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Miami-Dade's elections chief wants to boot touch-screen system

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A new South Florida elections chief wants to dump the electronic touch-screen voting system he inherited from a previous administration.

The recommendation isn't from Palm Beach County's Arthur Anderson, who campaigned with much fanfare against paperless voting last year, but from new Miami-Dade Elections Supervisor Lester Sola, who was appointed in April.



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Coming from a county that has more than 1 million voters and was among the first in the nation to embrace touch-screen technology, Sola's recommendation could have an "absolutely huge" impact on the national debate over voting machines, says Pamela Smith of Verifiedvoting.org, a leading opponent of paperless voting.

But whether Sola's proposal will have much of an effect in Florida is uncertain.

At the very least, it's likely to spark conversation when the state's elections supervisors gather in Pasco County this week for a semiannual conference.

Orange County Elections Supervisor Bill Cowles, head of the statewide association of elections chiefs, called the Miami-Dade recommendation "very isolated" and said he didn't know of any other counties contemplating a similar move.

Fifteen Florida counties with about half the state's voters use touch screens. The rest use paper ballots that are read by optical scanners.

Anderson downplayed any parallels between Miami-Dade, which uses Elections Systems & Software touch screens, and Palm Beach County, which uses touch screens made by Sequoia Voting Systems.

"I don't see where it has an application in Palm Beach County at all. They're using a different system," Anderson said last week.

Anderson plans to appoint a technology panel to compare the merits of touch screens and optical-scan voting and make a recommendation by the end of the year. If the panel calls for scrapping touch screens, Anderson said, "I will seriously entertain that recommendation for deliberation with the county commission."

In the meantime, Anderson's budget request for 2005-06 asks for \$1.7 million to buy 500 more touch screens. If the county sticks with touch screens, Anderson wants to add printers to them so voters could see tangible copies of their ballots before casting them and the county would have a backup paper trail in case questions arose about an election.

A 'local issue' for Miami-Dade

No such printers have been approved for use in Florida, but Sequoia has submitted a printer to the state Division of Elections for certification. Testing is to begin later this month, said Jenny Nash, a spokeswoman for Secretary of State Glenda Hood, Florida's top elections official.

Miami-Dade's Sola frowned on printers in his May 27 report, saying they "would further complicate our operation" by "adding 7,200 new pieces of electronic equipment with maintenance and material (such as paper and ink) needs as well as additional training and technical support."

Sola said dumping touch screens and switching to optical-scan ballots would boost voter confidence and save money. His proposal still faces review by the Miami-Dade County manager and commission.

If commissioners agree, touch screens wouldn't be completely banished. Sola wants to keep about 1,000 of them for voters with disabilities who have difficulty marking paper ballots.

Sola wasn't involved in Miami-Dade's original decision to purchase touch screens. He was appointed elections supervisor by Miami-Dade commissioners in April after complaints about the March elections led his predecessor, Constance Kaplan, to resign. Miami-Dade is the only county in Florida that appoints its elections chief. The state's 66 other county supervisors are elected.

Hood's office, which has spent considerable time touting the reliability of touch screens, called Sola's recommendation "a local issue" that doesn't carry broader implications.

Other elections chiefs who use the same type of Elections Systems & Software machines as Miami-Dade said they see no reason to switch.

"One size doesn't fit all.... I still think it's a great system," said Pasco County Elections Supervisor Kurt Browning.

"We've had no problems with them," said Martin County Elections Supervisor Vicki Davis.

"So far, the system has seemed to work well.... There's not any evidence to point otherwise," said Broward County Deputy Elections Supervisor Gisela Salas. Her elections office is conducting an evaluation of how touch screens performed in the last three elections, she said.

Touch screens made their debut in Florida in 2002 after punch cards and their hanging chads fell from favor with the 2000 presidential election. The new machines prevent a voter from casting an invalid "overvote" and alert a voter to any skipped races. They eliminate stray marks and subjective "voter intent" arguments.

But because touch screens don't produce a tangible ballot that each user can inspect before voting, critics say the machines are vulnerable to errors and fraud.

Sola's May 27 report said many Miami-Dade voters "remain uneasy about the lack of a paper record that is independent of the equipment on which the votes are cast."

Sola also noted that touch-screen voters are more likely than those using optical-scan systems to cast blank ballots. In last year's presidential election, 0.42 percent of touch-screen voters in Florida skipped the presidential race, whether deliberately or by accident, compared with 0.29 percent of voters who used optical-scan ballots at polling places.

Nationally, about 1.1 percent of all voters skipped the presidential race in 2004, according to a University of Missouri-St. Louis study. The "residual vote" rate was 0.9 percent for voters using touch screens and 0.7 percent for voters using optical-scan ballots at polling places.

Election costs higher

While raising these issues, Sola's recommendation is also based heavily on cost factors that other elections chiefs say are peculiar to Miami-Dade.

Miami-Dade spent \$7.3 million to put on the 2004 presidential election — about twice as much as Broward County, which has roughly the same number of voters and uses the same Elections Systems & Software system. Palm Beach County's cost was

about \$1.6 million.

Because the Miami-Dade machines handle three languages and have sophisticated screen displays, it takes longer to boot them up for an election. So Miami-Dade began turning on its machines the night before the election, incurring extra personnel and security costs. Also, as a precaution against massive machine failures, the county had about 800,000 backup paper ballots printed.

"We just didn't spend that kind of money," said Peter Corwin, Broward's assistant county administrator. "So when we do a cost comparison, there's not going to be that kind of savings."

Paperless voting foe Lida Rodriguez-Taseff of the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition called Sola's recommendation "a good first step." But she said optical-scan ballots can be difficult for people with disabilities or who don't speak English as their primary language. Rodriguez-Taseff wants elections officials to explore alternatives, such as a hybrid system in which voters use a touch screen to mark a paper ballot.

With jurisdictions in other parts of the U.S. still considering new systems to replace punch cards and lever machines, Rodriguez-Taseff said the Miami-Dade example could loom large.

"It will actually have more national implications than anything," she predicted. "In the state of Florida, we've already cast our lot."

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