

Politics

Liberal critics worry about Romney connection to voting machines in Ohio

By [Bill Turque](#)

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Hart InterCivic is an Austin-based voting machine company that serves local governments nationwide. Its clients include Hamilton County, Ohio, which administers elections in Cincinnati. Hart InterCivic also has in its DNA just enough traces of Bain & Co. and Mitt Romney campaign donors to trigger serious angst in the liberal blogosphere about the fate of Ohio's must-have 18 electoral votes.

Versions of the story have appeared in the Free Press, an Ohio Web site, in addition to Salon and a liberal blog carried by Forbes. In a nutshell: Three of Hart's five corporate board members are executives of HIG Capital, a global private-equity firm that made what it called a "significant" investment in Hart last year. Four HIG executives (Tony Tamer, John Bolduc, Douglas Berman and Brian D. Schwartz) have been identified as Romney bundlers by independent watchdog groups such as the Sunlight Foundation.

HIG employees as a whole have donated \$338,000 this year to the campaign of the Republican presidential nominee, according to Open Secrets. Three of them (Tamer, Berman and Bolduc) used to work at Bain. Among the investors in HIG is Solamere Capital, a private-equity firm run by Tagg Romney, one of the candidate's sons.

The implication in some of the news media coverage is that through these links, Romney will have some leverage over the vote count in Ohio.

For the moment, at least, the Hart story is only some intriguingly connected dots.

Through a spokesman, HIG declined to comment, although it has told other publications that Solamere's investment is not part of the firm's stake in Hart.

In a statement, Hart InterCivic cited its "long track record of supporting a fair and open Democratic process. Any suggestions that the company might try to influence the outcome of election results is unfounded."

The Romney connections kindle [bitter memories](#) of 2004, when Walden O'Dell, chief executive of Diebold, an Ohio-based voting machine manufacturer, wrote a fundraising letter declaring his commitment to helping deliver the state to President George W. Bush. When machine malfunctions and shortages caused long lines and exit polling showed Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kerry

ahead, there were allegations of a stolen election. But Bush won the state by more than 100,000 votes, and the evidence never held up under close scrutiny. Diebold has since sold its election machine division to [ES&S](#), which does business in the state.

Hart's footprint in [Ohio](#) is modest. While Hamilton, the state's third-most-populous county (833,000), is a critical spot — Barack Obama carried it in 2008 — the only other jurisdiction that uses Hart products is tiny Williams County (39,000) in the rural northwest corner of the state.

The Hart system comes with two options: a paper ballot that is electronically scanned and a digital "eSlate" device with a push-button control. Amy Searcy, Hamilton County's director of elections, said this week that officials bought the system five years ago and that Hart is not involved with its operations or maintenance.

"We own our equipment, we own the software, we have a bipartisan team on staff that does all the pretesting, all the diagnostic maintenance, ballot preparation and vote tabulation," Searcy said. "Hart has nothing to do with it."


She said Hart has performed without serious incident. But the company has come in for criticism from others. A 2007 study commissioned by then-Ohio Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner looked at the security of several voting systems, including Hart's, used by localities and found them all wanting to some extent.

"The mechanisms that Hart uses to protect data and software is frequently based on absent or flawed security models," researchers concluded. A Hart spokesman said the criticisms were overstated, and that the system remains certified by state and federal authorities.

At least four Virginia jurisdictions use Hart: Alexandria, Falls Church, Charlottesville and Chesapeake. Falls Church registrar David Bjerke said that he was aware of the discussion surrounding Hart but that he regarded the system as completely secure. "There's no way for the count to be manipulated," he said.

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