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HEADLINE: Never mind paper backup ballots, real problem is the machines

DATELINE:

BODY: "Ill every vote count in the upcoming election?" That was the question that Florida Secretary of State Glenda Hood was recently asked by members of the media. Hood's answer was evasive, something akin to "it's a goal."

A goal?

Having spent tens of millions of dollars on new voting equipment and presumably better technology, why is Florida once again poised to be the epicenter of the next elections debacle in the United States? The answer is simple.

Florida's elections experiences since September 2002 have demonstrated that the electronic voting machines, also called direct recording electronic machines [DREs], purchased by Florida's 15 most populous counties have serious systemic problems that cast serious doubt about these machines' ability to record votes as they are cast and tabulate votes that are recorded.

Those serious problems, however, continue to be downplayed or ignored by Hood and supervisors of elections across Florida, who have apparently jointly resolved to stick their collective heads in the sand as they hope that the worst does not come to pass.

Hood and the supervisors have engaged in a fairly fierce defense of the DREs even in the face of clear proof of problems.

In Miami-Dade County, that proof came first in the form of a disastrous September 2002 election where it was "discovered" that the DREs, which had been touted for their ability to allow voters to vote in the language of their choice, were incapable of being booted up with anything less than a full day's notice and an army of highly paid county employees with specialists by their side.

To date, the boot-up problems have not been resolved. In fact, speed has apparently given way to security as the Elections Department decided in May 2003 to permanently disable the redundant safety

mechanisms on the DREs used by disabled voters just to be able to turn them on faster.

But the problems do not end there.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Florida conducted a study of 31 Miami-Dade precincts after the Sept. 10, 2002, election. This was nothing complicated. The ACLU merely counted the number of signatures of the voters who signed up to vote on Election Day in each of these precincts, and compared that number with the number of votes that had been tabulated by the DREs at those precincts. Doing this simple analysis, the study determined that 18,752 voters signed the rolls to vote. However, only 17,208 votes were recorded.

This means that 1,544 votes were simply "lost" somehow. How were they lost? Did 1,544 voters simply leave after driving to their precincts, waiting in line and signing in? That makes no sense. Especially since once people sign in, they immediately go to the machines to vote.

Amazingly, the ACLU study showed that DREs had a lost-vote ratio of 8.2 percent. In November 2000, the lost-vote ratio on the now infamous punch card system, was only 6.75 percent.

Now, elections officials argue that the DREs should be trusted because they have no problems tabulating results. This claim flies in the face of widely reported problems in several recent contests where significant numbers of "undervotes" were recorded in single-issue contests. Among the demands for recounts and recriminations that followed, elections officials answered the question "Why would someone take all of the trouble to go to the polls to then not cast a ballot?" with their usual "blame the voters" rhetoric.

But these incidents have created discomfort for Hood and other elections officials, who are now looking for a way to minimize the scandal and control the spin. This is demonstrated by the fact that Hood recently pushed for legislation that would have eliminated recounts of votes cast on DREs.

Why the push?

Because Florida's politicians previously had required that DREs maintain a random sorted file of ballot images for every vote cast. These ballot images are printable!

More important, the bevy of scorned candidates and elections lawyers has now realized that they are printable. They therefore have uncovered the one tool that would expose the serious tabulation problems that experts know exist. Thus, the push to ban recounts of votes cast on DREs was really a push to ban the printing and counting of the ballot images that are stored in the files of the DREs, because that might just lead to scandal.

The bill that would have eliminated recounts of votes cast on DREs is all but dead now. This means that Hood and others will be looking for other ways to make printing of the ballot images illegal.

For now, they are counting on the fact that such an undertaking would be time-consuming and expensive. However, the possibility still exists that such a remedy could be mandated by a court in one of the many court challenges that are likely to arise in the next year.

What Hood and other local elections supervisors are banking on is that voting rights activists and politicians continue to focus all of their energies on pushing for a voter-verified paper trail, or VVPT.

They realize that in Florida, at least, the VVPT battle is getting nowhere fast, at least before the November election. There is no time, no money and no system ready for certification. Period.

However, so long as the powers that be continue to put all of their eggs in the VVPT basket, there is little chance that they will make even the slightest dent in the fight to improve the DRE voting systems in the short term.

As a result, Florida will undoubtedly be the "next Florida" and, just like "last time," the problems are right on the surface. However, just like last time, none of the players involved is terribly interested in a reliable system.

"Will every vote count in the upcoming election?" Not a chance.

-Lida Rodriguez-Tasef

Lida Rodriguez-Tasef is a partner at **DuaneMorris** in Miami. She is a past president of the Miami chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.