How safe are Wisconsin’s elections?

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WCIJ investigates voting machine security

We asked Grigor Atanesian, a journalist and Fulbright Scholar who is studying at the University of Missouri, to tackle the question of the security of Wisconsin’s elections systems. Grigor is a native of St. Petersburg, Russia.

Wisconsin has a long tradition of local control

“Wisconsin’s election systems are secure thanks to the Wisconsin Elections Commission’s strong partnerships with federal and state agencies and local election officials.”
— Wisconsin Elections Commission

Experts disagree about the strength of such a system

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“Diversity can be a strength, but in a statewide contest, I don’t have to hack all the machines. I just have to hack some machines.”
— J. Alex Halderman, citing Donald Trump’s narrow 22,748-vote win in Wisconsin

U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee report

“In 2016, cyberactors affiliated with the Russian Government conducted an unprecedented, coordinated nationwide cyber-campaign against state election infrastructures.

“Russian actors scanned databases for vulnerabilities, attempted intrusions, and in a small number of cases successfully penetrated a voter registration database. This activity was part of a larger campaign to prepare to undermine confidence in the voting process.”
U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wisconsin

“The election interference … is not the greatest threat to our democracy. We've blown it way out of proportion.”

Scott McDonell, Dane County clerk

“Even now with what happened with Russians intentionally trying to affect the election, I'm still more worried about a tornado or flood … I'd say we’re safe.”

Watch the New York Times video on vulnerabilities

Among the six experts Grigor interviewed was J. Alex Halderman, the University of Michigan’s Center for computer Security and Society

“By the end of the (four-day) conference, every piece of equipment in the Voting Village was effectively breached in some manner. Participants with little prior knowledge and only limited tools and resources were quite capable of undermining the confidentiality, integrity and availability of these systems.”

DEFCON 2017

To watch this video opinion piece from the New York Times that Dee Hall showed in her presentation, click on the link in the slide or click here.

Not just electronic machines are at risk

“This oft-repeated myth instills a false sense of security that is inhibiting officials and lawmakers from urgently requiring that all voting systems use paper ballots and that all elections be robustly audited.”

— Susan Greenhalgh, a spokeswoman for the National Election Defense Coalition, an elections integrity group
One solution: Risk-limiting audits

Not a full recount, risk-limiting audits involve counting a portion of the ballots after each election to detect anomalies.

Karen McKim of Wisconsin Election Integrity has been pushing for these audits for several years. It appears the Wisconsin Elections Commission is listening.

Watch for more voting machine security coverage

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