Why Audit the Vote Count After an Election?

No voting system is perfect. The optical scan vote counting systems Michigan uses have known error rates and security vulnerabilities that warrant a serious effort to check the accuracy of the vote count by these machines. It is particularly important to compare the results reported by the machines on election day with a manual hand-to-eye count of paper ballots. This is the only way to make the audit independent of the optical scanner system. Post-election audits that conduct hand counts can detect errors that pre-election testing cannot.

Under the Help America Vote Act, Michigan, along with most other states, rapidly introduced electronic vote counting into a system that developed gradually over many years. In Michigan, voter verified paper ballots are tabulated by one of three brands of optical scanners. When the polls close, the results are sent by modem transmission or by physical delivery of memory cards to a central location in each county, where the votes are aggregated by software and results declared. For each voting precinct, a tabulator memory card is programmed before the election and pretested to verify the accuracy of the programming. However, this system was established over a relatively short time frame, and has not been adequately understood, tested, or refined, particularly with respect to security from electronic tampering. Indeed, s*ecurity was never even a criterion for certification of the new machines!*

Election officials are faced with the disturbing possibility that what appears to be correct in pre-testing can be altered through either direct or remote access: machine programs can have hidden instructions activated by the machine's internal clock, memory chips can be switched (perhaps in the guise of vendor "upgrades"), memory cards can be swapped (as they lack a unique serial number), internal machine records of illicit manipulations can be erased or never recorded in the first place, and much more. For a full account please see the Brennan Center report that analyses security vulnerabilities in the three most commonly purchased electronic voting systems. (http://www.michiganelectionreformalliance.org/Brennan_Center_Report.Machinery_of_Democracy.pdf)

How can voters know their votes will be counted accurately? We continue to face the possibilities of extensive machine malfunctions and outright tampering. When the machine designs and operating systems are held as proprietary secrets by vendors, even an independent expert can offer the public no valid assurance that machine counting will be secure from tampering.

In short, without concerted action to check the vote count after the polls close and before results are certified, the outcome of any given election could be spoiled or hijacked without public knowledge and with little or no recourse. This is unacceptable.

Post-election audits can find counting errors and correct them, deter fraud, provide for continuous quality improvement in the administration of elections, and generally promote confidence in elections by assuring voters that contests are decided correctly,