What if: Hacks, email leaks could sway election weeks away

September 5 2016, by Jack Gillum

In this Aug. 30, 2016 file photo, a voter casts his primary vote in Hialeah, Fla. Hacking attempts of voting machines and leaked emails could alter the trajectory of the presidential campaign in its final weeks. These prospects worry people in both campaigns. (AP Photo/Alan Diaz, File)

Brace for a stream of digital leaks and shenanigans by Election Day.

Whether it's newly disclosed Democratic Party emails or someone tampering with voting machines, this year's presidential election could come with hacking intrigue like none before it.

Consider messages stolen from the Democrats by suspected Russian-linked hackers and posted online in the summer by the self-described persona Guccifer 2.0. That trove led to so much outrage from fellow Democrats that the party's chairwoman, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, was forced to resign.

Beyond partisan embarrassment from those leaks, security risks to electronic voting machines have the potential to do even more damage. Compromised machines, producing faulty vote tallies, would raise questions about the very integrity of the political process.

"Election administrators are trained to run elections, not defend computer systems," said Joe Hall, chief technologist for the Washington-based Center for Democracy and Technology. "The voting systems we use in many cases don't keep the kind of evidence one would need to detect an attack, let alone recover from it, without disruption or loss of votes."

Donald Trump has already suggested trouble is ahead, saying in early August he's "afraid the election is going to be rigged." He didn't provide specific evidence. He asked volunteers on his website to sign up to be poll monitors in November.

Foreign state-sponsored hacking of the machines—or even voter-registration records—would also have practical implications, like delayed results or hiccups in allowing citizens to cast a ballot.

"The biggest potential surprise in 2016 comes from the internet, and the potential for state-sponsored or hacker-instigated data dumps and

turbulence that are disconnected from the campaigns," said Princeton historian Julian Zelizer.

Federal officials are becoming increasingly concerned about the possibility that hackers, particularly those working for Russia or another country, will make mischief.

Two U.S. cybersecurity firms have said their analysis of computer breaches at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee showed detailed evidence that the intrusions were probably linked to Russian hackers. The internet domains and registrants used in the breach of computers used by the committee tied back to a Russian hacking group linked to that nation's intelligence services. That same hacking group, known as "Fancy Bear," was previously connected to the cyber breach at the Democratic National Committee.

Matthew Green, a Johns Hopkins cryptography expert, offered a simple solution to stave off ballot hacks: "There is only one way to protect the voting system from a nation-state-funded cyberattack," he wrote on Twitter. "Use paper."

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