, this can only be done after the poll closes. This would require the complicity or obliviousness of entire precinct staff, including judges from both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Third method – flip votes to your candidate

Hack the voting machine

Studies have shown that the software running voting machines is poorly vetted and could be vulnerable to malicious attack. It would be possible to slip a command at multiple points into the system that would take a duly recorded vote for your opponent and change it for your candidate.

However, every machine ballot has a paper trail that the voter can verify matches their selection. If the paper record were changed; some voters do pay attention and would notice. After the election, random machines' counts are audited against their paper record. Failing the audit would be a warning of either malfunction or fraud and invalidate the election.

Fourth method – hack the voter database

Federal agencies have already advised two states that their voter databases had been attacked by outsiders. In the commercial world this means that information that should have been private was not protected by adequate security measures. Usually intrusions of this sort are done to steal either financial assets or proprietary information.

Also, they only read the protected information and can't make any changes to it. It's unclear the value of a read-only attack since much of the voters' details including party registration and voting history are a public record regularly used by candidates and media.

Other commercial attacks destroy data either for vandalism or to make it inaccessible to the owner. Adding ineligible voters to use on election day would be apparent as it would break multiple backups and audits. While invalidating the election, it wouldn't help your candidate.

Fifth method – compromise the Board of Elections officials

Any attempt to bribe enough officials simply to report false results would ensure you'd run into a whistleblower somewhere and that the fraud would be exposed.

Summary

There may be potential flaws in every step from voter registration to the final tally. But most of these exploits are difficult and must be implemented vote-by-vote across a large number of the 2700 precincts across the state. It may be easier to change votes *en masse*, but doing so would be detected by multiple audits, watchdogs, and whistleblowers that the only damage possible would be to invalidate an election, not install a fraudulent candidate.

It may be possible to turn the vote in smaller jurisdictions than the statewide election; but doing so just sullies the reputation of the vote without doing any significant legislative harm.

About the writer

Bill Barnes is a technology professional and writer. He has been a low-level precinct worker through multiple elections; each with different rules as the legislature and courts attempt to balance security of the vote with access for all eligible voters.

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