To help with my kids' homework.

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Computers best suited to count all the votes

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Thousands of county officials from across the nation packed the halls of the Pennsylvania Convention Center to talk about whatever it is that county officials like to talk about. Some of the more controversial, topical workshops included, "How to use GIS to assess developmental impacts on land use" and "Growing smart: septic vs. sewer."

Rather than fight the media glut and scores of protesters I assumed would be at the septic vs. sewer showdown, I decided to drop in on a discussion about the future of voting technology. What I found there was very interesting, but not surprising.

"It's hard to believe computers can't improve the elections system," Massachusetts Institute of Technology Computer Scientist Ted Selker said to a room full of county officials - the folks at the front lines of the now heavily scrutinized elections process. "Computers are designed for tabulation. There's nothing better than computers for tabulation."

That summarized the point of this entire problem of counting the vote: We need to use the best possible equipment to handle such a fundamental task of democracy.

We need to use computers.

It's easy to trust Selker on this issue. He isn't just any old MIT computer whiz. He's one of a select few enlisted to ruminate about election troubles on an impressive panel of computer scientists, mechanical engineers and political scientists. All of these panelists came from the California Institute of Technology and MIT - two of the nation's most prestigious scientific institutes.

These people are some of the brightest minds on the planet. And they've found some of the most reasonable ways to fix the elections system.

In their report released last week, these scientists said that between 4 million and 6 million votes - amply more than the 3.3 million total ballots cast in New Jersey - were lost in last year's national election because of either faulty equipment, bad ballots, registration issues or other problems.

They proposed suggestions to fix these problems, but Selker said new technology, put through rigorous tests, could fix many of the flaws.

"Today, one in 100 ballots isn't registered correctly," Selker said. "When we make (computer) chips, we can't have one mistake in a million."

Another strong point Selker made is that there needs to

be more regional control and standards in the elections process - something terribly lacking in New Jersey, where 21 different counties have 21 different methods to do the same thing.

And so far, no one has given a legitimate excuse to have elections run on the local level.

"It's a vague motherhood and apple pie issue," Selker said, explaining that professionals on, say, a state level ought to be administering this process and setting standards.

Selker's message - and that of the Caltech/MIT report - ought to be considered by N.J. officials. They would gain a lot from this insight about how pathetically clumsy the voting system is, even in the Garden State. In fact, it's not too late for New Jersey to consider what's at stake and make fundamental changes to its antiquated elections process.

In the report released by the Caltech/MIT panel, the introduction by the institutes' presidents includes the bottom line on what was the lesson last year in Florida:
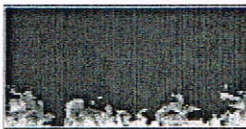
"In the last election, Americans learned that at the heart of their democratic process, their `can-do' spirit has ` make-do' technology as its central element.

For many years, we have `made do' with this deeply flawed system, but we now know how poorly these systems function.

"Until every effort has been made to insure that each vote will be counted, we will have legitimate concerns about embarking on another presidential election."

Until New Jersey adopts a uniform, computerized voting system, it will remain susceptible to the same debacle for which Florida now has become infamous.

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