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Florida officials: Some voting records wiped out

MIAMI, Florida (AP) -- A computer crash erased detailed records from Miami-Dade County's first widespread use of touchscreen voting machines, raising again the specter of election troubles in Florida, where the new technology was supposed to put an end to such problems.

The crashes occurred in May and November of 2003, erasing information from the September 2002 gubernatorial primaries and other elections, elections officials said Tuesday.

The malfunction was made public after the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition, a citizen's group, requested all data from the 2002 gubernatorial primary between Democratic candidates Janet Reno and Bill McBride.

In December, officials began backing up the data daily, to help avoid similar data wipeouts in the future, said Seth Kaplan, spokesman for the county's elections supervisor, Constance Kaplan.

The loss of data underscores problems with the touchscreen voting machines, the citizen's group said. "This is a disaster waiting to happen," said Lida Rodriguez-Taseff, chairwoman of the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition. "Of course it's worrisome."

The group is concerned about the machines' effectiveness, following revelations about other problems with the system. Last month, state officials said the touchscreen systems used by 11 counties had a bug that would make a manual recount impossible. Earlier this month, a newspaper study indicated touchscreen machines did not perform as well as those that scanned paper ballots.

Also Tuesday, election reform groups asked a judge to strike down a state rule preventing counties that use the machines from conducting manual recounts from them.

State election officers say manual recounts are not needed since the machines tell each voter if they are skipping a race, known as an undervote, and will not let them vote twice for the same race, known as an overvote. The officials also maintain that the computer systems running the machines can be trusted to count the votes accurately as they're cast, and give the final numbers when needed.

But lawyers representing the American Civil Liberties Union and other groups said the state should require a paper trail in case a physical recount is needed, as it was in the 2000 presidential race in Florida.

"I have concern about votes that are cast but not recorded," said Howard Simon, executive director for ACLU of Florida.

Election supervisors from some of the 15 counties using touchscreens had asked the state if they would need to go through the laborious process of printing screen images of each ballot during a recount.

The Division of Elections then ruled that state law only requires a recount to determine voters' intent, and that it is impossible to question voter intent with touchscreen ballots.

Florida counties without the touchscreen machines use optiscan technology, in which computers read voters' pencil marks

on paper ballots, and would be able to do physical recounts in tight races.

Administrative Law Judge Susan B. Kirkland has 30 days to make her decision after receiving the hearing transcript, which is due back in 10 working days.

Florida's voting system has been under scrutiny since the 2000 debacle, when it took five weeks of legal maneuvering and some recounting before Republican George W. Bush was declared president.

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