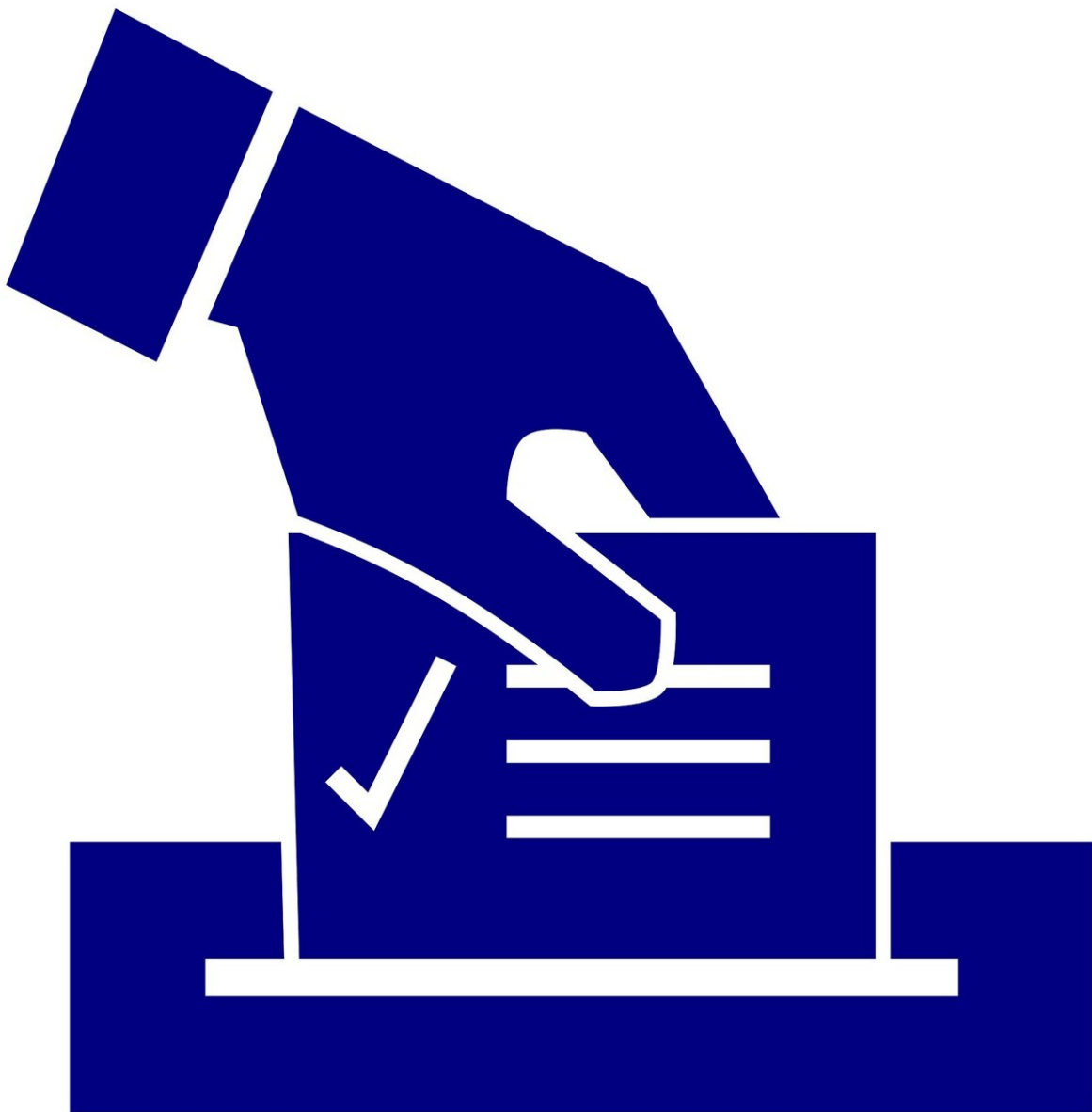


Researchers see risks in online vote system for 3 US states

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An online voting system approved in three US states is vulnerable to manipulation by hackers and may not protect ballot secrecy, according to an analysis by security researchers.

Scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and University of Michigan said in a research paper released Sunday that Democracy Live's OmniBallot platform represents "a severe risk to election security and could allow attackers to alter election results without detection."

The report comes with election officials scrambling following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic to enable remote voting in the November election to limit risks from crowded polling stations.

According to the researchers, OmniBallot has been approved as an option voting system in Delaware, West Virginia and New Jersey.

The report is the latest from security researchers warning of risks from online voting, stemming from the difficulty of ensuring voter authentication while keeping ballots secret and guarding against fraud and intimidation.

It comes amid a heated debate on expanding mail-in ballots, the most commonly used absentee voting system, which has been denounced by President Donald Trump.

According to the MIT and Michigan researchers, "OmniBallot uses a simplistic approach to Internet voting that is vulnerable to vote manipulation by malware on the voter's device and by insiders or other

attackers."

Additionally, they concluded that Democracy Live "appears to have no privacy policy," and "receives sensitive personally identifiable information—including the voter's identity, ballot selections, and browser fingerprint— that could be used to target political ads or disinformation campaigns."

Despite growing interest in online voting, many specialists have warned that these systems lack adequate security.

They acknowledge that the COVID-19 outbreak "has forced states to prepare for the possibility that voters may not be able to vote safely in person in coming elections."

The research paper urges voters to avoid using OmniBallot and says mail-in ballots are generally far safer.

The "next-safest option is to use OmniBallot to download a blank ballot and print it, mark it by hand, and mail it back or drop it off," the scientists said.

Democracy Live CEO Bryan Finney said OmniBallot has been used primarily for voters with disabilities, and for overseas military voters.

"In hundreds of elections since 2008, over 90 percent of OmniBallot users print and mail a ballot," Finney said. "In over a decade of deployments the system has never been compromised."

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