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## Voting's new look

### High-tech machines will greet voters Tuesday; some remain skeptical

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By Robert Vitale THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Ruth Fisher cast her first ballot in 1942 on a sheet of paper. In the years since, she's pulled levers, pushed buttons and poked punch cards to cast her votes in Franklin County.

On Tuesday, she'll step into a new age when she walks up to the voting machine at her West Side polling place.

Along with 118,000 others expected to cast primary-election ballots, she'll pick her candidates with the help of touch sensors, memory chips and 1.4 million lines of computer code.

For the Franklin County Board of Elections, still facing criticism for its handling of the 2004 presidential vote, it will be the first big test of more than 4,200 new voting machines, part of a \$3.86 billion nationwide overhaul of election equipment ordered by Congress in 2002.

Across Ohio, where \$116 million of that money has been spent, half the state's counties will roll out new systems Tuesday after the other half used their new machines last fall. Central Ohio voters in Delaware, Pickaway, Union, Ross and Knox counties will cast ballots on the same touch-screen models that are making their debut in Franklin County. They're made by Election Systems & Software of Omaha, Neb.

Voters in Licking and Fairfield counties will use touchscreen systems made by Diebold Elections Systems of North Canton, Ohio. Madison County is moving from punch cards to optical-scan ballots.

Voting, like most modern tasks, won't be nearly as complicated as the technology that supports it. You can nuke your leftovers, after all, without studying the schematics of a microwave oven.

But elections aren't the kind of affairs Fisher remembers from years past.

The 85-year-old doesn't use the ATM at her bank — "It took our card three times," says husband, Bill — but she said she's never been skeptical of technology at the ballot box.

"I guess we just trusted that the system worked," she said.

Many of her fellow Americans aren't so sure anymore.

Since Florida's 2000 presidential recount, the event that prompted the national upgrade known as the Help America Vote Act, Americans have paid far more attention to oncemundane election matters.

In 2004, watchdogs scrutinized voter registration, machine distribution, vote-counting and security measures in Franklin County, and some critics saw political shenanigans in all.

So much technology crammed into a 40-pound machine isn't a source of wonder for skeptics. It's cause for alarm.

"So many voting-rights advocates are suspect of any machines," said Upper Arlington lawyer Susan Truitt, cofounder of a statewide group called the Citizens' Alliance for Secure Elections, which fought for Ohio's requirement that the machines include a printout that tracks voters' actions.

"How do we know what they're programming into them? "

Matt Zimmerman, a lawyer for the San Francisco-based Electronic Frontier Foundation, said a series of malfunctions and breakdowns reported across the country shows voting still carries the uncertainties exposed in Florida nearly six years ago.

"It's not that we think technology isn't a good thing," he said. "There's a lot of making this more complicated than it needs to be. Every time you add a million lines of code you increase the chances for error."

Although they defend the performance of the new machines and credit them for reducing human error at the ballot box, even electronic voting's advocates acknowledge there's a lot going on behind the screens.

TV commercials tout the easy-to-use nature of the iVotronic models being used across central Ohio. For voters, manufacturer ES &S says, it's easy as one-two-three: Make your picks, give them a quick review, cast your ballot.

But reassuring the public that the machines will count votes honestly and accurately requires more of an explanation.

"It's impossible for anyone to upload, download, hack, connect. . . I'm trying to think of other words," said Franklin County Board of Elections Director Matthew Damschroder.

He said features of the new machines ensure that:

- Machines stand alone and have no wireless or dial-up modems that would allow someone to gain access. They cannot be hooked up to the Internet, a keyboard or a computer network.
- Three separate memory chips store votes on each machine, and the paper tape provides a fourth record that voters can see.
- Three numbered and recorded seals on each machine — across their doors, paper holders and slots for a memory card — guard against unauthorized access.

"They're safe, secure and easy to use," Damschroder said. "We don't want voters to have a moment of apprehension when they go to the polls."

Franklin County elections officials say they're taking extra steps, too, to reassure voters. Printouts will be posted in every polling place Tuesday morning to prove that machines start the day with no votes recorded.

At the end of the day, computerized tallies will be checked against paper tapes from random machines to test their accuracy.

Pre-election testing has uncovered one flaw — the printer garbled names of write-in candidates — but otherwise has shown them remarkably reliable, elections officials say.

"The two biggest problems out there are the folks who are not informed and the folks who are out there misinforming people," said Dennis L. White, Franklin County's deputy elections director.

Ted Selker, an associate professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and co-director of the Cal Tech-MIT Voting Technology Project, said electronic machines have brought about demonstrated improvements.

The Help America Vote Act demanded safeguards against errors that used to negate voters' ballots. On Franklin County's new machines, for instance, it's impossible to vote for too many candidates in a race, and skipping races is a choice that voters must confirm.

In Georgia, which switched from punch cards to touchscreens in 2002, undervotes fell from 3.2 percent in the 2000 presidential election to 0.4 percent in 2004, Selker said.

Although he advocates stringent safeguards against human mischief on election day, he said the machines themselves have behaved well.

"In some places there have been gigantic reductions in errors," Selker said.

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