

Reversing, Breaking, and Fixing the French Legislative Election E-Voting Protocol

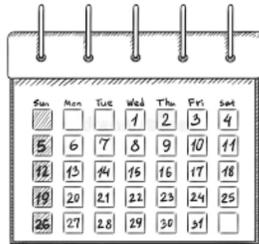
Alexandre Debant and Lucca Hirschi

Université de Lorraine, CNRS, Inria, LORIA, Nancy, France

**Cortier fest
January 31st 2023**



Some numbers...



May 27th – June 1st first round of the election
June 10th – June 15th second round of the election

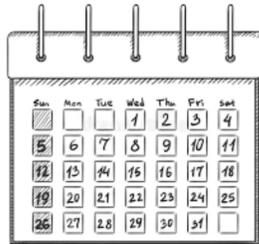


> 1.5 millions number of eligible voters (French citizens abroad only)



11 number of deputies to elect, i.e. constituencies
~200 number of consulates

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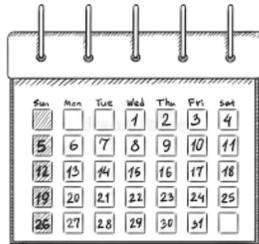
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The results are published at the consulates level!

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~524 000 number of expressed votes (~251k first round and ~273k second round)

76,9% percentage of online voting (22,7% in person, 0,3% postal voting)

4 stakeholders



1. Organizer: the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs

(the ministry)

4 stakeholders



MINISTÈRE
DE L'EUROPE
ET DES AFFAIRES
ÉTRANGÈRES

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2. Institutional security advisor: the French National Cybersecurity Agency

(ANSSI)

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(Voxaly or the vendor)



4. External third party: V. Cortier, P. Gaudry and S. Glondu

(the Loria)

May 17th 2022....

← Tweet



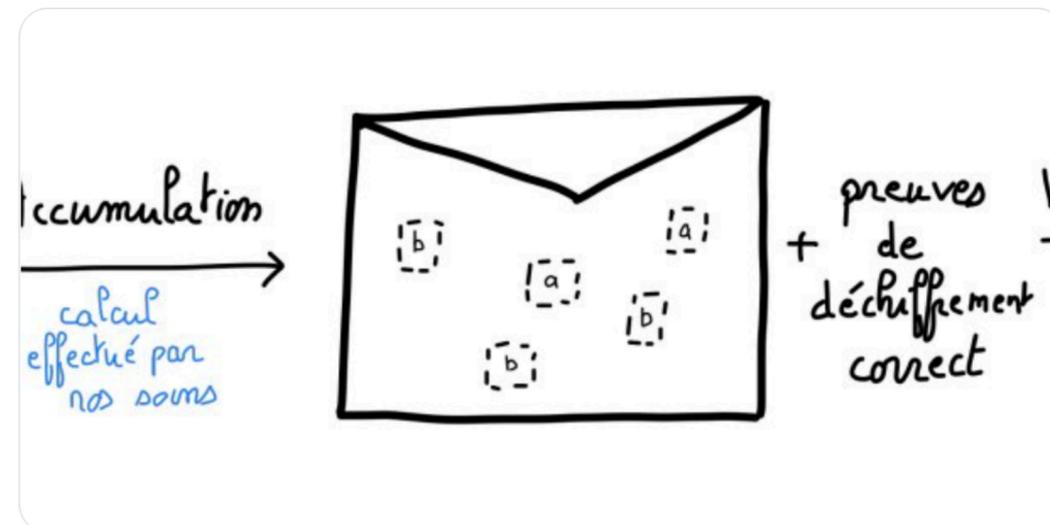
Inria Nancy - Grand Est
@Inria_Nancy



 [#Législatives2022](#) Être français, habiter à l'étranger & pouvoir vérifier son vote, ce sera possible ! Mandatés comme tiers de confiance par [@francediplo](#) & le [@CNRS](#), des scientifiques [@labo_Loria](#) [@Inria](#) mettront en ligne un site sécurisé. 

+ d'infos : verifiabilite-legislatives2022.fr/informations.h...

[Translate Tweet](#)



 Caramba, Nancy and 2 others

5:17 AM · May 17, 2022 · Twitter Web App

2 Retweets 1 Quote Tweet 14 Likes



May 17th 2022....

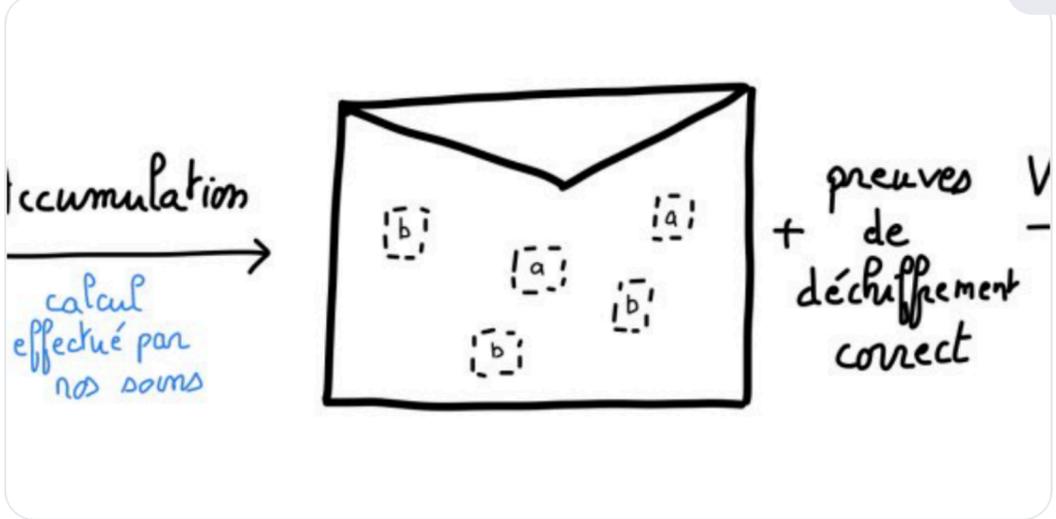
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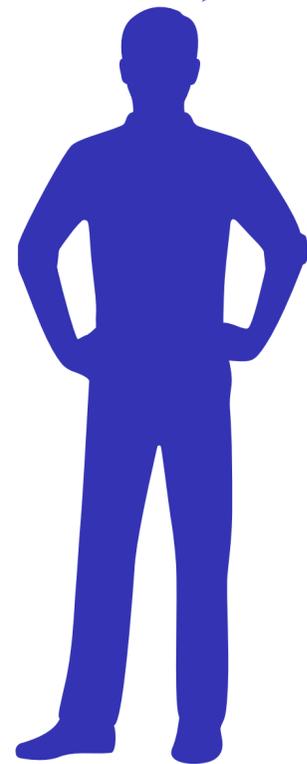
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🗨️ ↻️ ❤️ ↗️

“Be French, live abroad, and **be able to verify your vote**, it will be possible. [...] Acting as trusted third parties, researchers will launch a secure website.”

May 17th 2022....

Hum... is it true?
Is it really secure?

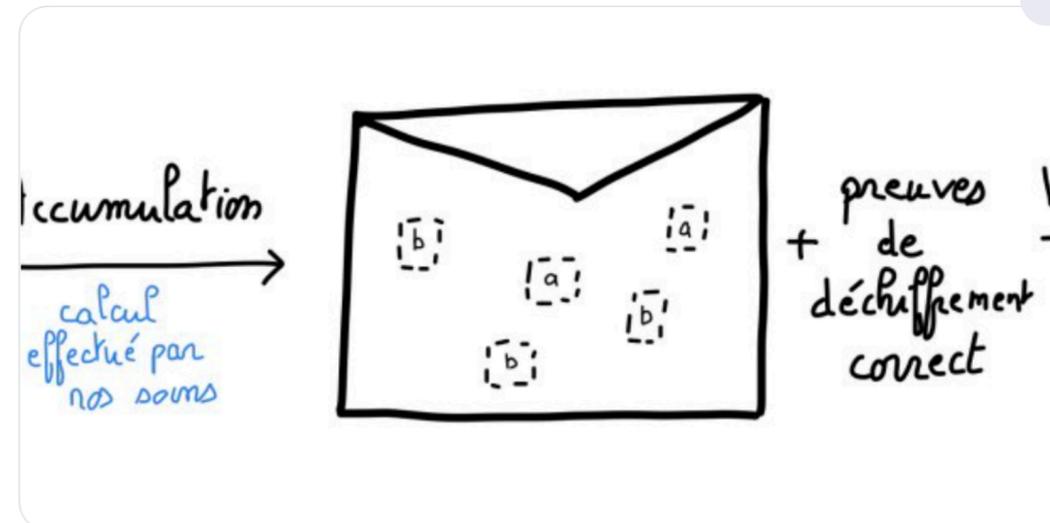


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Outline

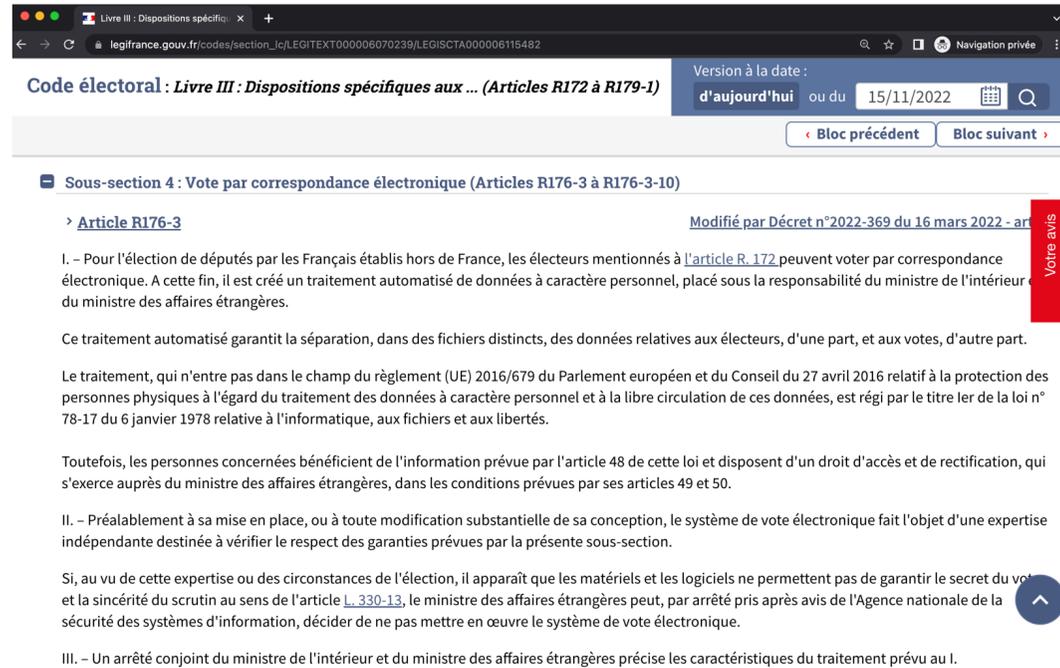
1. Reverse the threat model and the protocol

2. Vulnerabilities, attacks, and fixes

- ▶ how to defeat verifiability?
- ▶ how to defeat vote privacy?

3. Other concerns and take away

How to define the security targets?



The screenshot shows a web browser displaying the French Code électoral. The page title is "Code électoral : Livre III : Dispositions spécifiques aux ... (Articles R172 à R179-1)". The browser address bar shows "legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/section_lc/LEGITEXTE000006070239/LEGISCTA000006115482". The page content includes a navigation bar with "Version à la date : d'aujourd'hui ou du 15/11/2022" and buttons for "Bloc précédent" and "Bloc suivant". The main content is under the heading "Sous-section 4 : Vote par correspondance électronique (Articles R176-3 à R176-3-10)". It features a link to "Article R176-3" and a "Votre avis" button. The text describes the electronic voting process for French citizens abroad, mentioning the use of a centralized system and the role of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It also notes that the system must ensure the secrecy and sincerity of the vote, and that the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Foreign Affairs must issue a joint decree specifying the characteristics of the system.

1. The Code électoral (the French law)

How to define the security targets?

Code électoral : Livre III : Dispositions spécifiques aux ... (Articles R172 à R179-1)

Version à la date : d'aujourd'hui ou du 15/11/2022

Sous-section 4 : Vote par correspondance électronique (Articles R176-3 à R176-3-10)

> Article R176-3 Modifié par Décret n°2022-369 du 16 mars 2022 - ar

I. – Pour l'élection de députés par les Français établis hors de France, les électeurs mentionnés à l'article R. 172 peuvent voter par correspondance électronique. A cette fin, il est créé un traitement automatisé de données à caractère personnel, placé sous la responsabilité du ministre de l'intérieur et du ministre des affaires étrangères.

Ce traitement automatisé garantit la séparation, dans des fichiers distincts, des données relatives aux électeurs, d'une part, et aux votes, d'autre part.

Le traitement, qui n'entre pas dans le champ du règlement (UE) 2016/679 du Parlement européen et du Conseil du 27 avril 2016 relatif à la protection des personnes physiques à l'égard du traitement des données à caractère personnel et à la libre circulation de ces données, est régi par le titre Ier de la loi n° 78-17 du 6 janvier 1978 relative à l'informatique, aux fichiers et aux libertés.

Toutefois, les personnes concernées bénéficient de l'information prévue par l'article 48 de cette loi et disposent d'un droit d'accès et de rectification, qui s'exerce auprès du ministre des affaires étrangères, dans les conditions prévues par ses articles 49 et 50.

II. – Préalablement à sa mise en place, ou à toute modification substantielle de sa conception, le système de vote électronique fait l'objet d'une expertise indépendante destinée à vérifier le respect des garanties prévues par la présente sous-section.

Si, au vu de cette expertise ou des circonstances de l'élection, il apparaît que les matériels et les logiciels ne permettent pas de garantir le secret du vote et la sincérité du scrutin au sens de l'article L. 330-13, le ministre des affaires étrangères peut, par arrêté pris après avis de l'Agence nationale de la sécurité des systèmes d'information, décider de ne pas mettre en œuvre le système de vote électronique.

III. – Un arrêté conjoint du ministre de l'intérieur et du ministre des affaires étrangères précise les caractéristiques du traitement prévu au I.

1. The Code électoral (the French law)

2. The CNIL recommendations (National Commission on Informatics and Liberty in English)

➔ level 3 is expected

Sécurité des systèmes de vote par internet : la CNIL actualise sa recommandation de 2010

10 juillet 2019

Avec l'entrée en application RGPD et suite à la consultation auprès des professionnels et experts afin d'améliorer la sécurité des solutions de vote par correspondance électronique, notamment via Internet, la CNIL a mis à jour sa recommandation sur ces dispositifs.

Le 25 avril 2019, la CNIL a adopté une recommandation relative à la sécurité des systèmes de vote par correspondance électronique, notamment via Internet. Elle présente aux responsables de traitement souhaitant recourir à un tel système de vote une approche par niveau de risque et par objectifs de sécurité à atteindre.

La recommandation s'accompagne d'une fiche pratique qui présente une méthodologie en deux temps :

- une grille d'analyse pour déterminer le niveau de sécurité que le système de vote par correspondance électronique, notamment via Internet, doit respecter ;
- des niveaux d'objectifs de sécurité avec des exemples de moyens, non limitatifs, à mettre en œuvre pour atteindre ces objectifs.

Etape 1 : remplir la grille d'analyse

La grille suivante, basée sur des questions fermées, a pour objet d'aider les responsables de traitement à déterminer le niveau de sécurité que leur système doit atteindre.

	Vrai (0)	Faux (1)
Question 1 : Le scrutin peut être reporté, par exemple en cas d'incident.		
Question 2 : Le scrutin concerne moins de 50 personnes.		

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The CNIL recommendations are not legal requirements... but the protocol must meet them in practice any way!

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Security properties

Vote secrecy

“Votes must remain confidential”

—Code électoral, Article R176-3-9

"[the system must] ensure the strict confidentiality of the ballots as soon as created."

—CNIL, Security objective n°1-04

"[The system must] ensure that the identity of the voter and the expression of his choice can not be linked during the whole process"

—CNIL, Security objective n°1-07

Verifiability

"When a voter's vote is registered, the voter is provided with a digital receipt allowing them to verify online that their vote has been taken into account."

—Code électoral, Article R176-3-9

"ensure the transparency of the ballot-box for all the voters [...] It must be possible for the voters to ensure that their ballot has been counted in the ballot-box."

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An attacker cannot learn the choice of a target voter

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Verifiability

"When a voter's vote is verified online that the voter's choice is correctly recorded in the ballot-box."

A voter must have the guarantee that their ballot appears in the ballot-box

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Verifiability

"When a voter's vote is verified online that the voter can be sure that the vote is correctly recorded."

A voter must have the guarantee that their ballot appears in the ballot-box

"ensure the transparency of the process to ensure that the result corresponds to the content of the ballot-box"

The result must correspond to the content of the ballot-box

— CNIL, Security objective n°2-07

Ballots must be sent by legitimate voters only



Threat model

"Security level 3: The threat actors include the voters, **the election operators**, outsiders, **insiders within the provider or internal staff**. They can be resourceful or highly motivated. "

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	Voter	Voting device	Com. channels	Voting server	Dec. auth.	3 rd -party
Verifiability	😊	😊	👹	👹	👹	😊
Confidentiality	😊	😊	👹	👹	😊	😊

😊 = trustworthy

👹 = compromised

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TLS is broken
(e.g. middle-box TLS, corrupted network administrator, ...)

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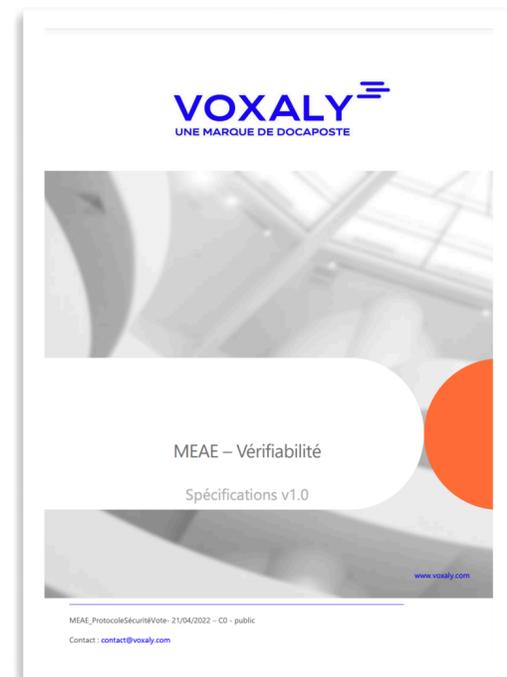
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😊 = trustworthy

👹 = compromised

😊* = trustworthy (However, compromise decreases attacks complexity.)

How to obtain a comprehensive description of the protocol?



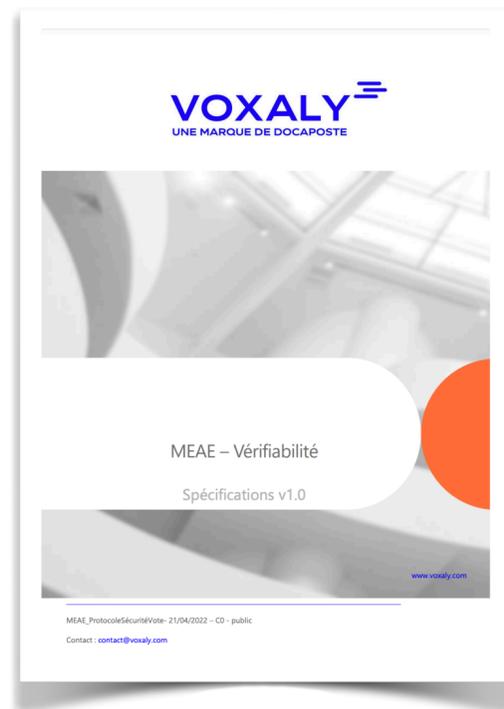
A specification of the system

- ▶ published by Voxaly Docapost on April 21st 2022
- ▶ allowing one to develop a third party verifier



This specification is incomplete... it does not describe the protocol itself!

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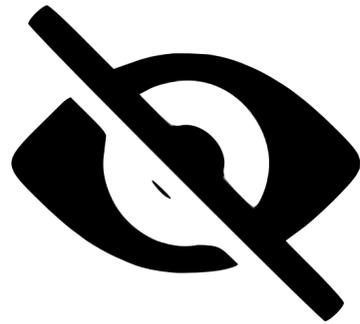
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Some reverse engineering

- ▶ based on the voter's journey (official tutorial and observation in-situ)
- ▶ based on HTML/JS/CSS data collected by different voters
- ▶ cross checking those data with data collected during a **previous large-scale test**



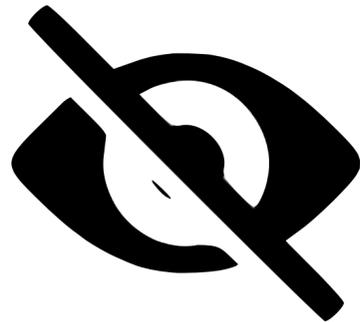
Security by obfuscation?



Standard obfuscation techniques:

- ▶ function and variable renaming
- ▶ control flow alteration (infinite for loop and breaks, switch case, nested functions, etc)

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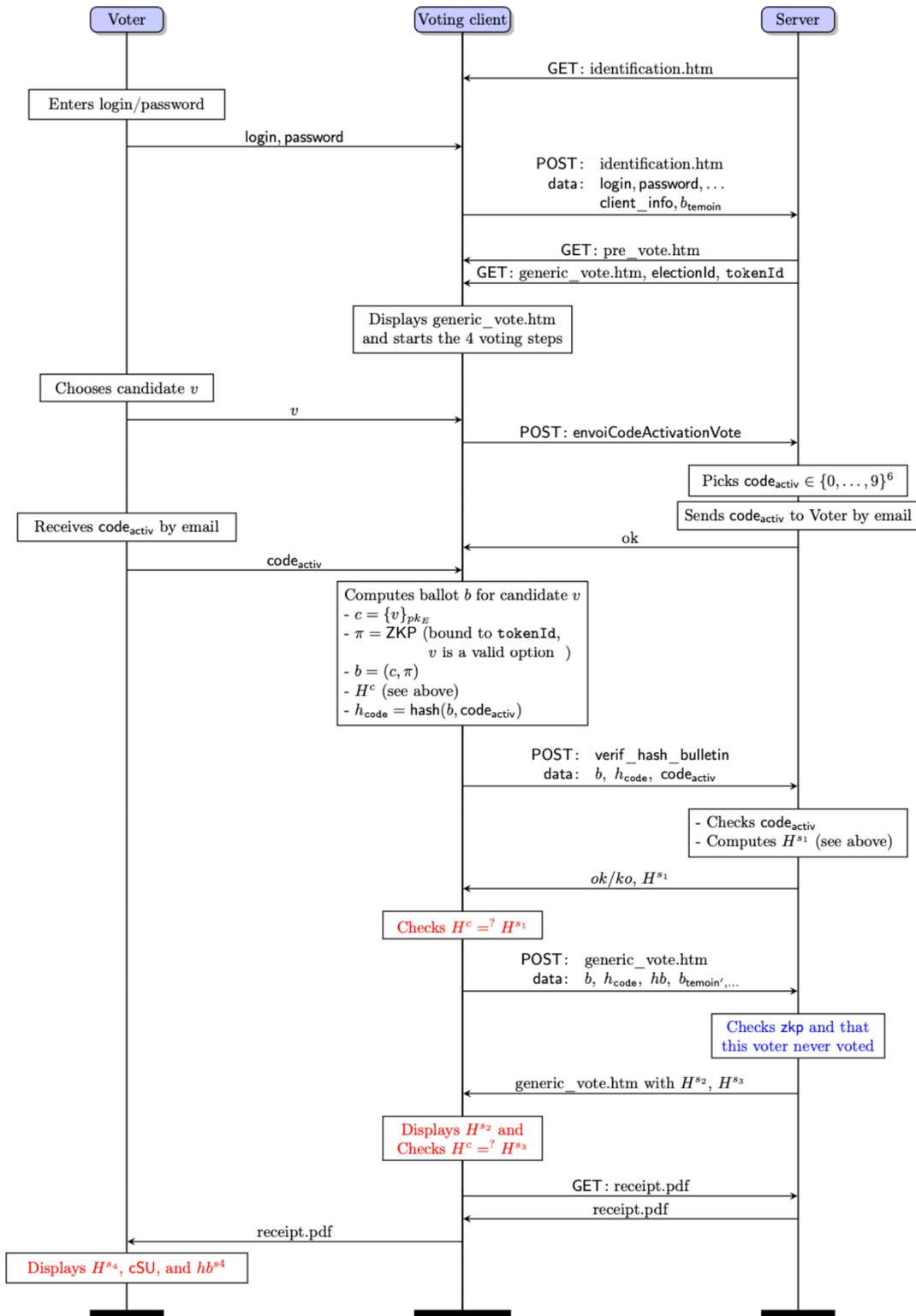
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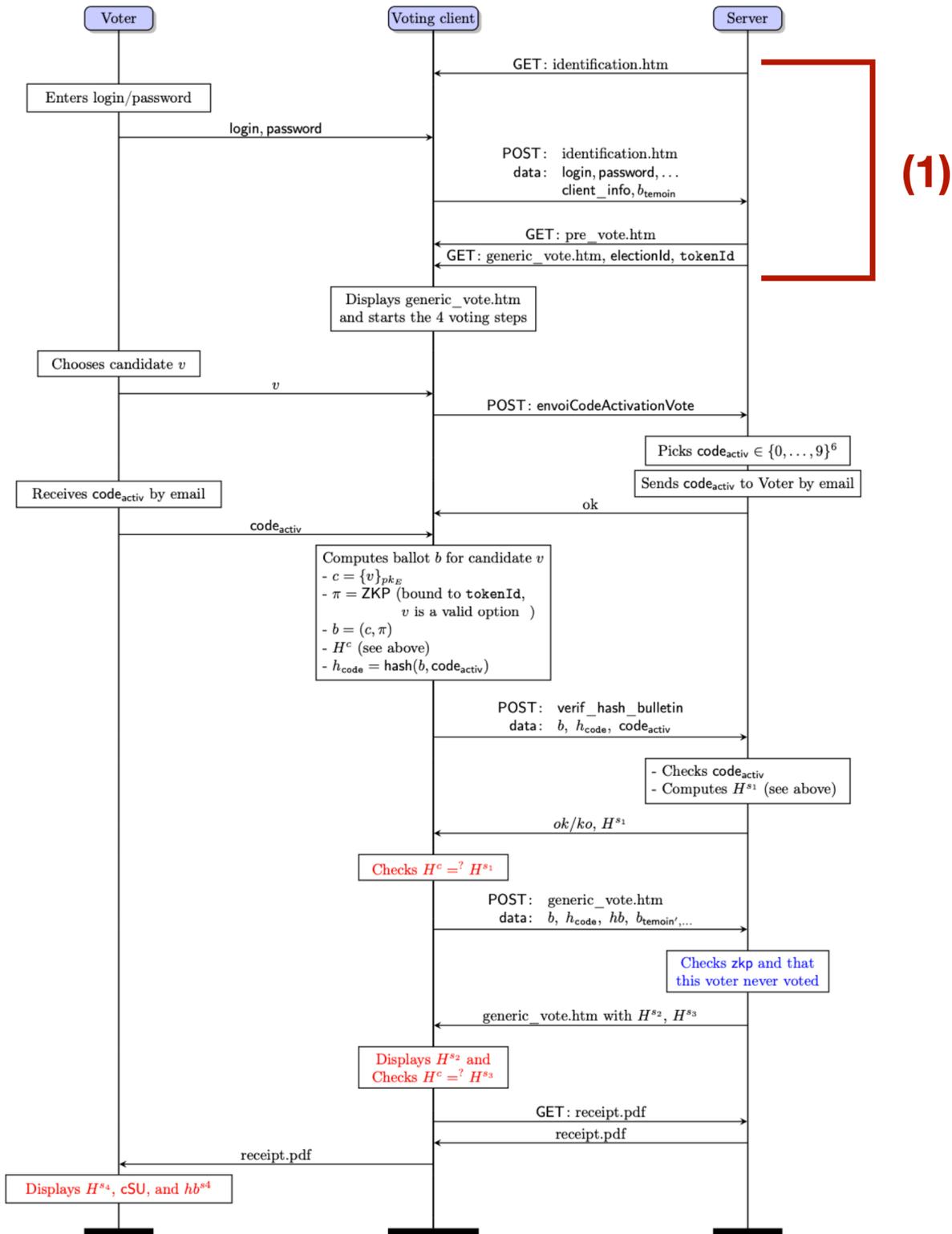
Few funny elements...

- ▶ it's mix of French and English: `bulletin`, `codeActivation`, `erreurHashVerification`, ...
`correctLength`, `chosenCandidates`, `updateVoteStatus`, ...
- ▶ obfuscation “by-design”, e.g, `o.voteSignature` is not a signature 🤪

A comprehensive description of the protocol

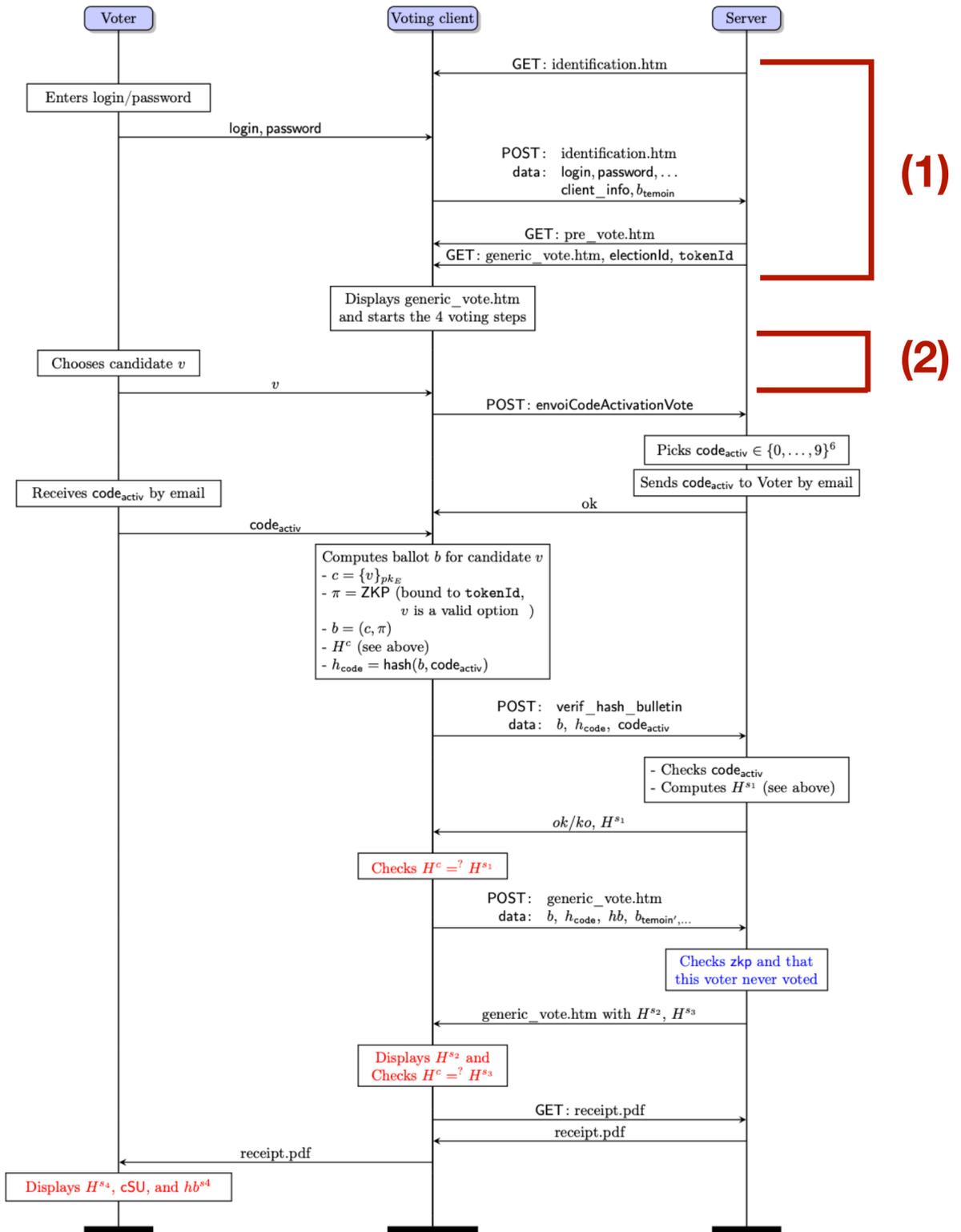


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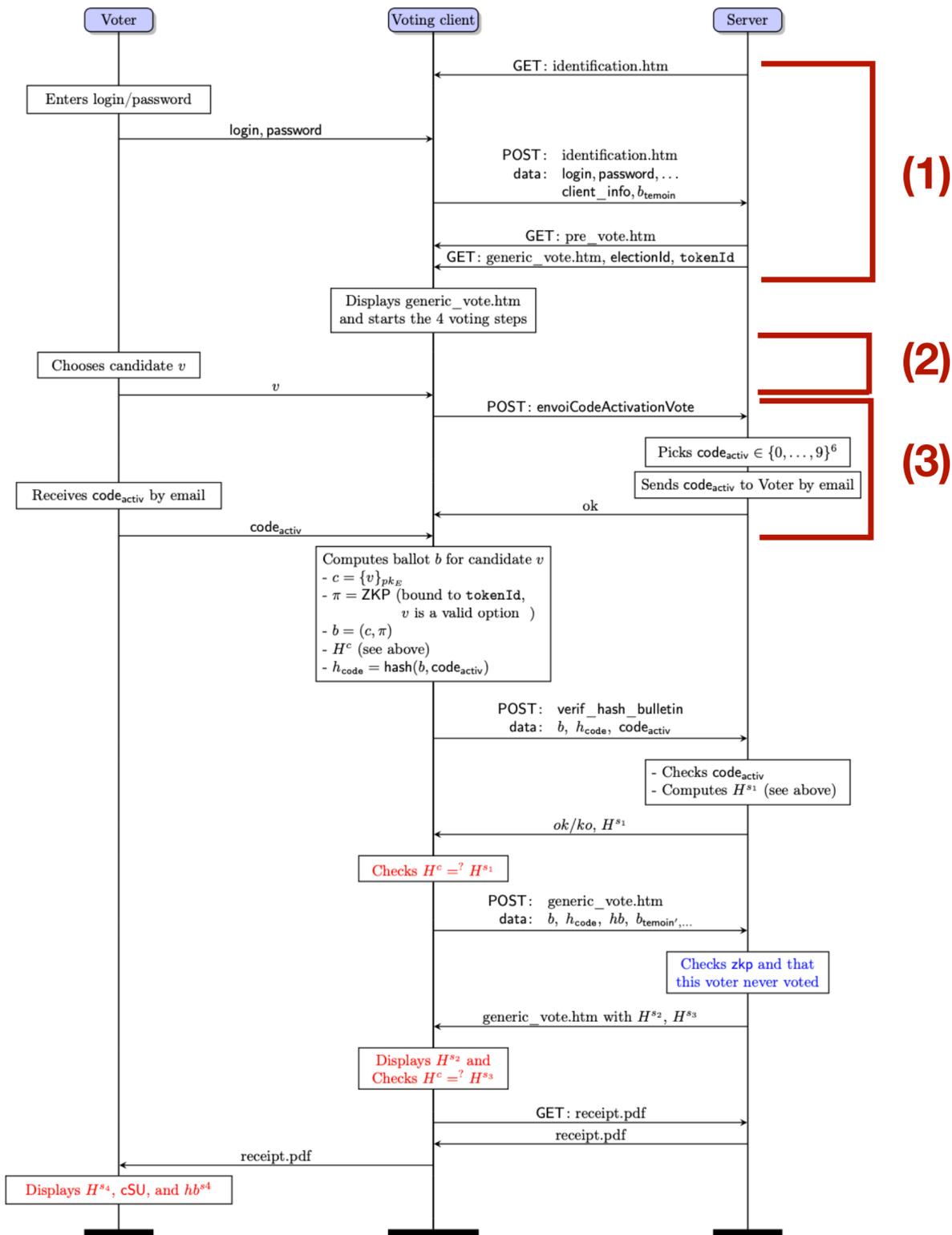
1. Authentication: the voter sends their login/password to the server

A comprehensive description of the protocol



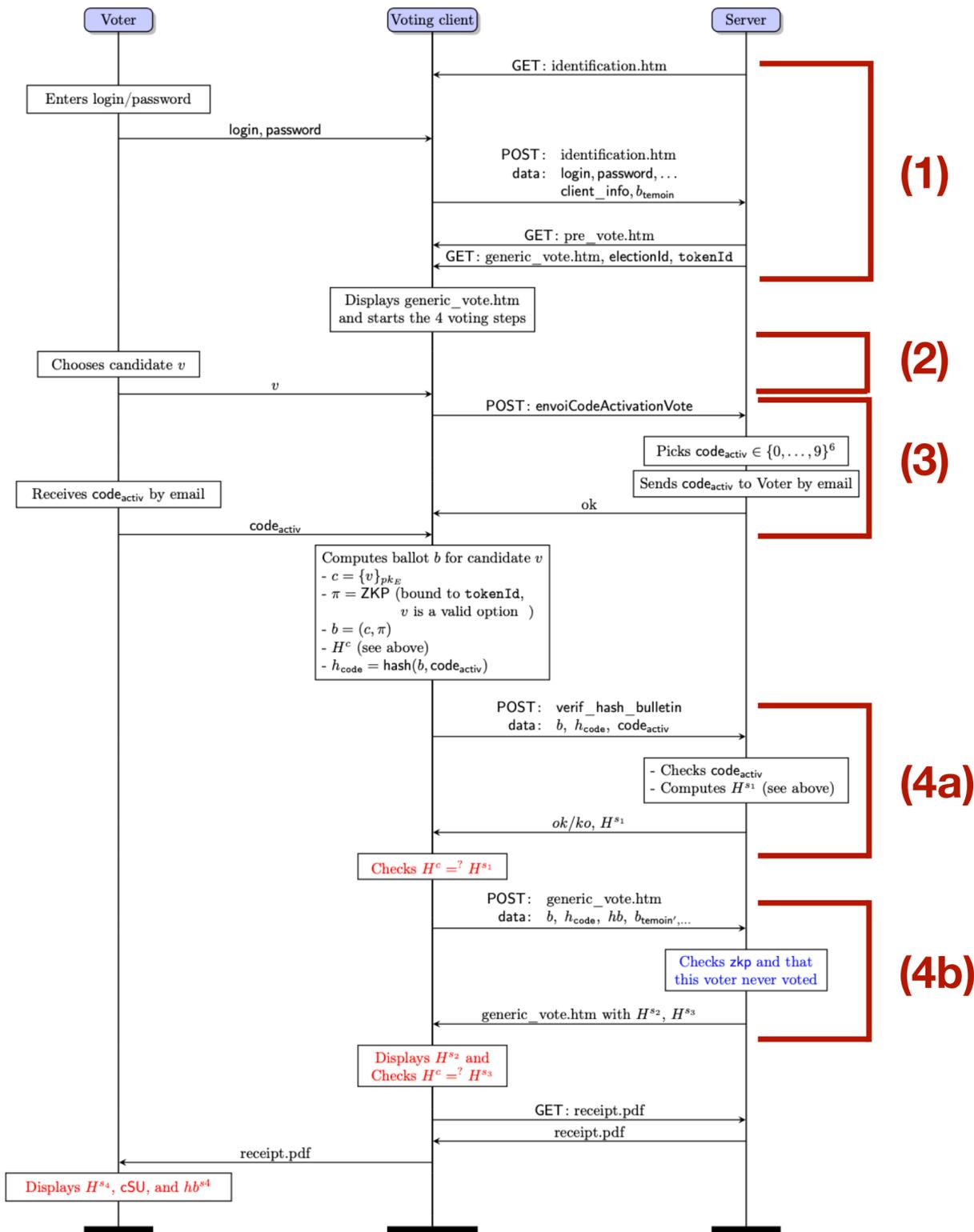
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2. Vote section and confirmation

A comprehensive description of the protocol



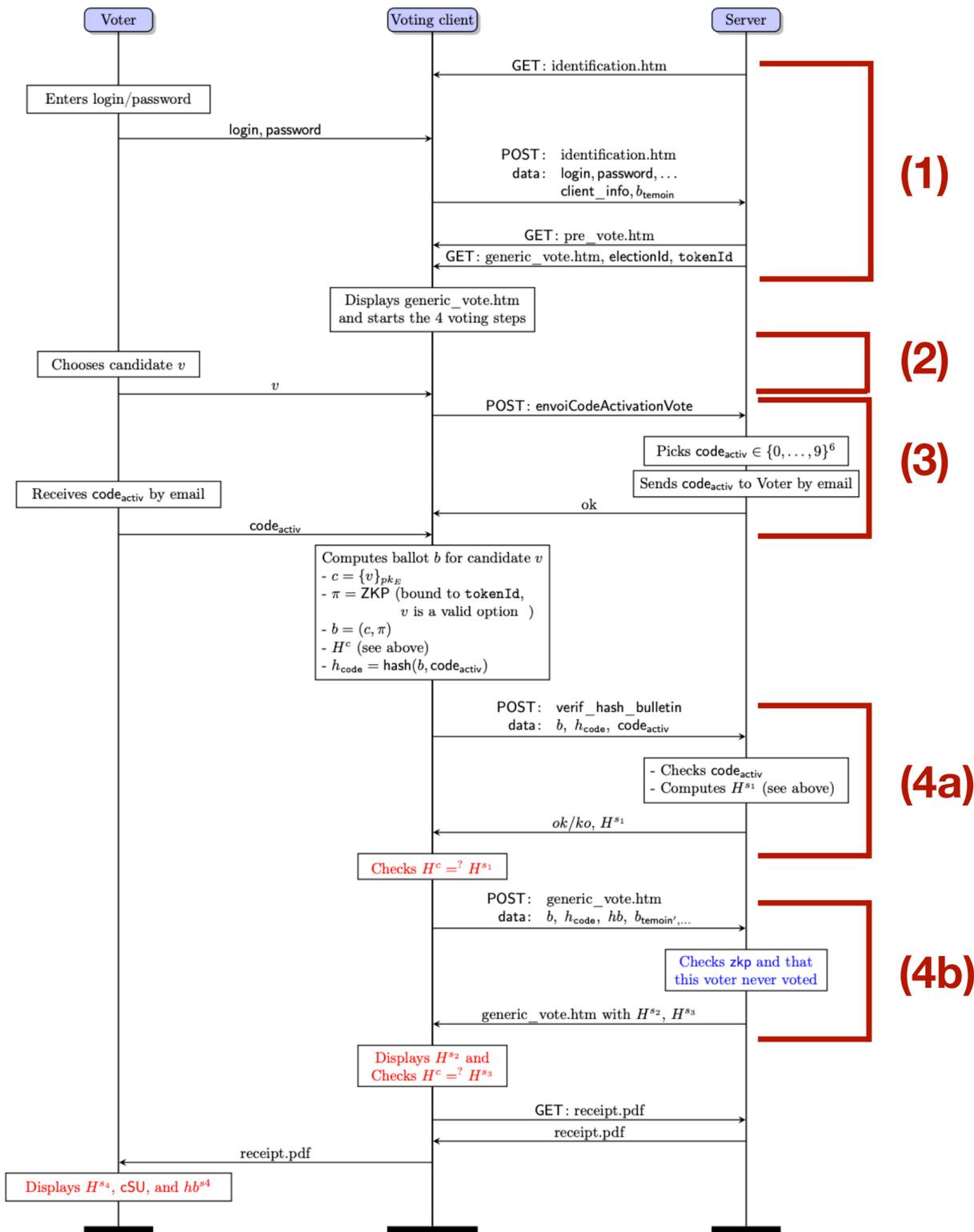
1. **Authentication:** the voter sends their login/password to the server
2. **Vote section and confirmation**
3. **Code activation:** once confirmed, the voter initiates the sending of the **activation code** by email

A comprehensive description of the protocol



1. **Authentication:** the voter sends their login/password to the server
2. **Vote section and confirmation**
3. **Code activation:** once confirmed, the voter initiates the sending of the **activation code** by email
4. **Sending the ballot:** the voter sends their ballot together with the activation code

A comprehensive description of the protocol

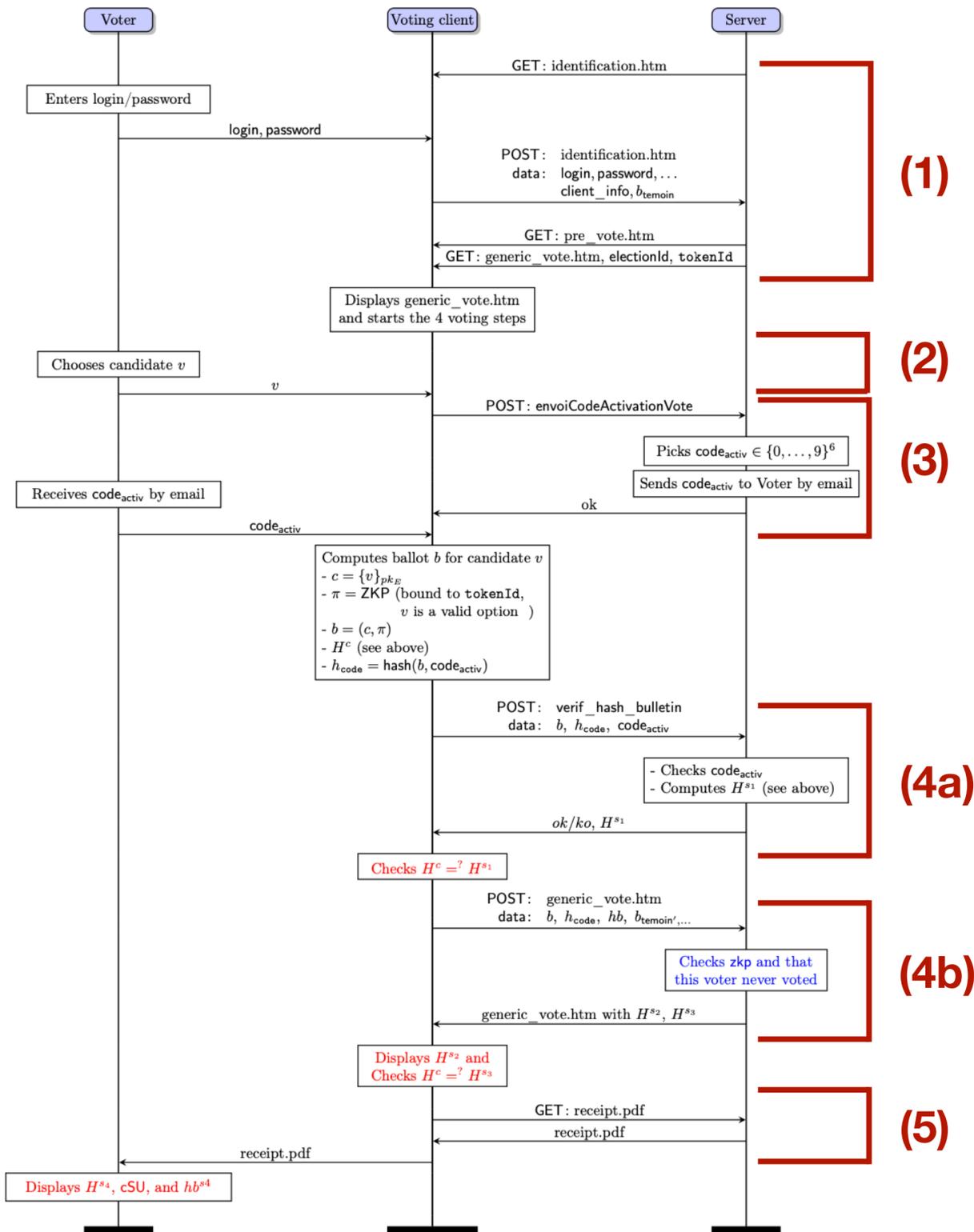


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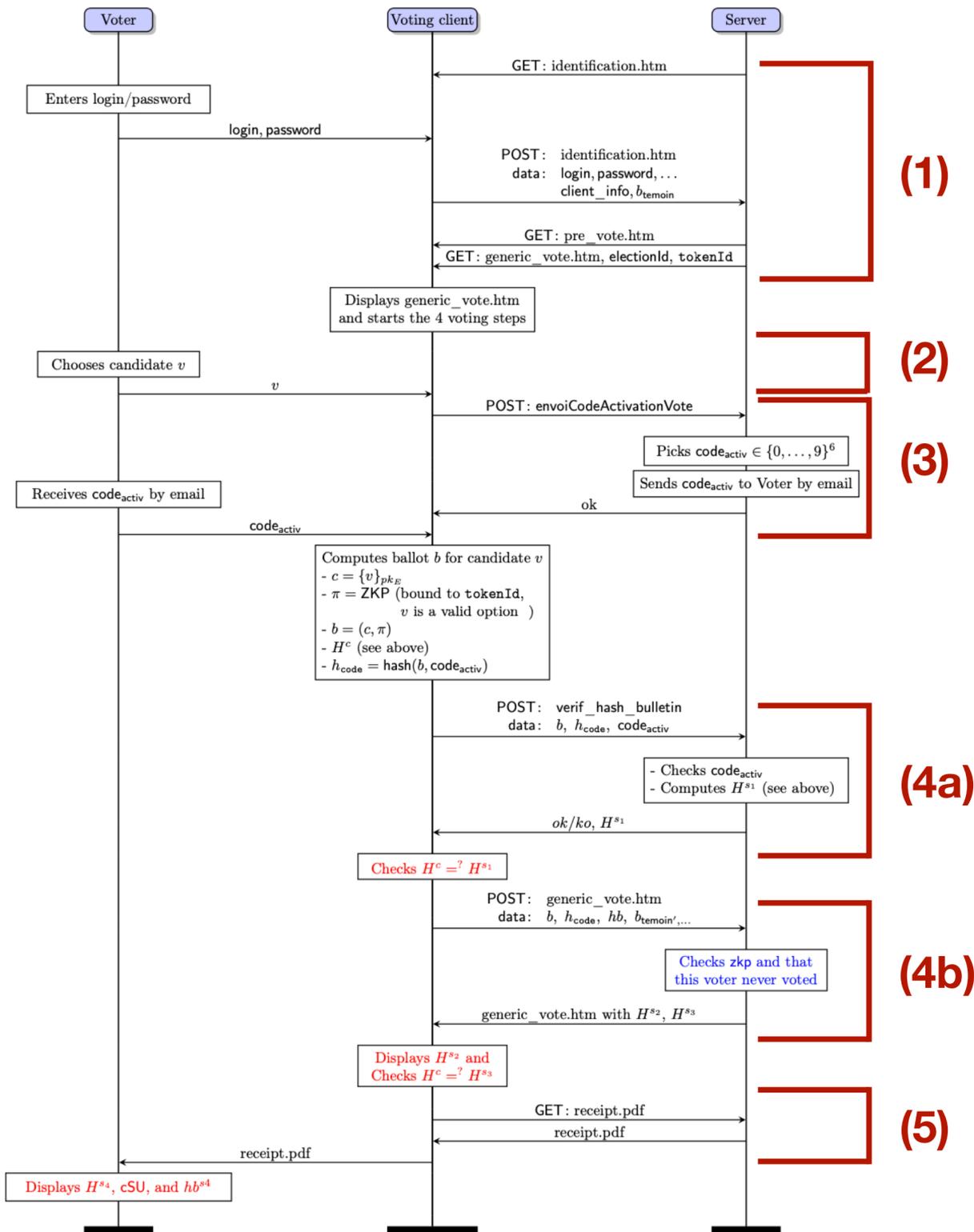
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This is the first public comprehensive description of the protocol.

Outline

1. Reverse the threat model and the protocol

2. Vulnerabilities, attacks, and fixes

- ▶ how to defeat verifiability?
- ▶ how to defeat vote privacy?

3. Other concerns and take away

More details about the receipt



Elections législatives 2022 1er tour

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More details about the receipt

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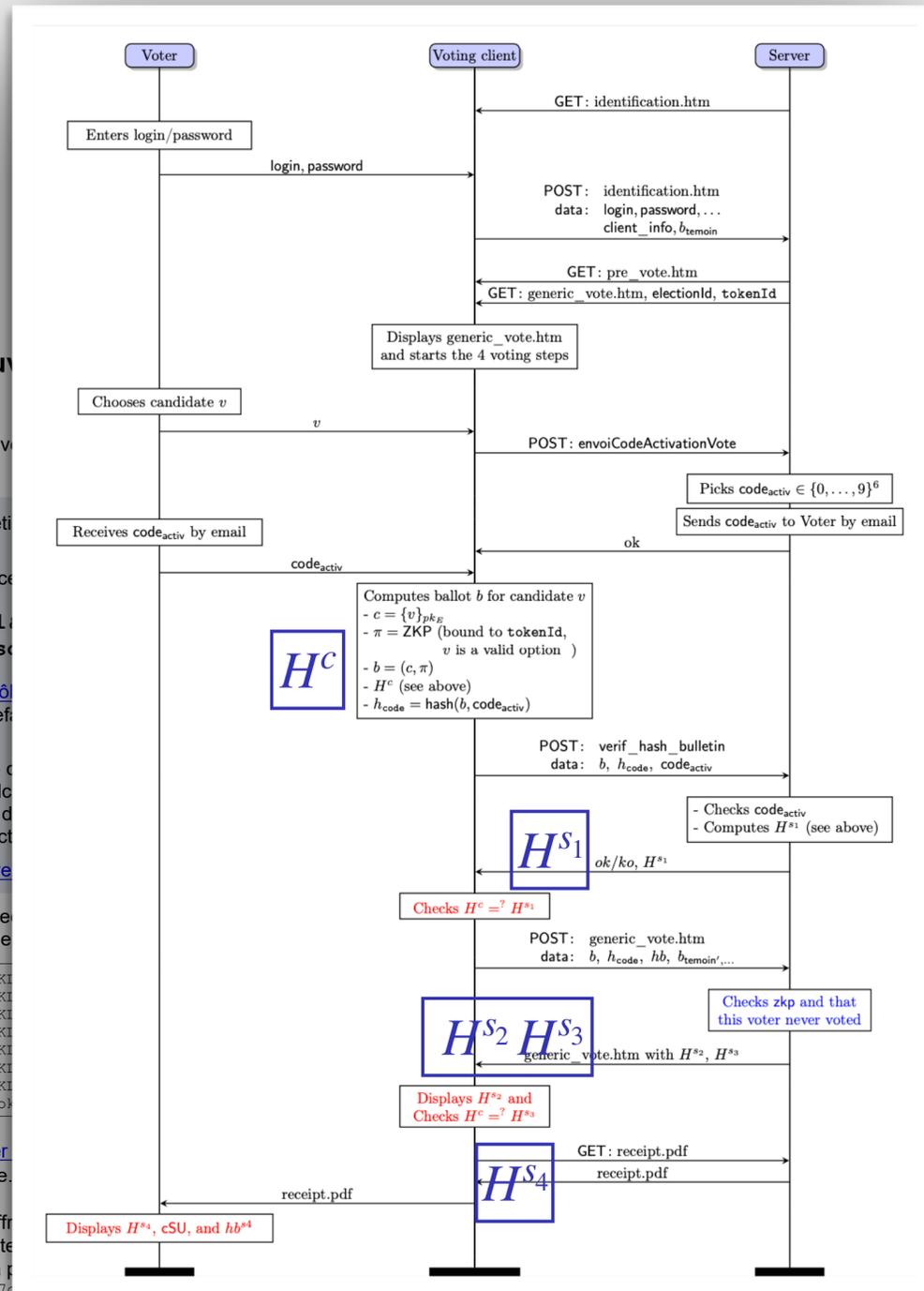
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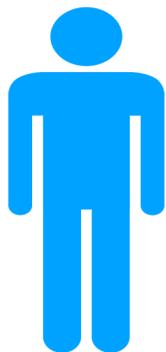
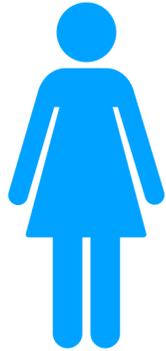
Vulnerability 2: The ballot b is not cryptographically bound to the consulate, i.e. ballotBoxId

Attack against verifiability

The references seen by the voter may not correspond to their ballot.

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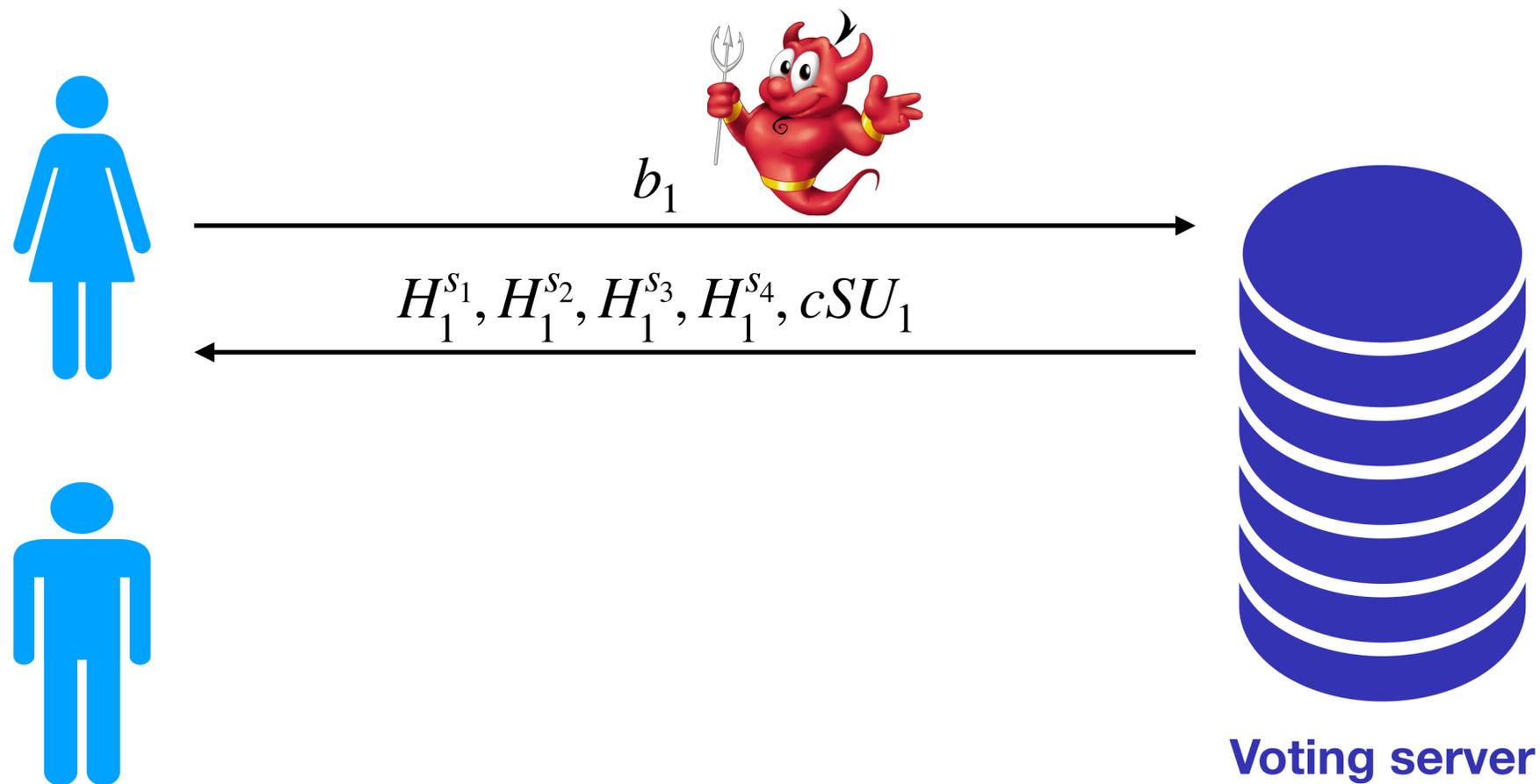
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Voting server

Attack against verifiability

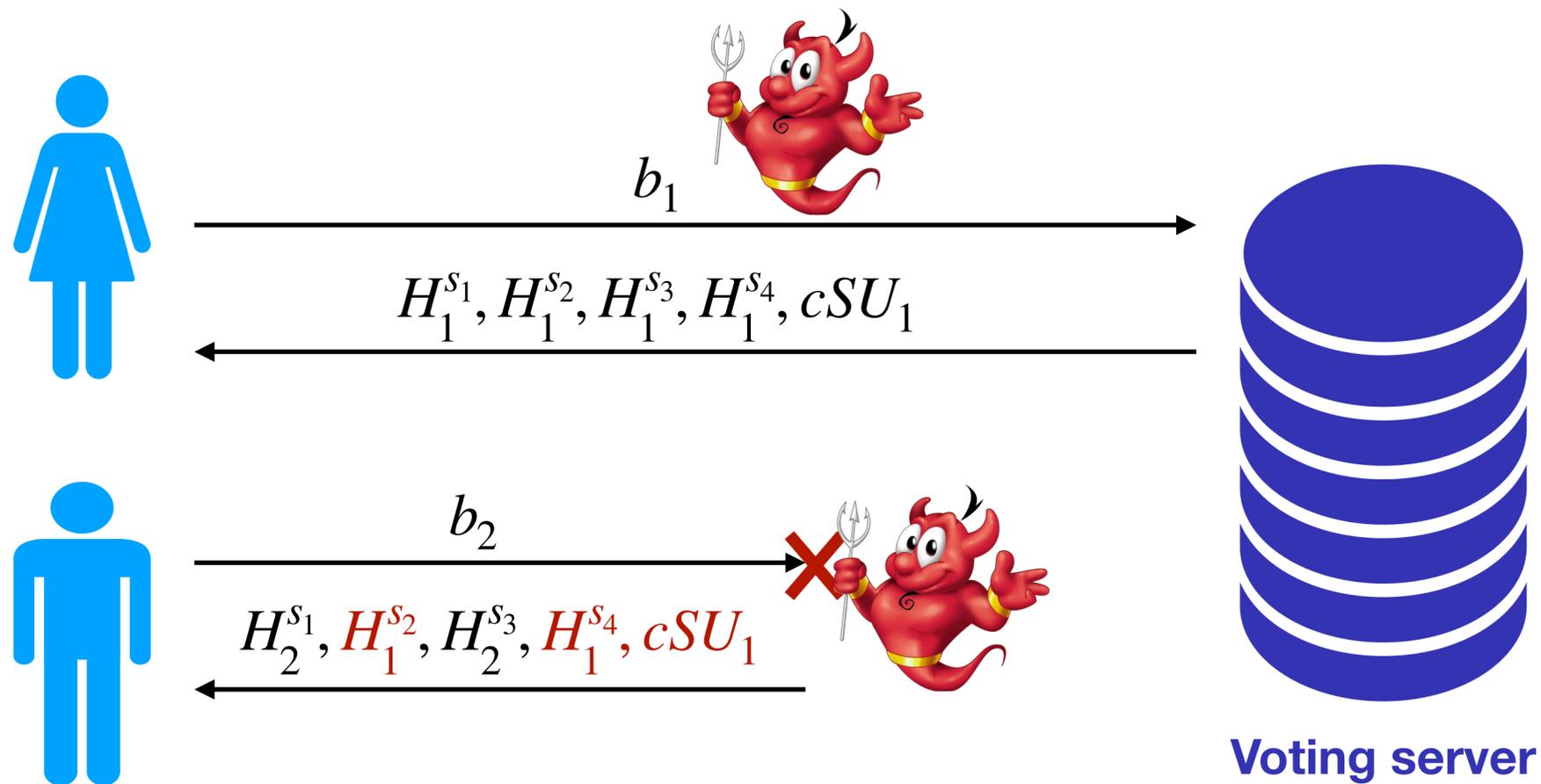
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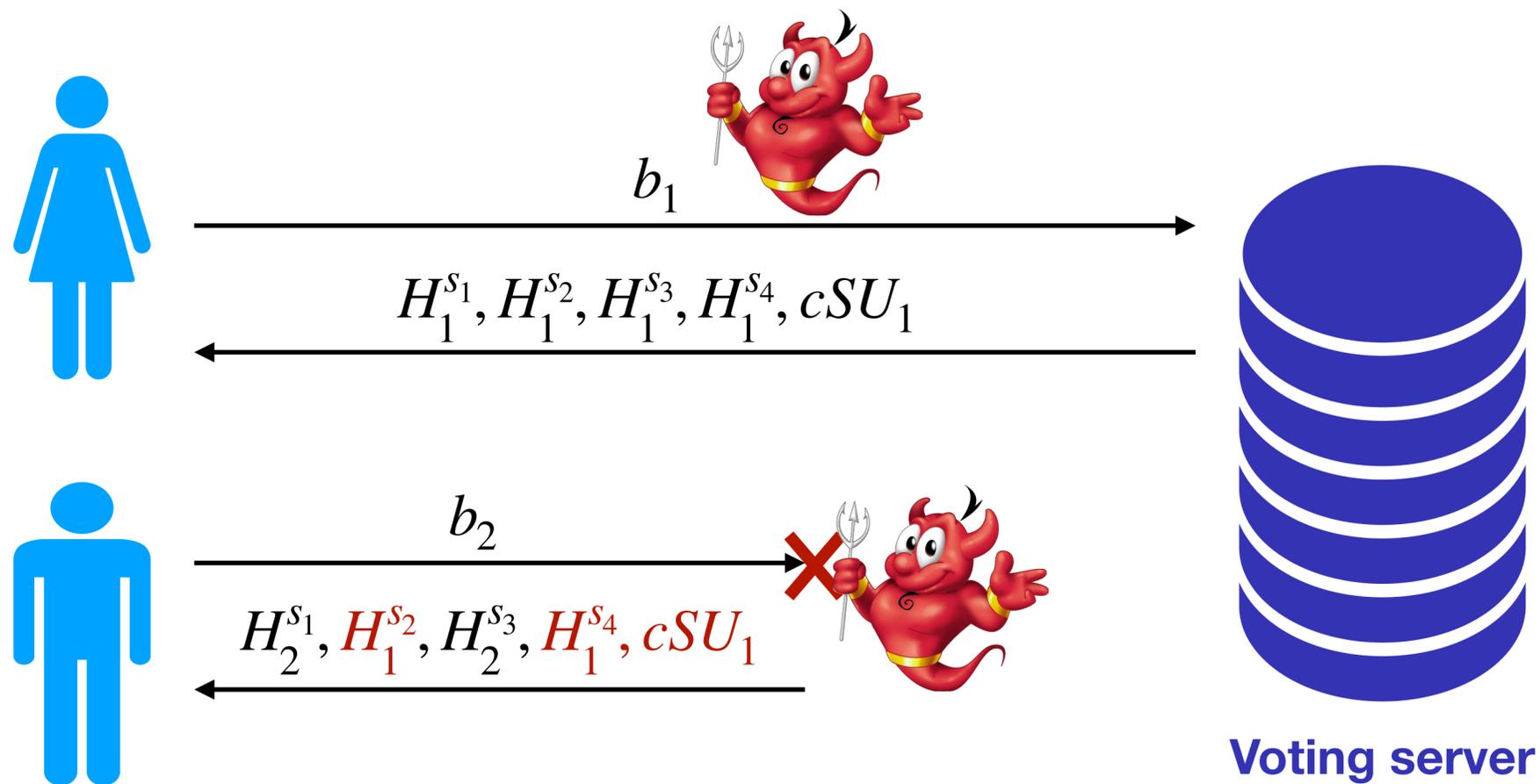
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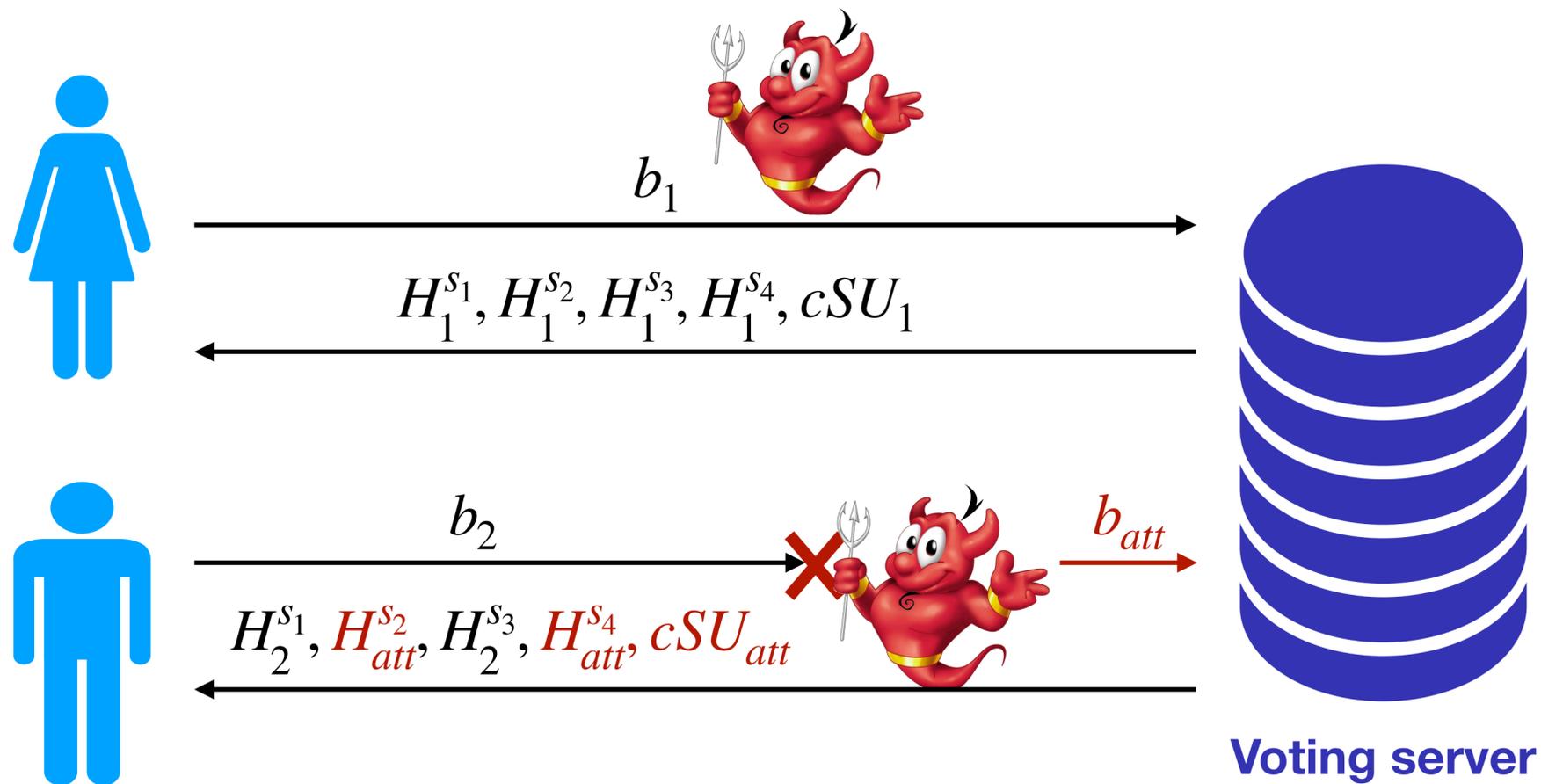
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Improvement: the attacker can completely modify Bob's ballot

An almost undetectable attack

1. No error detected during the voting process: $H_2^C = H_2^{s_1} = H_2^{s_3} \neq H_1^{s_2} = H_1^{s_4}$
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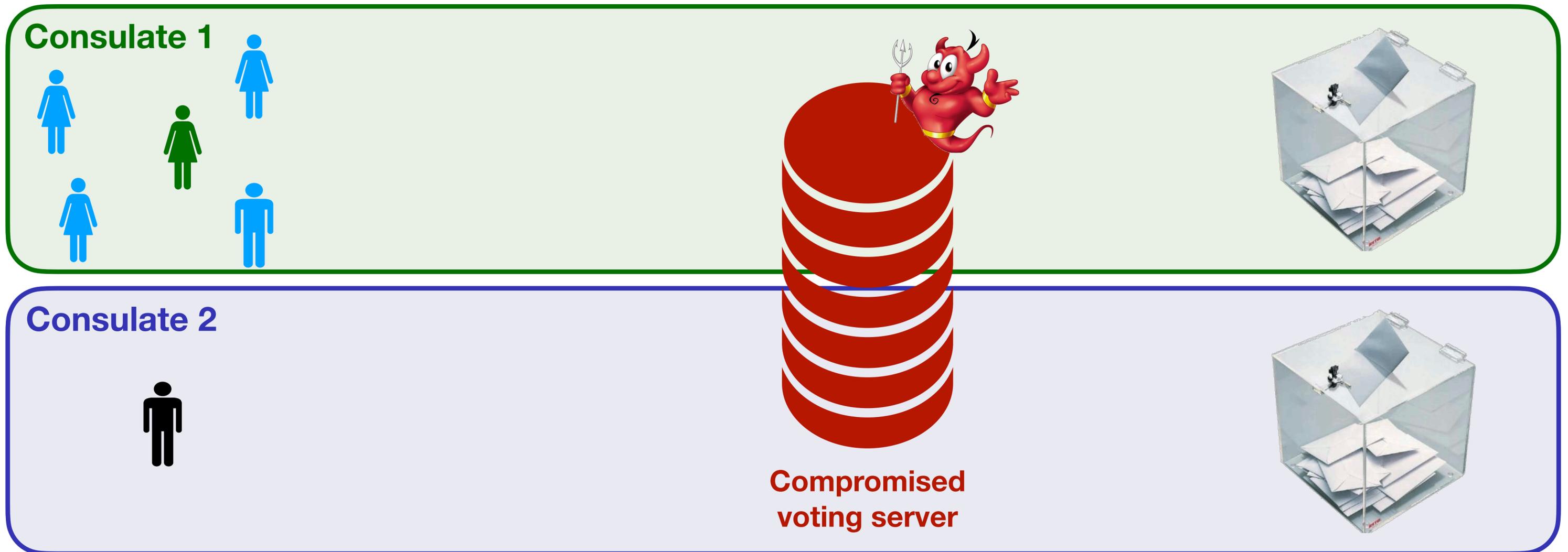
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- ▶ **Attack 2 (drop and replace):** detectable if no-one else voted for Bob's candidate
➔ **unlikely in large consulates...**

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The ballot b are not cryptographically bound to the consulate

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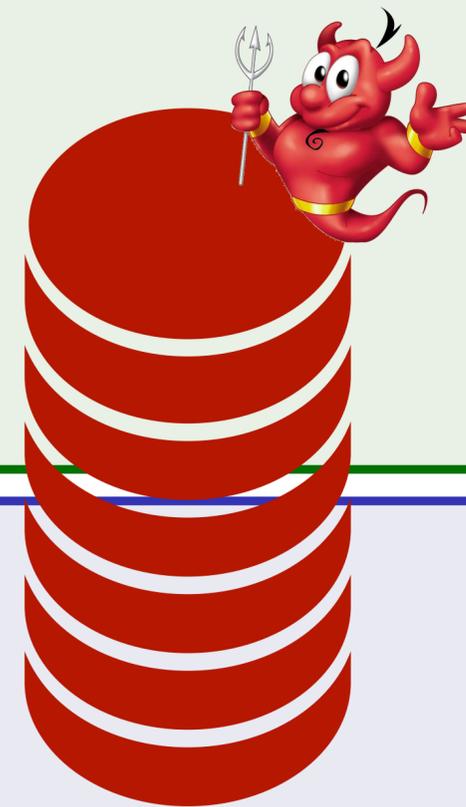


Attack against vote secrecy

E.g SIDNEY
consulate

The ballot b are not cryptographically bound to the consulate

Consulate 1



Consulate 2



E.g EKATERINBURG
consulate

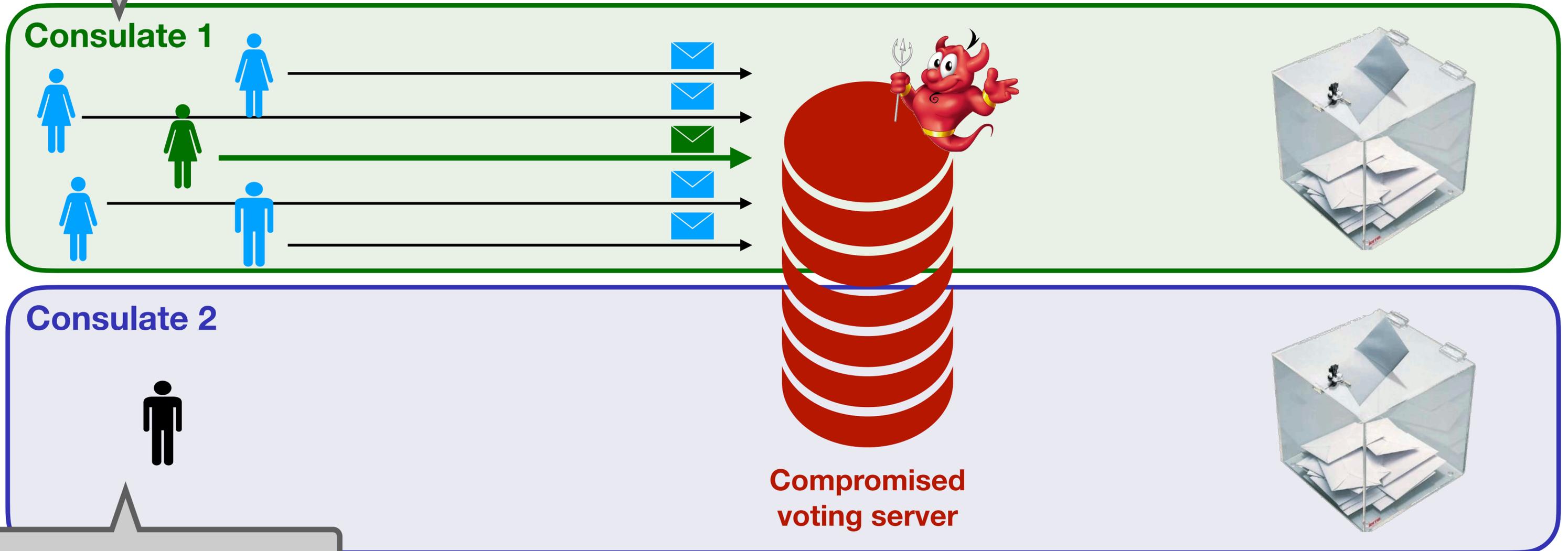
Compromised
voting server



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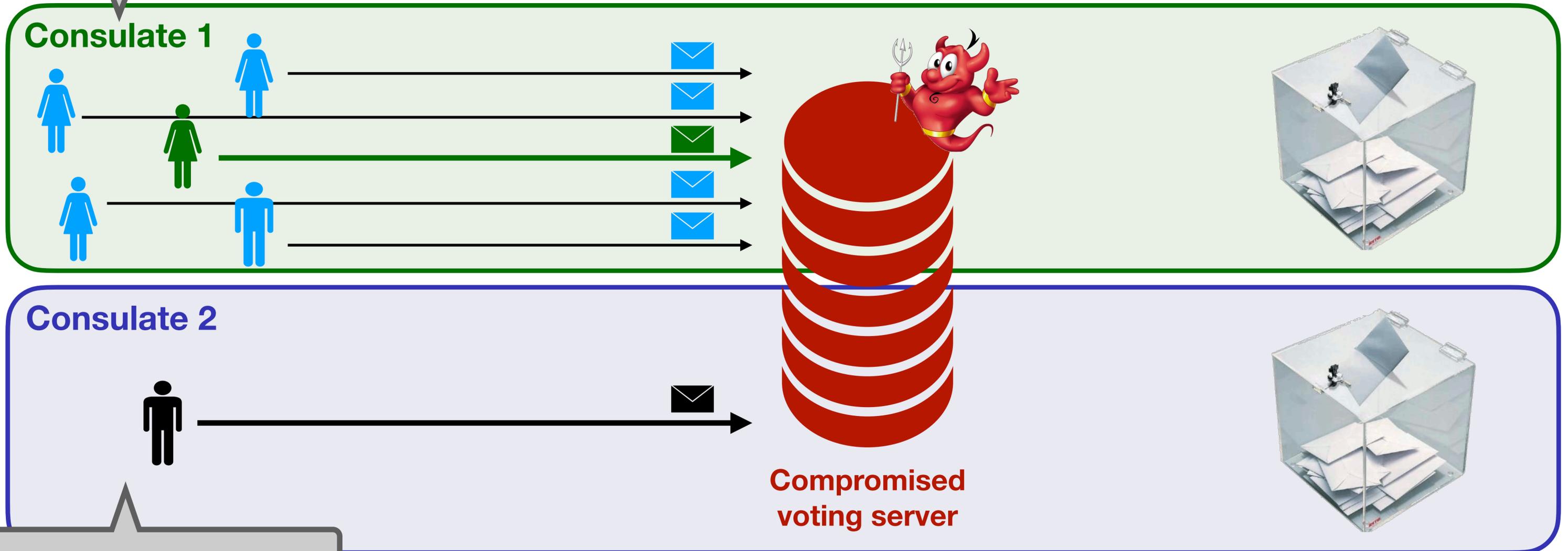


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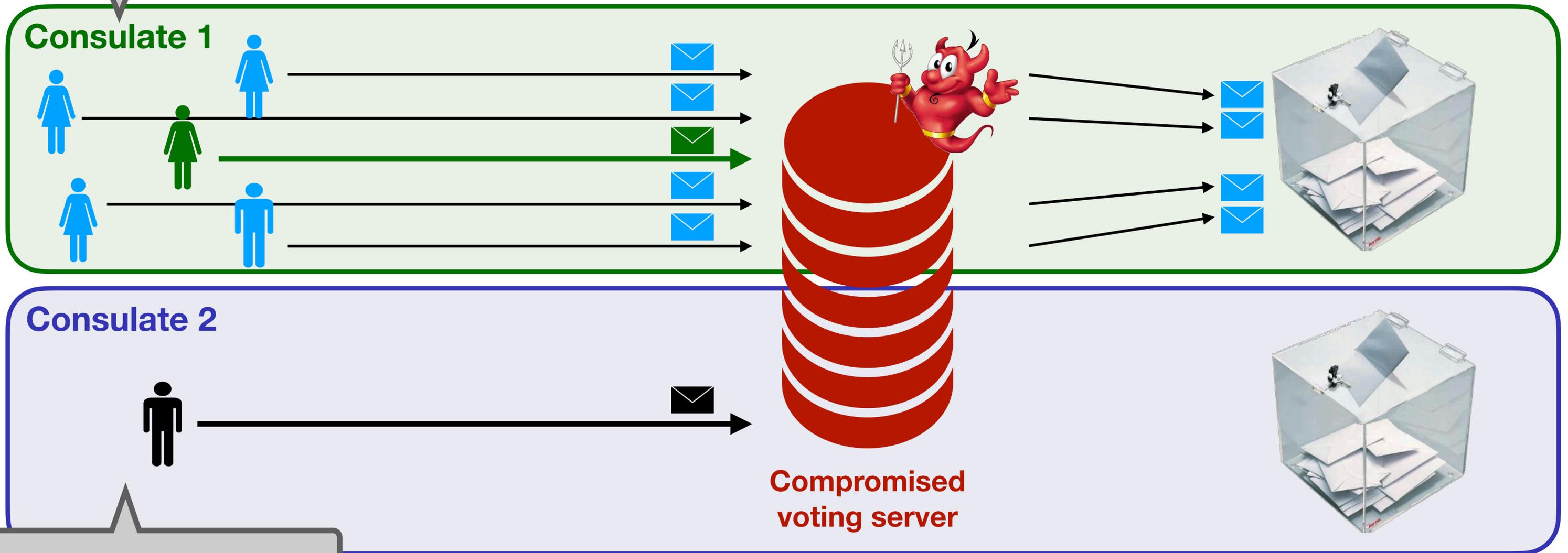


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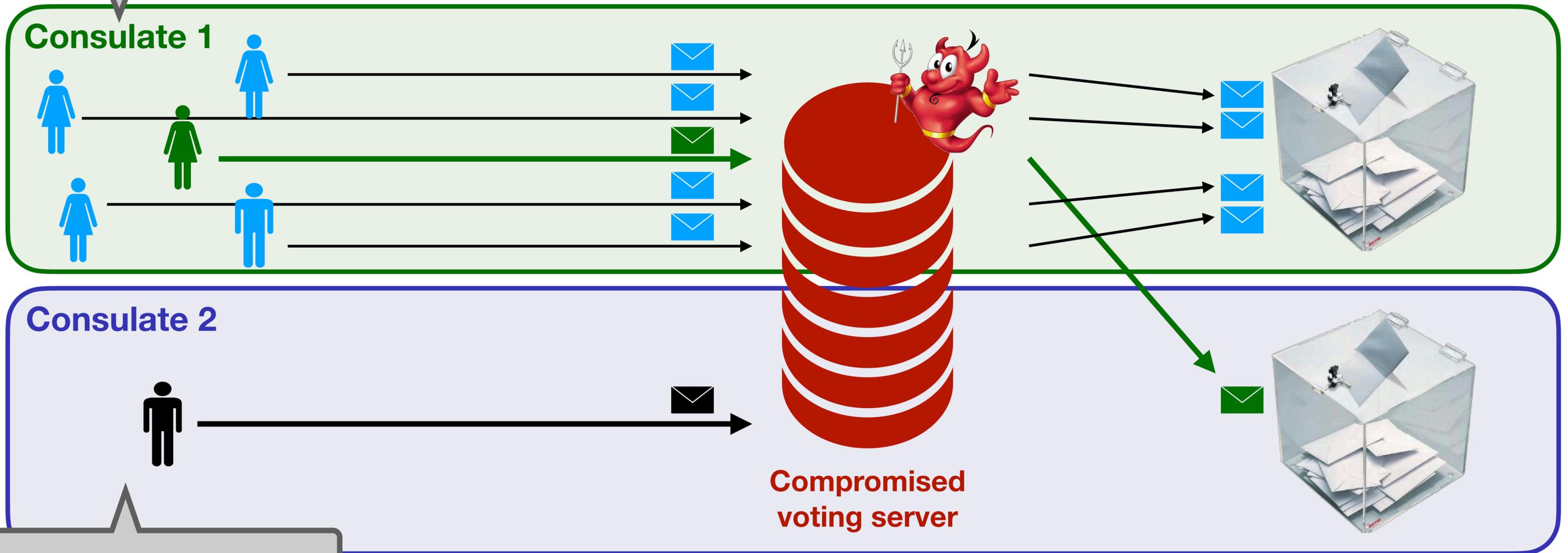


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Consulate 1

Consulate 2

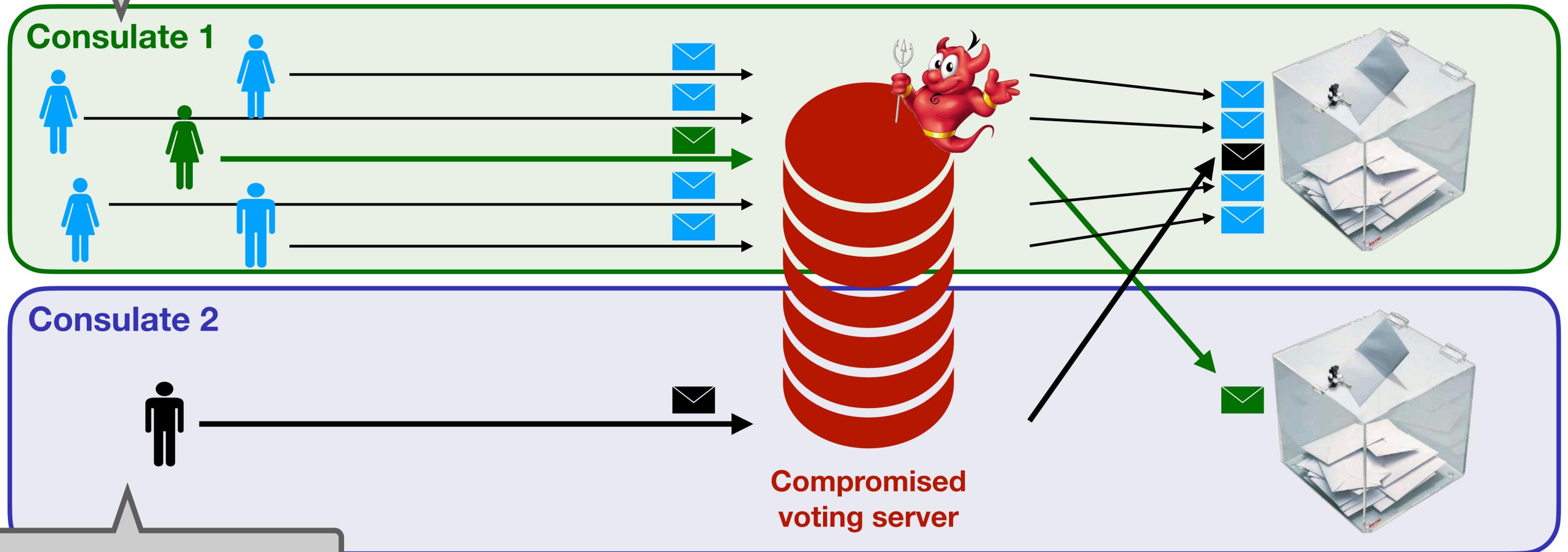
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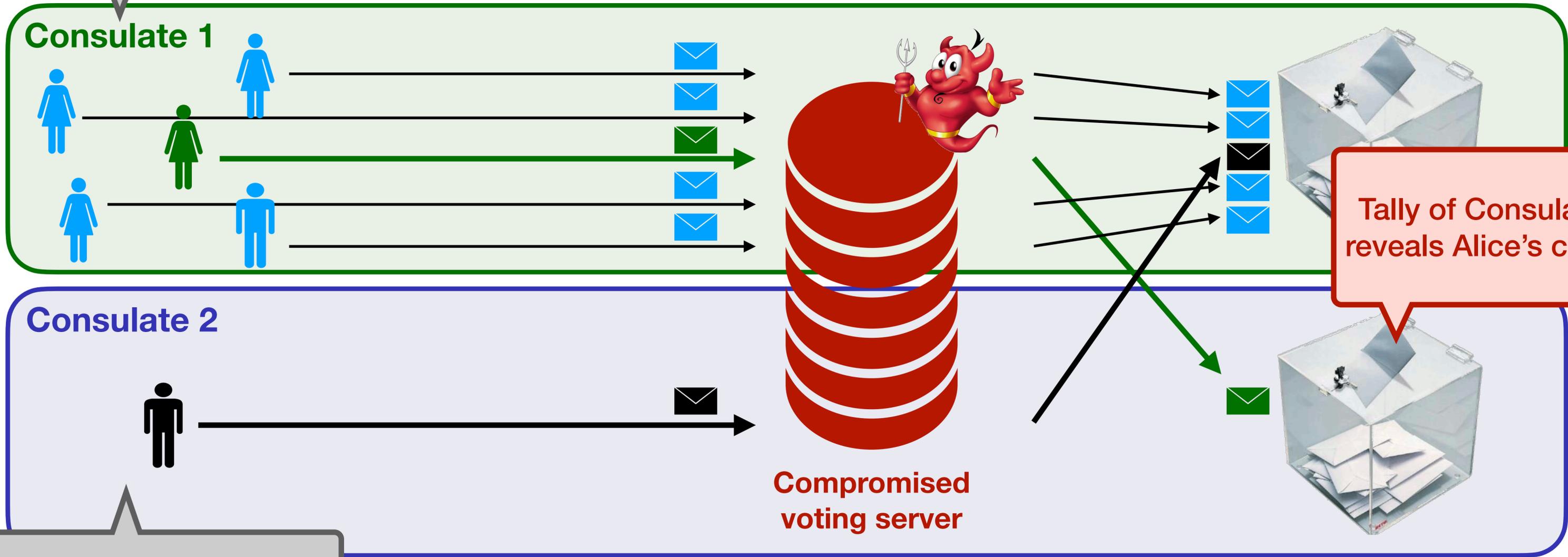
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Tally of Consulate 2 reveals Alice's choice

E.g EKATERINBURG consulate

Impact of the attack

Assumptions to mount a completely undetectable attack:

- ▶ a **channel attacker** is enough
- ▶ at least as many corrupted voter as candidates
- ▶ at least as many expressed votes as candidates in the small consulate
- ▶ at least one vote per candidate in the large consulate

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Impact

- ▶ can **learn the choice** or a **bias** on the choice of target voters: one per “small” consulate
- ▶ could contribute to remote **coercion attacks**: gather and isolate all coerced voters ballots in the same consulate
- ▶ is **completely undetectable**

Summary of attacks

1- Individual verifiability does not hold

Despite the use of a third-party verifier, an attacker who compromises the communication channels (or even worse the voting server) can significantly modify the outcome of the election by dropping and replacing ballots.

2- Vote secrecy does not hold

An attacker who compromises the communication channels (or even more so the voting server) can learn the plaintext vote of arbitrary target voters. The number of voters who can be targeted is immediately related to the number of consulates with a small number of votes cast.

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Very easy fixes

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- ▶ add *ballotBoxId* in the context of the ZKPs

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An attacker who compromises the communication channels (or even worse the voting server) can learn the plaintext vote immediately related to the ballot.

We detail 6 different variants of these attacks and propose fixes in the full report!

[ePrint 2022/1653]

(or even worse the voting server) can learn the plaintext vote immediately related to the ballot. This can be targeted in the votes cast.

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Outline

1. Reverse the threat model and the protocol

2. Vulnerabilities, attacks, and fixes

- ▶ how to defeat verifiability?
- ▶ how to defeat vote privacy?

3. Other concerns and take away

On the importance of... the voting device

**Regarding security, the key element is the voting device...
(not the voting server)**

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😊 = trustworthy
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	Voter	Voting device	Com. channels	Voting server	Dec. auth.	3 rd -party
Verifiability	😊	😊	😈	😈	😈	😊
Confidentiality	😊	😊	😈	😈	😊	😊

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Now, the voting client is a Javascript program provided by the server...

- ➔ need to find a solution to **make it really trustworthy?** (transparency, audibility...)
- ➔ ensure cast-as-intended?

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Can we improve the protocol to prevent such a weakness? Yes, we think so!
(but we have no solution to present for now...)

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- ▶ our vote secrecy attacks
- ▶ Cortier and Smyth attack (2011) to break verifiability and vote secrecy
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Everything is in place to
make ballot weeding...
but they weren't aware of...

Summary



We provide the first **public** and **comprehensive specification** of the protocol



We show that the system **fails to ensure verifiability** and **vote secrecy** under a reasonable threat model:

- ▶ assumes a channel attacker only
- ▶ 6 attacks, some of them being completely undetectable



We propose fixes for each attack and recall well-known vulnerability and fixes of the literature that the protocol should implement.

Some of our fixes is **will be implemented for future elections**, others will depend on the timeline...

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We hope our recommendations will be taken into account for the next public tender...

- ▶ define a clearer threat model
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- ▶ **Vote secrecy:** 4 out of 16 is not acceptable... can we do better?

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Thank you!