RECORD SUGGESTS ELECTRONIC VOTING BEST BET FOR NOW; [Broward Metro Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

About half the voters in Florida, living in 15 counties including Broward and Palm Beach, will vote on touch-screen machines in the presidential election. The rest will use optical-scan machines. Together, they replaced the much-maligned punch-card systems involved in the 2000 recount fight.

Full Text (1385   words)

There have been screw-ups and turf fights, millions of dollars spent and audits in abundance, but as Florida residents go to the polls this election season, the experts say electronic machines will provide the most accurate vote count ever.

The touch-screen machines aren't perfect, but they may be as close to perfection as voters can get in this election.

"There is no perfect voting system. Voters and poll workers are people and people make mistakes. This [touch-screen] system is better than anything we've had before," said Theresa LePore, the Palm Beach County elections supervisor.

But some scientists fear the machines could be subverted by clever hackers.

Touch-screen machines have the potential of falling victim to a vast conspiracy, said Eugene Spafford, a computer scientist at Purdue University who researches data security.

"There have always been ways to manipulate individual ballots locally. But with widespread electronic voting systems, it opens the possibility for a very quiet and subtle alteration of the vote nationally by someone who wished to do that. And it wouldn't be recognized by the population," Spafford told WISH-Ch. 8 in Indianapolis.

Touch-screen voting machines spread across the state and the nation as elections officials sought a way to avoid another fiasco after the disputed 2000 recount in Florida and President Bush's 537-vote win.

One-third of America's voters will use such machines in early voting and on Nov. 2, according to estimates by Ted Selker, a voting expert with the Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, established by the two schools after the 2000 presidential debacle to ensure that future election systems would be reliable.

About half the voters in Florida, living in 15 counties including Broward and Palm Beach, will vote on touch-screen machines in the presidential election. The rest will use optical-scan machines. Together, they replaced the much-maligned punch-card systems involved in the 2000 recount fight.

So far, the track record for the machines has been impressive.

About 2.7 percent of the punch-card ballots in five large counties in the Tampa Bay area and Gold Coast were flawed in 1990, 1994 and 1998 elections. That rate decreased to 2.2 percent with touch-screen machines in the 2002 primary, the first real test of electronic voting in Florida, according to calculations by researchers from the voting project.

"Better technology is improving the functioning of democracy," said Charles Stewart, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor with the voting project. "Most of the problems reported by journalists covering the 2002 primary elections in Florida did not concern equipment malfunctions, but problems encountered preparing for Election Day, such as training poll workers."

The touch-screen machines have been expensive.

Broward has spent $20 million for its machines, and Palm Beach County paid $14 million. An optical-scan system, in which a voter makes pencil marks on a paper ballot that is fed into a computer for counting, would have cost about $8 million for both counties.

The touch screens were promoted heavily by lobbyists, who made millions in fees from the decision to use the higher-priced machines.

One of the selling points to county commissioners was the elimination of paper ballots, the biggest problem in 2000. Flawed paper ballots in 2000 contained overvotes or undervotes. An overvote occurs when the voter chooses more than one candidate in a race; an undervote happens when the voter chooses no candidate. In the recount, elections officials had to pore over ballots by hand, trying to ascertain voter intent.

The new machines solved much of this problem. They eliminate the possibility of overvotes and automatically warn a voter attempting to undervote.

MIT's Selker cites statistics from Georgia, where the undervote and overvote rate was reduced from 3.2 percent in 2000, among the worst in the nation, to .9 percent in 2002 after the introduction of touch-screen machines.

The machines are also more accessible for the disabled.

Murray Hirsh, who lives in a Pembroke Pines condominium, knows that the touch-screen machines break down and have occasional software glitches. But he said he still thinks the machines, which he lobbied the Broward County Commission to buy back in 2002, are worth the trouble.

"They are better for the disabled. The blind can't possibly fill out a paper ballot," Hirsh said. "If you have Parkinson's, you could destroy a ballot by mistake. These machines are much better."

Better, but not perfect.

Some voters worry because touch-screen machines, unlike optical scanners, lack a paper trail, which they think is needed to prove the electronic tabulations are accurate in the event of a recount.

Others fear the computers could fall victim to hackers.

Critics are "doing a disservice to the process," said Secretary of State Glenda Hood, the state's chief elections officer. "I want voters to feel confident. These machines have a tremendous track record. There have been no problems."

Among the pre-election litigation over provisional ballots, registration and other issues, only one high-profile case concerns the voting machines: a federal lawsuit filed by U. S. Rep. Robert Wexler, D-Boca Raton.

"Computers can make mistakes. We need some sort of paper trail. We have to have something independent of the electronic count to audit," Wexler said.

Broward and Palm Beach County officials are open to buying printers for the machines, but they weren't developed, tested and approved for use by the state in time for the upcoming election.

The use of optical-scan machines, which have paper ballots to recount the vote, and touch-screen machines, which have no paper trail, could set up a legal logjam similar to 2000.

The U.S. Supreme Court, in handing the presidency to Bush, halted the recount in Florida. The justices cited Florida's different standards for conducting the recount and said it created an equal-protection problem -- the constitutional requirement that every vote be treated the same.

There is another complication that Florida officials discovered in 2002 after buying the touch screens.

The 2002 September primary in Miami-Dade and Broward Counties was a disaster because election officials didn't realize the new machines were more difficult for poll workers to operate. Thousands or people ended up not voting because polls didn't open on time or because poll workers couldn't properly operate the machines, made by Elections Systems & Software.

Palm Beach County, which uses touch screens manufactured by Sequoia Voting Systems, didn't have the problems.

Gearing up for 2004, Miami-Dade and Broward Counties were forced to spend millions of dollars. They put hundreds of extra workers at the polls, added training and made sure voting machine technicians were available to help on Election Day.

The changes so far have apparently worked.

Elections after the September 2002 primary have been well run.

Still, with much higher turnout expected, the presidential election is the real test, said election analysts. The forecast in this year's presidential election is for 70 percent of 9.75 million voters to cast ballots, compared with 26 percent in the primary and 55 percent in the November 2002 gubernatorial election.

Even a perfectly run election might not satisfy some critics, particularly conspiracy theorists who contend the touch-screen machines can be subverted by corrupt computer experts.

"Is it possible? Anything is possible. Much higher on the risk list are simple malfunctions, everything from tripping over the cord and disconnecting the machine to software glitches," said R. Michael Alvarez, political scientist at California Institute of Technology and co-director of the voting technology project.

Despite its shortcomings, MIT's Selker predicted, electronic voting will expand. He looks forward to more use of touch-screen machines because the real problems that arise in elections are usually human mistakes.

"You've got mistakes throughout any [voting] system that someone touches and someone always touches paper," Selker said.

He advocates repeated testing of machines before and during an election. To alleviate fears that the software has been altered, he said, the machines should be tested with their clocks set ahead to duplicate conditions on Election Day.

Selker recommends having at least two people do everything from software programming to starting the machine at polling places so that they can check each other's work.

"Financial institutions transfer billions [of dollars] daily and it holds up. It is secure," Selker said. "We can do that with voting machines."

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[Illustration]
PHOTO 5; Caption: VOTING EVOLUTION: Hand-counted paper ballots; Lever machines; Punch card; Optical scanners; Electronic touch-screen machines.

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