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[Coro Southern California Homepage](#) > [Email Newsletter](#) > [Debra Bowen Receives JFK Profile in Courage Award](#)

Debra Bowen Receives JFK Profile in Courage Award

California Secretary of State Debra Bowen (CI '89) has been named a recipient of the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award. The JFK Profile in Courage Award is presented annually to public servants who have made decisions of conscience without regard for personal or professional consequences. Ohio Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner and Mississippi Governor William Winter will join her in receiving the award.

By challenging the reliability of electronic voting systems, Secretary of State Bowen called for greater accountability in the voting procedures of the California primaries. She ordered an independent review of the new voting technologies to ensure the integrity of the vote. After discovering flaws in the electronic voting system, Secretary Bowen imposed significant auditing requirements to ensure an accurate vote count.

"People should never be afraid to ask questions about their government or the way they elect their leaders," Kate Folmar, Secretary Bowen's press secretary, comments. "That's not just right; it's a responsibility."

Her top-to-bottom review of voting machines in California began in March 2007 and continued until November. The results of her review called for the withdrawal of approval or conditional reapproval of three election systems: Diebold, Hart InterCivic and Sequoia. Under review were direct recording electronic systems (DRE), the most recent evolution of voting technology which allows voters to enter choices into electronic storage with the use of touch screens. In the future, DREs will be required to comply with increased security. The review ensured that California voters cast their ballots on secure, accurate and reliable machines.

The study was led by UC Berkeley computer scientist, David Wagner, who discovered serious flaws in the software source code for the DREs. Security holes would allow hackers to enter the system and override results, possibly altering the outcome of the election. "Unfortunately," Wagner said, "these vulnerabilities are not trivial implementation bugs that can be patched up. The software just wasn't designed with fundamental safeguards in place to make them resilient to intrusion."

Voting companies, as a result, bore the brunt of the \$1.8 million needed to cover the costs of provisional paper ballots for every county. County officials complained that the \$450 million spent in the past few years was going to waste. In the face of much opposition from voting system vendors and county election officials, Sec. Bowen stood for a democratic and ethical voting process. In receiving the sterling-silver lantern given as the Profile in Courage Award, she represents a beacon of hope in the public arena. Secretary Bowen joins past recipients of the award including former President Gerald Ford, Ukraine President Viktor Yushchenko and US Senator John McCain.

"This award is a deeply meaningful recognition," Folmar says, "not just of Secretary Bowen's work, but for the work of people across the country who have raised questions about the integrity of voting systems for years."

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