



Fla. Voting Machines Have Recount Flaw

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - Touchscreen voting machines in 11 counties have a software flaw that could make manual recounts impossible in November's presidential election, state officials said.

A spokeswoman for the secretary of state called the problems "minor technical hiccups" that can be resolved, but critics allege voting officials wrongly certified a voting system they knew had a bug.

The electronic voting machines are a response to Florida's 2000 presidential election fiasco, where thousands of punchcard ballots were improperly marked. But the new machines have brought concerns that errors could go unchecked without paper records of the electronic voting.

The machines, made by Election Systems & Software of Omaha, Neb., fail to provide a consistent electronic "event log" of voting activity when asked to reproduce what happened during the election, state officials said.

Officials with the company and the state Division of Elections said they believe they can fix the problem by linking the voting equipment with laptop computers. Florida's two largest counties — Miami-Dade and Broward — are among those affected by the flaws.

Rep. Robert Wexler, D-Fla., has asked state Attorney General Charlie Crist to investigate whether the head of the state elections division lied under oath when he denied knowing of the computer problem before reading about it in the media. A spokeswoman for Crist said he was reviewing the request.

The elections chief, Ed Kast, abruptly resigned Monday, saying he wanted a change of pace.

During a May 17 deposition for a lawsuit Wexler filed seeking to require a paper trail for state voting machines, Kast said he had recently heard of the problem only days earlier. But in a letter to Crist, Wexler said the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition, a citizens' group, notified Kast and Secretary of State Glenda Hood of the glitch in March.

Hood blamed Miami-Dade Supervisor of Elections Constance Kaplan for the delay, telling Kaplan in a May 13 letter she should have notified state officials when she learned of the problem in June 2003.

Nonetheless, state and county election officials insist the problem can be resolved in the five months before the November election.

"These are minor technical hiccups that happen," said Hood spokeswoman Nicole DeLara. "No votes are lost, or could be lost."

Wexler and coalition members said they want to know how the state can be sure that glitches will not prevent elections officials from even detecting computer malfunctions.

"How do you know that any votes were lost if your audit is wrong?" asked Lida Rodriguez-Taseff, chairwoman of the Miami-Dade coalition.

State officials say there is no need for recounts, or an audit trail, with the touchscreen system because it was designed to prevent people from voting in the same race more than once — an overvote — and provide multiple alerts to voters to warn them when they are skipping a race — an undervote.

They emphasize that the "glitch" in the touchscreen machines occurs when the audit is done after the election, not when the tally sheet is printed in each precinct when polls close.