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## Here's how to jam up Election Day

By [Joel Engelhardt](#)

Palm Beach Post Editorial Writer

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If one election expert has his way, touch-screen voters will don headsets to give themselves the best chance of knowing that machines accurately record their vote.

Voters are a lot more likely to listen to a little voice reading back their choices than they are to scrutinize a printout, said Massachusetts Institute of Technology Associate Professor Ted Selker, co-director of the CalTech/MIT Voting Project. While he told a Senate committee about his study last year, the issue is hot now because in Sarasota County a congressional election is under protest after 18,000 voters made no choice in a race decided by 369 votes.

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U.S. Rep. Rush Holt, D-N.J., plans to reintroduce a bill to require a paper trail on all touch screens. In Sarasota County, 55 percent of voters - casting ballots mostly on touch-screen machines - defied the elections supervisor and backed a measure to throw out the county's \$4.7 million touch-screen system in favor of paper fill-in-the-oval ballots.

The worried electorate did not consider the obvious: If touch-screens are so prone to manipulation, why wouldn't the supervisor have manipulated *that* result?

Most of the attention, however, has focused on why nearly 15 percent of voters didn't pick either Republican Vern Buchanan or



Democrat Christine Jennings to succeed U.S. Rep. Katherine Harris. If it's because, as one theory goes, the ads were too negative, that would argue for far more races with unexplained gaps. Besides, the negative ads crossed county lines, but the undervotes did not.

Despite near-universal acclaim for a voter-verified paper trail, though, printouts would not help if voters didn't look at them. Professor Selker contends that they won't.

The touch-screen paper trail is nothing like the receipts spit out by ATM machines or gas stations. The printer would be under glass. Voters wouldn't touch the paper. They just could look at it after they made their selections. If the paper reflected their choices, they'd touch the screen to register their vote and the paper would roll forward to reveal a blank page for the next voter. If not, voters could make corrections before casting their ballot. Voters who didn't look still would register a vote; they just wouldn't know whether their choices matched the ones printed on the paper roll.

Suspecting that paper trails are not the savior, Professor Selker experimented. He hired test subjects who would vote on touch-screen machines, some with paper verification and others with audio verification. He made sure that the verification measures would make mistakes. Then he asked the subjects whether they had noticed the errors.

While voting, none of the paper-trail voters caught any errors. Audio voters caught some errors. In interviews after voting, 85 percent of the audio voters agreed that there had been errors, but only 8 percent of the paper-trail voters said they had seen errors. One third were convinced that there had been no errors.

While Professor Selker champions audio verification, he admits that it has drawbacks. But they're not the kind I would imagine. His paper, published in May 2005, pointed out that audio voting takes longer, and test subjects said they were more comfortable with printer verification. "We believe that this preference is a result of voters' familiarity with paper records in other situations," Professor Selker wrote, "and inexperience with audio records."

I don't think so. I'm not sure that Professor Selker has any idea of the types of headaches that headsets would bring to election officials in a place like Palm Beach County.

Imagine the relative calm of the voting booth broken by ear-splitting cries from disturbed voters. "What did he say? I can't hear this darn thing!" (Slamming of headset against touch-screen machine.) "How do you turn up the volume?"

Furthermore, who's going to account for headset hygiene? Would the pads be replaced for every voter? Could iPod devotees bring their own headsets, replacing Plug and Play with Plug and Vote? Most important, how would election workers handle poofy hair?

No, Professor Selker, you may have a great way to accurately record votes, but I don't think the electorate is ready for it just yet. Just give us our printers, and we'll remain blissfully unaware.

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