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VOTING | MAKING TECHNOLOGY COUNT

An election paper trail?

Concern about the security of touch-screens prompts Broward commissioners to consider printouts that

confirm electronic balloting.

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County mulls making

balloting paper trail

Like their colleagues in Miami-Dade County, Broward County commissioners have entered the national debate over the security of electronic voting.

Broward leaders will vote today on exploring ways to print a paper record of each electronic vote by adding printers to the 5,200 touch-screen machines purchased two years ago for $17.2 million. They're also considering asking state lawmakers to change the law to allow printouts to be part of Florida's election recount process, which they hope would increase voter confidence in the results.

''I think that we need some sort of receipt,'' said Broward County Commissioner Ilene Lieberman, a sponsor of the idea. ``Voting is a sacred right. People who go to vote want to know that their vote counts.''

Broward and Miami-Dade were the first of the nation's large counties to buy touch-screen voting equipment two years ago, but leaders in both counties are now asking whether they should have a paper trail confirming the electronic vote. Miami-Dade leaders voted last week to investigate the cost.

Counties across the United States face a federal requirement to upgrade outmoded election equipment, and the resulting scramble for new technology has heated up the national debate over the security of recording votes on a hard drive instead of on paper.

State's big investment

Florida counties have already made a sizable investment in new technology, the result of the Legislature's 2001 decision to outlaw the punch-card systems that were so problematic in the 2000 presidential election. All Florida counties have had either touch-screen or optical-scan systems in place for the past year.

''When you think about the millions and millions of dollars invested, the stakes are incredibly high,'' said Doug Chapin, director of the national nonpartisan election website www.electionline.org.

Monday's ruling by a federal appeals court in California only furthers the confusion. The Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals determined that California's recall vote cannot proceed as scheduled because some areas still use punch-card machines.

Votes cast in some of the state's biggest counties, including Los Angeles with four million voters, could be

lost by the outmoded technology, the court decided.

As more and more states make the mandatory transition to higher-tech voting, security concerns raised by some fringe scientists and political activists have entered mainstream discussions at respected universities, including Stanford and Johns Hopkins.

Maryland officials were so concerned about some issues raised by a Johns Hopkins report that they commissioned an independent study before committing to a purchase. The study is expected to be released this week.

But many election officials oppose the introduction of paper to an electronic system, fearing a reprise of past problems caused by paper ballots.

They point out that putting a printer in every precinct could be a technical nightmare, considering how difficult it has been to train the mostly older corps of poll workers on the new technology. They also worry that the debate has further eroded the shaky confidence of many modern voters in the election process.

''I'm in the camp that a paper receipt proves nothing,'' said Pasco County Supervisor of Elections Kurt Browning, a statewide election leader who uses the same equipment as Broward and Miami-Dade. ``I think it's just unwarranted at this point. These systems have been through independent testing and they've been through rigorous state testing.''

Hooking up to printers

Broward County's machines have ports -- so far, unused -- to hook up a printer. But Florida law does not address printers or printouts from touch-screen machines, said Christina Johnson, the deputy chief of staff for Secretary of State Glenda Hood.

As a result, there is no certified printing equipment in the state, and companies such as ES&S, which sold Broward and Miami-Dade their machines, have only begun developing such printers.

Broward County commissioners who support the concept say the like the idea, but add that until the state actually certifies a system, they're not willing to spend any money. First, state lawmakers would have to write the printers into law, said Commissioner Suzanne Gunzburger.

''I really believe in the [idea,] but until they're certified, I'm not willing to invest,'' Gunzburger said. ``We have to know what sort of costs we're incurring.''