



Touch-screen voting should be a help

BY TED SELKER

Ted Selker is co-director of the Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project and an associate professor of media arts and sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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Roughly a third of U.S. voters in the November election are expected to use electronic voting machines. In California, any county using these machines also must provide the option of a paper ballot. This may comfort those who are "freaking out" (to quote the head of a voting advocacy group) that their vote somehow won't count if made on a computer screen. But they are making a false assumption that paper is safer than electronic records.

In fact, electronic voting machines offer the safest voting method currently available - provided that their use is carefully supervised and monitored.

The 29 percent of Americans who will vote electronically in California, 28 other states and the District of Columbia don't have to worry about their votes being "helpfully" altered by a poll worker, as I witnessed happening with optical scan ballots at a precinct in Massachusetts last November. Nor can electronic votes be temporarily misplaced, as the ballot box was where I was poll watching last October in California.

The ideal voting machine would demonstrate to the voter that his ballot has been included in the final count before he leaves the booth. But even without that assurance, it's important to remember that since Thomas Edison first experimented with an electronic voting device in 1869, each introduction of technology to voting has been challenged by those fearful of its being used to change votes. The best protection has always been human oversight.

Whatever the system - paper, electronic or the antiquated lever machines still in use in New York and parts of other states - a two-person rule is the key to avoiding the alteration or loss of a vote. At least two people must be involved in every step in which the system could be compromised - testing the ballot, distributing the ballots, storing equipment before and after elections, setting up the equipment, handling paper ballots or smart cards, shutting off equipment, and, of course, assembling the tallies.

I have seen poor supervision in many of the hundreds of precincts that I have monitored in the last three years. One election official was writing down the ballot total by herself at the end of an election day in Nevada in September. In Chicago, a lone poll worker accidentally allowed people to insert the incorrect punch cards into voting machines; in Nevada this September, lone election officials accidentally programmed provisional ballots for voters - in both cases depriving voters of voting on local issues. In each of these instances, getting another poll worker to sign that the correct ballot was used, or that the count was done correctly, would lead to a more secure and auditable result.

If a voting machine freezes or otherwise malfunctions on Election Day, poll workers must call troubleshooters immediately. This solved several problems in Reno, where there was a timely and helpful response. Some places

have certified "hot machines" in vehicles ready to be deployed wherever problems surface; this should be practiced everywhere.

Absentee voting is more prone to discrepancies than other kinds of voting, but it is hard to get data on it. I watched part of a recount of absentee ballots in Broward County, Fla., in 2002. The ballots were in a warehouse with an open loading dock door, workers were coming and going with no check-in, boxes of ballots were not clearly marked, and the central reader jammed.

The voter cannot control these unfortunate events, which demand better on-site supervision. But he can guard against the three most prevalent ways that non-absentee ballot votes were lost in 2000: registration problems, confusion over ballot design and lost ballots. A voter needs to check his registration and make sure he goes to the right polling place, make sure he has voted for the candidate of his choice, and give himself enough time to vote carefully and alert poll workers if problems occur.

As a result of the confusion in 2000, the Help America Vote Act was put in place to help fund improved voting equipment and training for poll workers and election officials. In November, about 12 percent of the voting machines will be new. With poll workers more aware of potential problems, and numerous organizations formed to monitor the voting, this likely will be the most observed election in U.S. history. If in addition each voter does whatever he can to make sure his vote counts, we can have the most modernized, secure and accurate vote ever recorded.

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