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Panel Shifts Direction On E-voting Audit Trail

Grant Gross

December 11, 2006 (Computerworld) A government board charged with improving the security of electronic voting last week took a first step toward requiring that new e-voting machines include independent audit mechanisms.

The move came just a day after the same board had voted to reject a similar but stronger measure.

The latest proposal, unanimously approved by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission's Technical Guidelines Development Committee (TGDC), would require that new direct recording electronic (DRE) voting machines provide independently verifiable voting records, such as voter-verified paper-trail printouts.

The plan, offered by TGDC member Ronald Rivest, a computer science professor at MIT, calls on the group's Security and Transparency Subcommittee to write requirements for the next generation of e-voting machines.

According to the approved proposal, the rules must ensure that new machines use an audit mechanism that is independent of the software running the machines. "I think [the proposal] is very important for the safety of voting machines in this country," Rivest said.

A final proposal will be submitted to the Elections Assistance Commission next July. The commission will solicit public comment before taking a vote on the plan.

The committee had rejected a proposal to require that audit capabilities also be added to machines already installed in voting districts nationwide.

"I'm not sure that we've really proven that the processes that state election officials have used for a few decades now of testing and verifying that the systems work are failing," said Paul Miller, voting systems manager in the state of Washington's secretary of state's office.

The Association for Computing Machinery's Public Policy Committee, which has long called for e-voting machines to produce physical records, said in a statement last week that it supports the vote.

"We have long held the position that there needs to be a means of verification that voters recognize as the vote they cast," the statement said. "The committee ... rightly acknowledges that further research in this field is needed."

Meanwhile, H. Stephen Berger, chairman of the voting systems standards committee at the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, contended that vendors should be able to develop software for e-voting machines that can accurately count votes without requiring a paper trail.

However, Daniel Schutzer, executive director of the Financial Services Technology Consortium, noted that Internet browsers have less code than the typical DRE machine and still have "tons of problems" with

security. "If money were no object, if time were no object," e-voting machine vendors could create software that was free of bugs and could be tested and verified, Schutzer added. "Considering what we're working with ... that's still a pipe dream," he said.

Rivest noted that the plan approved by the committee also addresses concerns about making installed machines accessible to disabled people.

Makers of e-voting machines will support the plan if it's finally approved by the Election Assistance Commission, said Michael Kerr, director of the Information Technology Association of America's Election Technology Council, a trade group representing e-voting vendors.

E-voting machine vendors "will build voting machines that comply" with the wishes of their customers, Kerr said.

Gross is a reporter for the IDG News Service.