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3 Georgia precincts to use paper trail
Officials hope experiment reassures voters

By CARLOS CAMPOS

Published on: 11/05/06

Voters in three Georgia precincts on Tuesday will see something critics of electronic voting have demanded for years: a paper trail.

For the first time in the four years since the state began electronic voting, about 5,000 Georgia voters will be able to review a printed record of their ballots after making their choices by touching the computer screens. The paper records will be tested in three precincts, one each in Bibb, Camden and Cobb counties.



Calvin Cruce/AJC
(ENLARGE)

Cobb County voting official **Beth Kish** loads the printer attachment to a voting machine in a demonstration of the devices Thursday. Printouts will be used Tuesday in a west Cobb precinct.

Officials hope the experiment will begin to dispel lingering doubts about electronic voting, doubts that persist even though Georgia elections officials express nearly absolute confidence in the technology.

More than 39 percent of the nation's voters on Tuesday will cast ballots on electronic voting machines, according to a study earlier this year by Election Data Services, Inc. Twenty-two states already require voter-verified paper audit trails.

Elections officials generally see paper trails as an unnecessary logistical nightmare. But they believe they've helped turn down some of the noise over potential fraud raised by computer scientists, political organizations and the media.

Rolling Stone magazine ran an article on the fears of potential electronic voting fraud headlined "Will The Next Election Be Hacked?" HBO debuted a documentary last Thursday called "Hacking Democracy." And most major television networks have featured similar programs, including withering criticism of electronic voting from CNN's Lou Dobbs.

For the Georgia experiment, new voting machines will be installed in each of the three precincts and will produce an accompanying piece of paper showing a voter's ballot choices. Voters will be able to compare their choices made on the machine's touch screen with the piece of paper, officially known as a voter-verified paper audit trail.

However, voters won't be allowed to take paper records with them — or even touch them. Even so, officials hope skeptical voters will gain peace of mind from the experiment.

Roxanne Jekot, for one, intends to remain skeptical. An outspoken opponent of paperless electronic voting, Jekot believes the pilot project is "a complete waste of money and effort."

Jekot, a computer programmer in Forsyth County, noted the events in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, earlier this year as evidence that paper trails are no cure-all. In the May primary elections there, paper ballots often failed to match electronic tallies, an Election Science Institute report concluded.

Jekot favors a paper-based voting system that allows voters to physically mark a ballot.

"Toss the DREs [Direct Recording Electronic voting machines used in Georgia] in a landfill and replace them with optical scan paper ballots counted at the precinct statewide," Jekot said.

While Jekot probably doesn't represent the views of most voters — a 2005 University of Georgia survey found that most voters believe their votes are accurately counted by electronic voting machines — she does reflect lingering doubts about the technology.

Such doubts frustrate state officials who have been reassuring voters about the machines for years. Nevertheless, several computer security experts at respected universities — most recently Princeton — have concluded that anyone with a little computer knowledge can manipulate votes.

Elected officials on polar ends of the political spectrum, including U.S. Reps. Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga.) of DeKalb County and Tom Price (R-Ga.) of north Fulton County, have questioned the reliability of the machines.

The possibility of fraud is real, computer experts say — particularly from insiders. Mustaque Ahamad, director of the Georgia Tech Information Security Center, said most computer scientists believe voting machines are susceptible to tampering.

The question of whether votes can be stolen comes down to who has access to the machines. Ahamad said he believes most elections officials and poll workers are honest people who don't fool with election results. But skeptics worry access to voting equipment isn't limited to trustworthy people.

Voters press issue

The voting paper trail experiment in Georgia is part of Senate Bill 500, passed by the Georgia Legislature earlier this year. The bill's sponsor, Sen. Bill Stephens (R-Canton), said he pushed the measure during the legislative session after hearing concerns from constituents and "ordinary citizens" about the potential for tampering with electronic voting machines. The 2005 UGA survey found that voters like the idea of having a paper record of their votes.

Stephens doesn't think the machines are as vulnerable as some suggest, but believes electronic voting machines should be equipped with a paper audit trail.

"I thought this was a way to do a pilot program to test whether or not this restored any confidence to the process," said Stephens. "I'm not overly concerned whether or not someone can hack it. I'm concerned about people's confidence in the machines."

After the election, officials will have 30 days to conduct a hand count of the paper ballots to check if they match the machine totals. Public hearings will be held to discuss the results.

Elections officials, including Georgia Secretary of State Cathy Cox, insist that academic studies of voting machine security don't take into account the rigorous testing of election machines that take place before and after elections to ensure accurate results.

Cox has also said that such studies are unrealistic because they take place outside of an election environment where poll workers, monitors and public elections officials are keeping a watchful eye on equipment.

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Ryan Lee, of Cairo, Ga., said he has no concerns about voting machine security, but thinks the paper backup might be a good idea. "The paper trail would be a great safety net," Lee said. "It would take away any anxiety from the process."

Charles Burnham of Fitzgerald said he thinks adding a paper audit trail is unnecessary.

"They are making it more difficult than it needs to be," he said.

Touch-screen pioneer

Following the 2000 presidential election debacle in Florida that brought terms like "hanging chads" into the American lexicon, many states rushed to change their voting technology. Two years later, Georgia was the first in the nation to go to a uniform electronic voting system, replacing its patchwork of punch-card, lever, and optical scan machine systems.

Doug Chapin, director of the Election Reform Information Project in Washington, said recently that Georgia's transition to electronic voting has been relatively trouble-free.

Because so much is at stake on a national level, especially a possible takeover of the U.S. House by Democrats, both parties have assembled legal teams to watch for voting problems, including problems with electronic voting machines.

Complaints from lawyers in Florida, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia raise allegations that a summary page on the electronic machines cuts off candidate's last name or that the machine displays a wrong name when a candidate is selected.

For Tuesday's experiment in Georgia, Diebold Election Systems, maker of state's electronic voting machines, lent Georgia 22 next-generation machines, said Secretary of State spokesman Chris Riggall. Secretary of State officials encouraged elections supervisors to pick a precinct for the project that has a mix of black and white voters, in part because the federal government is sensitive to the impact of voting changes on minorities.

The Macland 01 precinct at the McEachern United Methodist Church in Powder Springs was chosen to participate in west Cobb County, which has a good cross-section of the county's registered voters, said Director of Elections and Registration Sharon Dunn. With 2,528 registered voters, it is the largest of the three test precincts but small enough to check the ballots by a hand-count, Dunn said.

Poll workers received two hours of training on the new machines. On Election Day, a Diebold technician and a secretary of state official will be on hand at all three precincts.

Dunn and her assistants aren't sure how long it will take to count the paper ballots from the precinct by hand, or how voters will react to the paper ballot.

"We don't know," said Beth Kish, manager of Cobb elections and registration. "That's part of the reason we're doing the project."

Camden Probate Judge Martin Gillette, who supervises elections in the southeast coastal county, said he's prepared for the pilot project. But Gillette thinks paper audit trails are unnecessary and he hopes the Legislature doesn't mandate them.

"If they did that, then we would regress in our voting policies," Gillette said. "The convenience of the machine was the whole reason it was created that way."

The Legislature, if it chooses to make a paper trail mandatory, will have to eventually decide whether to fund the purchase of new machines capable of producing a paper trail, or retrofitting the current machines with the technology. Cost estimates range from \$19.5 million to \$75 million.

The next secretary of state, who will be chosen by voters on Tuesday, will also play a role in the selection of a voting platform. Both candidates, Democrat Gail Buckner and Republican Karen Handel, say they favor a paper trail, though neither has committed to a particular implementation plan.

Staff writer David Bennett contributed to this article.

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