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Rush to absentee ballots may magnify trouble

By Jane Musgrave
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Voters do the darndest things.

Despite instructions that clearly explain how to connect arrows so their votes will be counted, warnings to vote for only one candidate and admonitions not to erase, at least 150 Palm Beach County voters managed to mess up their absentee ballots in the March presidential primary.

They voted for two candidates. They used Wite-Out. They erased. They drew lines, circles, squares and check marks. They scrawled "Yes" or "No" in margins to indicate their choice.

Others, who otherwise followed instructions, had other distractions. They spilled food or drink on their ballots. Or, in an apparent attempt to secure the envelope, smeared their ballot with glue.

The sugarcoated, ink-covered and glue-spattered ballots, along with others that couldn't be read by the elections office's optical scanners, ended up in the reject pile.

While all were eventually reviewed by the elections canvassing board, which is charged with determining what voters were trying to do, such mistakes not only add immeasurably to the workload of elections officials but open the possibility that votes will be miscounted, not counted or lost.

"Anytime you vote on paper, voters make more mistakes than they do on electronic gear," said Doug Lewis, director of The Election Center, a Houston, Texas-based nonprofit organization that works with elections officials throughout the nation.

However, fueled by politicians who insist absentee ballots are the only way for people to create a paper record of their votes in counties that use touch-screen machines, more voters than ever are expected to cast paper ballots from home in the Aug. 31 primary and Nov. 2 presidential election.

Already, Palm Beach County Elections Supervisor Theresa LePore has received 15,000 requests for absentee ballots for the Aug. 31 election. That is nearly three times the 5,190 requests she received at this time four years ago.

And while she said she is confident her office will be able to handle the expected crush of 125,000 absentee votes in November — a possible 75,000 more than the 47,122 cast in 2000 — some of those who have studied elections systems and voting behavior say an absentee vote is no more secure than one cast on a touch-screen machine and, in fact, may be less so.

"The entire paper-trail issue is a red herring," said Ted Selker, a computer science professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and co-director of the Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project.

He pointed out that Georgia, which had arguably much worse but far less publicized voting problems than Florida in the 2000

election, cut its error rate from 3.2 percent to 0.7 percent — one-fifth as many errors — by switching to touch-screen machines.

Legitimate votes ignored

"I'm very anti-absentee ballot because of fraud and coercion," Selker said, reeling off infamous examples, including the 1997 Miami mayoral race where all 5,200 absentee ballots were thrown out amid evidence that ballots were forged and votes were bought.

Further, he said, he is less than enamored by the optical scanners used to read absentee ballots.

They work in places like Martin and St. Lucie counties because ballots are read at polling places and given back to voters if the scanner detects that they voted twice in one race or forgot to vote in one race entirely.

But, Selker and others said, they are far more risky when they are used to read absentee ballots at one central location — as they are in Palm Beach County — because the voter isn't available to correct mistakes. That leaves it up to canvasing board members to try to determine what famously became known in the 2000 election as "voter intent."

More important, Selker and others point out, scanners don't necessarily count all votes.

Programmed to set aside ballots in which a person voted for more than one candidate for the same office and to alert elections officials of completely blank ballots, they don't kick out ballots in which a voter failed to vote in one or more races — so-called undervotes.

The reason for such a system is clear, said Doug Jones, a computer science professor at the University of Iowa.

"Very few people vote in the mosquito control board race except the guy who's running and the five members of his family and his friends," he said.

If the machines were programmed to set aside ballots with undervotes, huge percentages would have to be hand-counted, throwing the entire elections system into chaos.

Experts have found that optical-scan machines also regularly ignore legitimate votes.

In a review of the 2000 election, *The Miami Herald* discovered that 2,119 votes cast in the presidential election weren't recorded by optical scanners. The ballots had been marked in such a way that the votes — mostly for Democrat Al Gore — weren't detected by the scanners but were easily discernible to anyone looking at them. The problem is that, under the optical-scan system, no one did.

If you vote correctly in just one race on the ballot but mess up your vote (draw your own misplaced arrow or underline a candidate's name) in the other races on that same ballot, the scanner does not detect those messed-up votes. And it does not alert elections workers to the need to look at the rest of the ballot to judge the voter's intent.

MIT's Selker, who has traveled across the country watching elections unfold, said there are also problems when the high-speed machines jam.

He said he watched workers in Broward County pulling out jammed ballots and haphazardly deciding whether they had been counted.

LePore said the rules about jams are clear: The count on the machine is cleared and the entire stack is recounted.

"You have to, because you don't know whether the jammed ballot was counted or not," she said.

While acknowledging that the system will be put to the test if her projections of record-shattering absentee voting are correct, she is confident the office can handle the deluge. By law, her office can begin opening and counting absentee ballots four days before the election; it just can't push the button to reveal the vote totals.

LePore readily acknowledged the potential problem caused by the machines not counting votes that aren't marked correctly. But, she said, there's only so far she — or any elections official — can go.

"While I get trouble for saying it's human error, that's what it is," said LePore, who was blasted after the 2000 election for blaming voters for not understanding her infamous butterfly ballot. "With absentee ballots, people are sitting at their kitchen table or in their living room, and they have all the time to get it right. It's not like they've been waiting in a long line and they're in a rush."

Still, as the absentee ballots cast in the recent presidential primary illustrate, people make mistakes that workers try to correct.

When the scanners reject a ballot because it was filled out improperly or stained with food, workers duplicate it and present both it and the duplicate to the canvassing board to review. In March, about 300 of the 6,575 ballots cast were duplicated — either because voters failed to follow instructions or the ballots were torn when workers opened the envelope.

That process alone is fraught with the possibility for fraud or simple human error, Selker said.

And that's the problem, most agree. When humans are involved, there is always the possibility for errors.

That's why some who have studied elections insist that people shouldn't worry about the frailties of the various election systems.

"People shouldn't freak out about this," said Thad Hall, a political science professor at the University of Utah who collaborated on the Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project. "People should vote in the way that makes them feel most comfortable.

"If they think their vote can be stolen by an electronic voting machine, they should vote absentee. If they don't trust the absentee system, they should vote on the electronic machines," he said.

Trail possibility: Audiotape

Selker said more emphasis should be put on other aspects of the voting process than simply on the machines.

He said the Caltech/MIT study found three things were responsible for the worst problems in the 2000 election: registration databases (voters improperly purged), ballot design and polling-place operations. Not even the infamous punch-card machines made the list of top problems that contributed to the loss of 6 million votes, he said.

Further, he said he wishes people like U.S. Rep. Robert Wexler, D-Boca Raton, would get off the paper-trail kick. Adding a printer to a touch-screen machine is fraught with problems, and printers that have been used have not performed well.

One way to create an independent record that could be used for a recount on electronic machines is to use the same technology that allows the blind to use touch-screen machines.

Each voter would get an earpiece and hear votes as they cast them. The audiotape that is produced of all votes could then be read by a computer to confirm the election results.

While excited about the prospect, Selker said his immediate concern for the upcoming elections is that poll workers are well-trained, that polling places are easily accessible and that people aren't erroneously purged from voting lists.

Elections supervisors are working to address those issues, The Election Center's Lewis said. But, he said, they are also hoping for some divine intervention.

"Every election official in America spends time praying," he said.

The prayer, he said, is simple: "Let the winners win big."

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