Suspect AI Software Verified Mail-In Ballots With Little Human Oversight in Key Battleground States

Untested AI software was used to verify mail-in ballot signatures in highly contested localities like Clark County, Nevada. The company that produces it has close ties to Lockheed Martin and Microsoft and its founder has a bone to pick with Donald Trump.

BY **WHITNEY WEBB**   NOVEMBER 9, 2020   12 MINUTE READ

Though accusations of election fraud in the 2020 US presidential election have been swirling across social media and some news outlets for much of the past week, few have examined the role of a little known Silicon Valley company whose artificial intelligence (AI) algorithm was used to accept or reject ballots in highly contested states such as Nevada.

That company, Parascript, has long-standing cozy ties to defense contractors such as Lockheed Martin and tech giants including Microsoft, in addition to being a contractor to the US Postal Service. In addition, its founder, Stepan Pachikov, better known for cofounding the app Evernote in 2007, is a long-standing and 2020 donor to Democratic presidential candidates.

Parascript's AI software was used during this election in at least eight states for matching signatures on ballot envelopes with those in government databases in order to "ease the workload of staff enforcing voter signature rules" resulting from the influx of mail-in ballots. *Reuters*, which reported on the use of the technology, <u>asked the company</u> to provide a list of counties and states using its software for the 2020 election. Parascript, however, declined to supply the list, replying, instead, that their clients "included 20 of the top 100 counties by registered voters."

Despite not receiving the official list from Parascript, *Reuters* was able to compile its own partial list, which revealed that several counties in Florida, Colorado, Washington, and Utah, among others, utilized the AI software to determine the validity of ballots. *Reuters* also reported that Clark County, Nevada, which is <u>one of the hotspots</u> of <u>litigation between the Trump and Biden campaigns</u> and <u>fraud allegations</u>, was one that used the software. *Reuters* was able to determine how the software was used in some counties, with many counties allowing the software to approve anywhere from 20 to 75 percent of mail-in ballots as acceptable. For several counties included in the *Reuters* list,staff reviewed 1 percent or less of the AI software's acceptances. Figures were not available for Clark County, Nevada.

Prior to the election, concerns were raised regarding the efficacy of AI signature-verification software for use on mail-in ballots. For instance, Kyle Wiggers, a journalist who covers AI for *Venture Beat*, <u>noted that</u> the accuracy of such systems is believed to vary between 74 and 96 percent. However, he also stated that "we don't have benchmarks from the systems that are in use to verify signatures on these mail-in ballots. We basically have to go by what the manufacturers of the systems are telling us, which is that the systems are accurate." Given that states and counties have relied on companies themselves for information on the accuracy of their algorithms, it becomes important to take a deeper look into Parascript, their partners, and their software.

An Untested "Xpert"

This May, Parascript <u>announced a new version</u> of its automated signature-verification software, called SignatureXpert, which the company said was able to "evaluate ballot signatures and compare them with voter record signatures pulled from driver's licenses," adding that "with advanced machine learning image perfection, even low-resolution driver's licenses can be used."

At the time of the announcement, Parascript's vice president of marketing and product management, Greg Council, <u>stated</u>:

> "*We did a lot of research with our partners and found oftentimes the most efficient way for municipalities to create voter signature databases was to pull them from signatures on driver's licenses. . . . But we found that these images are often stored at lower resolutions. With our new advanced machine learning image processing, we can take lower resolution images*

and improve them to high levels of quality that enable automated signature verification to be used on more ballots."

What Council did not state is that most driver's license signatures are acquired via an electronic tablet or signature pad, which often results in a very different signature than one written on a paper ballot.

Regarding the use of their new SignatureXpert software in the 2020 election, the company stated in a blog post that "ASV [automated signature verification]is used today in the vote-by-mail processes of many states to provide solid assurances that each vote is treated fairly and thoroughly reviewed. For this election, some of the larger cities and counties in America are deploying ASV software from Parascript to assist their verification teams to produce accurate results."

Parascript's October 30 blog post on its software also noted that that the algorithm had yet to be verified for use on mail-in ballots, but it attempted to obfuscate this fact. In response to the question "Is this proven technology?" the post responded:

"In the case of Parascript, the answer is yes. The AI that powers SignatureXpert has been field-proven in the banking industry for over a decade and is trusted to produce reliable voting results. States such as Oregon, Colorado, Washington and Utah use it to ensure that every election is efficient, legitimate and secure. Voters can also be assured knowing SignatureXpert is always used to assist, not replace, election officials so there is no worry that the ASV bots will secretly throw the election!"

While the AI that powers SignatureXpert was tested for use in the banking industry, it has not been tested for use on mail-in ballots. Furthermore, the statement that several states use the software "to ensure that every election is efficient, legitimate and secure" omits the fact that the version of SignatureXpert to be used on mail-in ballots was not announced until this May and had yet to be tested for mail-in ballots, having only been previously used in Colorado to verify signatures on petitions. In addition, the claim that SignatureXpert only assists and does not replace election officials varies by county, as each county decides if there is human oversight and to what extent. As previously mentioned, Reuters found that several counties only have humans review 1 percent or less of ballots accepted by Parascript's software.

Also notable is Parascript's concluding statement regarding its promotion of the use of its AI software for mail-in ballots in the presidential election. The company states that "no matter which candidate wins the 2020 election, the voting process will have changed forever. AI such as that provided by Parascript will become more commonplace in the never-ending battle to keep our elections safe and secure from fraud."

Parascript Post

Today, Parascript boasts clients in <u>numerous sectors</u>, including finance, health care, logistics, and the public sphere, with one of their most prominent clients being the US Postal Service. Since 2011, Parascript <u>has provided</u> the USPS with automated and bundled mail-sorting equipment that utilizes the company's optical character recognition (OCR) technology.

In addition to their multimillion-dollar contracts with the USPS, Parascript is partnered with another major USPS contractor, Lockheed Martin. While best known as a weapons manufacturer and a key fixture of the military-industrial complex, Lockheed Martin has also long been the contractor for the USPS's remote-computer-reader system, which utilizes Parascript's software. Through its partnership with Lockheed, Parascript's software has been a component of USPS' automated mail sorting process <u>since at least 2003</u>.

A <u>Parascript press release</u> stated the following regarding the Lockheed Martin–Parascript relationship as it relates to this USPS system:

> *"Parascript was recognized* [*by Lockheed Martin*]*, in particular, for providing highly advanced and reliable Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software for handwritten address recognition and interpretation on letter mail pieces with its AddressScript technology. The primary purpose of the AddressScript OCR system is to work closely with Lockheed Martin's advanced mail processing technology to meet and exceed requirements of the USPS."*

Since 2017 Lockheed Martin has also provided the USPS with its "next generation" processing systems for packages and mail. These processing machines "are capable of automatically separating mail pieces, reading printed and handwritten addresses, and sorting packages, priority and bundled mail," according to <u>a Lockheed Martin press release</u>. Parascript's AI software automatically identifies and sorts the addresses.

Notably, Lockheed Martin is one of the leading investors in the intelligence-linked cybersecurity firm Cybereason, which, for well over a year, <u>has simulated various chaotic scenarios</u> for the 2020 US election. Cybereason's various simulations ended with Americans' faith in the electoral process being utterly destroyed and subsequent declarations of martial law. Despite Cybereason's clear and enduring ties to the intelligence apparatus of a foreign power (Israel) with <u>a history of using backdoors in software</u> to spy on the US government, Lockheed Martin has served as <u>the key conduit</u> that allowed Cybereason's cybersecurity software to gain access to some of the United States' most classified systems. This election cycle, Lockheed Martin affiliates <u>donated heavily</u> to both candidates but gave nearly $27,000 more to Biden than to Trump.

In addition, Parascript is also partnered with Pitney Bowes, a private "work-share partner" that sorts and processes an estimated 15 billion pieces of mail annually on behalf of the USPS. Pitney Bowes is also one of the leading companies that has pushed for the privatization of the USPS, even funding a report authored by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) that laid out a roadmap for transforming the USPS into a "public-private hybrid" in which all retail and processing components of the USPS would be privatized. Pitney Bowes "Exemplar Mail Sorting Solution" utilizes Parascript's software, according to the company's promotional material. More recently, Pitney Bowes has become heavily focused on e-commerce, developing a very close relationship with eBay, which is owned by Silicon Valley billionaire and Democratic Party donor Pierre Omidyar.

Pitney Bowes has long offered an automated mail-in balloting system for elections, called Relia-Vote, which was used to sort mail-in ballots during the 2020 presidential election. However, Relia-Vote is now owned by Bluecrest, a spin-off of Pitney Bowes that has operated independently of its parent company since 2018. Bluecrest is currently owned by Platinum Equity, an investment firm founded and headed by Tom Gores. Gores donated $100,000 to Hillary Clinton in her unsuccessful bid for the presidency in 2016. It is unclear if the latest version of Relia-Vote, which was used in the 2020 presidential election, employs Parascript's AI software.

Given the use of Parascript's unproven AI software for the verification of signatures on mail-in ballots during this year's highly contested election, the near ubiquitous presence of this company's software on automated mail-sorting machines and its long-standing ties to the USPS and other prominent USPS contractors is worth noting.
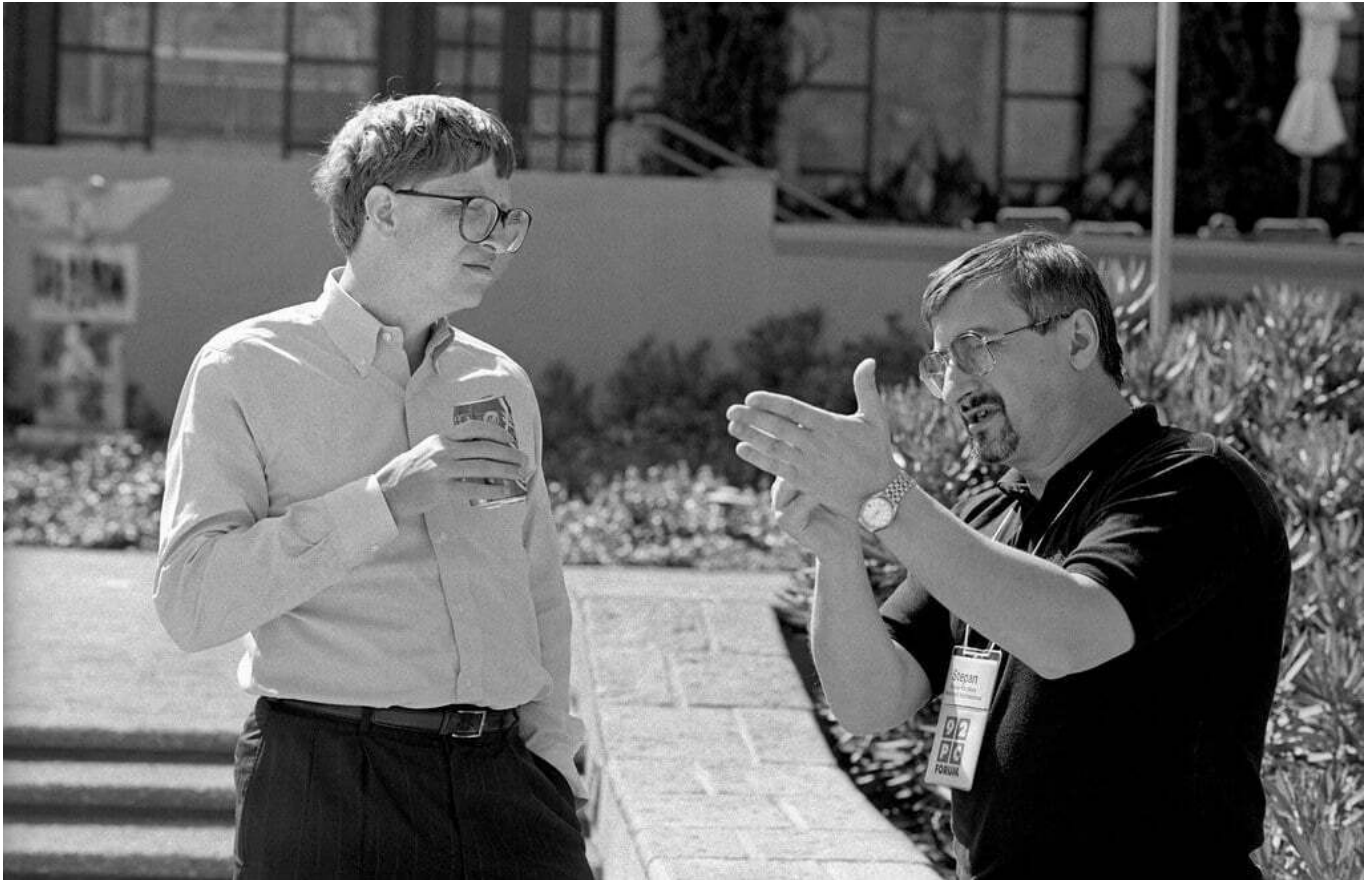
Parascript's Powerful Partners

In addition to Lockheed Martin, Parascript enjoys partnerships with other prominent companies with long-standing ties to US intelligence. For instance, Parascript is a partner of Hewlett-Packard, a company whose close ties to the CIA and its venture capital arm In-Q-Tel, particularly under the leadership of Carly Fiorina, is an open secret.

Parascript is also partnered with IBM. Just last year, the CIA hired IBM Federal vice president Juliane Gallina to serve as the intelligence agency's chief information officer. In that position, Gallina oversees "the CIA's modernization efforts as well as making better use of the massive amount of data it possesses." In addition, IBM is a major corporation driving the push to create "smart cities" in the United States and globally, but to date they have focused much of their smart city efforts on China and have long-standing ties to China's political and economic elites. In addition, IBM is one of the four sponsors of the Center for Presidential Transition, which issued a statement on Sunday (November 8) urging President Trump to concede to his rival Joe Biden. IBM had previously sponsored Biden's cancer initiative for the Department of Veterans Affairs when he was vice president and, this election cycle, donated $640,801 to Biden, compared to $139,373 to Trump.

In addition to its partnerships with HP and IBM, Parascript is also a "gold" application development partner of Microsoft and has a long-standing relationship with the tech giant. Parascript's previous iteration as a company, Paragraph International, developed the first handwriting-recognition technology employed by Microsoft in the 1990s. When Paragraph International transformed into Parascript the

partnership continued through application development, with Microsoft <u>fully integrat</u>ing Parascript's image-recognition technology into its SharePoint software in 2014.

Notably, the two former Parascript software leads for developing USPS mail sorting now hold prominent positions at Microsoft. The development lead for Parascript's automated address-reading software, <u>Mikhail Parakhin</u>, is now Microsoft's corporate vice president of technology. <u>Max Lepikhin</u>, who worked directly under Parakhin in overseeing the development of Parascript's mail-sorting–related software, currently works at Microsoft as a principal software engineer.

Stepan Pachikov, Parascript's founder, with Bill Gates in 1990

Microsoft executives have shown obvious support for Biden during this election cycle, with <u>nearly $2 million</u> donated to him in his bid to oust Trump. In addition, the wife of former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer <u>donated the maximum amount</u> for an individual to the Biden campaign, while Microsoft's current president, Brad Smith, <u>hosted fundraisers</u> for Biden. Microsoft chief technology officer, Kevin Scott, <u>also donated </u>over $50,000 to support Biden's election efforts, and Reid Hoffman, the LinkedIn founder who sits on Microsoft's board, was one of Biden's largest donors in this campaign cycle, funneling over half a million to Biden, the DNC, and related PACs. Microsoft affiliates have donated to the RNC during this election cycle, but those donations are dwarfed by contributions to the DNC and Biden.

Currently, US election infrastructure is overseen by the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), headed by Chris Krebs, who was a top Microsoft executive before taking on his current role. Under Krebs's leadership, CISA's 2020 election operations center <u>includes representatives</u> from major Silicon Valley companies, including Google, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as unspecified "election technology" companies. The center also works

with the Center for Internet Security, which is <u>funded by eBay billionaire Pierre Omidyar's Democracy Fund</u> and has several members of the Obama administration's cybersecurity team and/or National Security Council <u>on its board</u>. Microsoft directly partnered with the Center for Internet Security's efforts related to the 2020 election <u>this past June</u> and IBM is <u>also partnered</u> with the center.

Krebs, in his capacity as CISA director, has advocated for the implementation of <u>Microsoft's controversial ElectionGuard software</u> nationwide. ElectionGuard was co-developed by Microsoft and Galois, a cybersecurity contractor for the national security state whose only investors are the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and the Office of Naval Research. Over the past two years, Microsoft has finalized agreements or is in the process of drafting agreements with the main voting-machine manufacturers in the United States. Microsoft <u>has publicly stated</u> on several occasions <u>in just the past week</u> that it expects ElectionGuard to be widely adopted nationwide for the 2024 presidential election and ostensibly all subsequent presidential elections. ElectionGuard recently received a <u>glowing review</u> from the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute.

Stepan Pachikov and the DNC's "Russian Interference" Double Standard

Given its partners, it should be unsurprising that Parascript's founder and many employees have close ties to prominent Silicon Valley billionaires and are known for their support of the Democratic Party and their rejection of President Trump.

Paragraph International, it should be noted, was founded by a team of immigrants from the Soviet Union led by Stepan Pachikov and funded by American venture capitalists. As Paragraph International, it made <u>several big deals</u> with Apple and Microsoft in the 1990s before becoming Parascript in 1996. <u>Most of Parascript's top executives</u> are Russian citizens who have been with the company for decades, starting when it was Paragraph International.

Pachikov, as mentioned, is better known as a co-founder of Evernote. Evernote's founding CEO and current chairman, Phil Libin, has <u>developed close ties</u> to Amazon's Jeff Bezos and LinkedIn's Reid Hoffman. Pachikov, like many in Silicon Valley, is an avid transhumanist who <u>continues to promote</u> the use and development of brain implants to "improve memory" and "<u>dreams of immortality</u> by uploading all memories to artificial intelligence." In fact, Pachikov's <u>original vision for Evernote</u> was of a brain-machine interface that would allow a user to "remember everything." In <u>a piece for Evernote's blog</u> written by Pamela Rosen, Pachikov denotes his belief that "future technology [will exist] as a literal physical extension of the human brain, perhaps as an embedded chip," with Pachikov adding that "we have no choice" when it comes to merging the human body with machines. "It's just another type of integration," he asserts.

In addition to his embrace of transhumanism, Pachikov is a long-time donor to Democratic Party candidates, <u>having contributed</u> to Obama in his presidential campaigns, Hillary Clinton in her unsuccessful 2016 presidential campaign and previous senatorial campaigns, and to the Democratic Party

in this election cycle. Pachikov's distaste for Donald Trump was the subject of his 2016 *Bloomberg* op-ed entitled "Russian-Americans Don't All Back Trump."

Given this background, one thing that is particularly odd about Parascript's role in the 2020 election is that there were no complaints from the Democratic National Committee or any prominent "Russiagaters" regarding a company that is founded and staffed largely by Russian citizens. Russians having such intimate involvement in the verification of mail-in ballots in a highly contested presidential election, especially when such technology has been accused of being biased against ethnic minorities and immigrants for whom English is a second language, is something one would think would evoke distress from those espousing concern about foreign interference in our electoral process.

The DNC and many prominent Democrats have put forward claims (discredited) of Russian election interference on behalf of Donald Trump (and against Hillary Clinton) during the 2016 election, with many warning in recent months that "Russians" would seek to meddle in the 2020 contest between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Indeed, highly contested parts of the country, including Clark County, Nevada, used Parascript's software and were subsequently accused of election fraud, something that would presumably spark the ire of Russiagaters everywhere. Yet, since proponents of Russiagate are by and large supporters of Biden and critical of Trump, it appears that prime opportunities to breathe new life into the discredited Russiagate narrative are readily cast aside when it benefits their preferred candidate.

AI   Biden   election   Election Fraud   Mail-In Ballots

Author

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Whitney Webb has been a professional writer, researcher and journalist since 2016. She has written for several websites and, from 2017 to 2020, was a staff writer and senior investigative reporter for Mint Press News. She currently writes for The Last American Vagabond.

8 comments

Nonposso says:
November 10, 2020 at 4:06 am

What about Hammer and Scorecard?
Reply

Liane Franck says:
November 10, 2020 at 8:05 am

Love the double meaning of the company name Parascript.

Reply

uncle tungsten says:
November 10, 2020 at 10:52 pm

Thank you Whitney for another really informative investigation. You are a legend.

Reply

AppreciativeReader says:
November 11, 2020 at 1:53 am

I'm probably reading way too much into this but I am starting to notice strange comments like the one below popping up online. I immediately thought of the secession aspect of the sequence of events in the election "wargames" whitepapers. It made me think they are in the early stages of nudging online sentiment in that direction via seeding the concept of "secession" where they can. For what it's worth, I think many on the right would welcome leftist states seceding! Also, I found the way the tweet spelled republicans to include a "Q" to be odd – I had not observed that before and don't know what, if anything, to make of it beyond the obvious reference to the Q crew.

Oh, and Whitney, please let us know your telegram so we can keep up with you there. You mentioned it in passing on a recent livestream but I couldn't make note of it at the time. Maybe you could tweet it out or add it to your bio and encourage people to find you there. I appreciate your articles and discuss them with others and want to stay updated with your reporting.

This tweet was someone responding to a Bill Kristol tweet telling people to "be alarmed" about a DOJ official who is supposed to be overseeing fraud investigations who recently quit his job.

https://twitter.com/BenevPropheteer/status/1325994071307870208

Here is the tweet in plaintext in case he deletes it:

"THIS IS NOW A RED ALERT

The blue states must threaten secession IMMEDIATELY. The red states and the RepubliQans need to know that their attempts to hijack the election are totally unacceptable and will break the union."
Reply

D says:

November 11, 2020 at 10:25 pm

Very informative, thank you for all of your hard work, Whitney
Reply

Rob says:
November 18, 2020 at 1:11 am

Whitney, excellent reporting, very informative, thank you for all of your hard work, Cheers!!!

Reply

Dennis Solomon says:
December 2, 2020 at 5:23 pm

Excellent Research & Writing. Having studied document and signature forensics that the first thing I learned (from the FBI Handbook on the subject) is that scanned or photographic analysis of a 'copied' signature is basically worthless, easily overcome by the 'backlit original' and related processes, or most professional artists. Only the analysis of both original and ballot signatures, together with an ink spectrographic analysis (compared to other proximal ballots) would provide some assurances against casual workers. An insider scheme would gain access to the reference database, and create AI forgeries printed with a multiple-pen CRiCUT.
Reply

Youri says:
December 6, 2020 at 11:29 pm

interesting article! This and the superb investigative piece"Bipartisan" Washington Insiders Reveal Their Plan for Chaos if Trump Wins the Election" needs to be widely shared, the only thing more scary then Trump is the deep state and rival oligarchic actors all coming from the same swamp that truly needs to be drained. There is some truth to Trump supporters saying this election was rigged and again I don't support their guy but we should not be cheering on the deep states efforts in this real election interference but pity Bernie Sanders and his supporters don't seem to recognize that given the deep state and its oligarchs would be opposed to any left-wing goverment.
Reply