

Ohio 'paper' vote system debuting with flaws, researchers say

The new voting system that Cleveland and its suburbs will use in tomorrow's primary election has serious flaws that risk greater voter error, say members of a research team from the Universities of Maryland, Rochester and Michigan who conducted a comprehensive analysis of the technology over the past several years.

Cuyahoga County -- which encompasses Cleveland -- will retire its touch screen voting machines on March 4 in favor of a paper/optical scan system. The ballots will be counted at a central location.

One of the potential problems is that voters will not get a chance to run their ballots through a scanner before handing them in -- a step available in some other jurisdictions with optical scan systems, say the researchers. This scan provides an important opportunity for voters to catch mistakes.

"This is not an auspicious debut," says University of Maryland political scientist Paul Herrnson who led the research team. "Voters will go to the polls Tuesday without a safety net. They should be very careful to avoid stray marks and to review their ballots closely. If they want to make changes, they ask for a new form instead of erasing. Colorado dropped this particular configuration of the paper/optical scan machines because it eliminates this important accuracy check."

The ballots are computer forms similar to those used in standardized tests, in which voters register their choices by filling in small ovals with a pencil.

Herrnson and the research team of political and computer scientists conducted an extensive comparison of the usability of several electronic voting and verification systems. The study is the most comprehensive of its kind, relying on data from field tests with more than 1,500 subjects, laboratory tests and expert reviews. The results and recommendations are reported in the January 2008 book, "Voting Technology: The Not-So-Simple Act of Casting a Ballot," published by the Brookings Institution.

Among the research findings on the paper ballot/optical scan system: users sometimes "overvote" -- select too many candidates in a single race, disqualifying the vote. Erasures or stray marks may be read by the computer as overvotes.

"The worst mistake of all is accidentally voting for the competitor in the race," Herrnson says. "In effect, that's two votes against your own candidate. With central count optical scan there's no review screen to help a voter catch such an error."

When voters finish with the ballots, they put them in a collection box in the precinct. Then, the ballots are taken to a central location for scanning and tallying.

This central count approach poses potential security problems, Herrnson adds, pointing to numerous examples of U.S. election fraud involving paper ballots.

"It's ironic that Cuyahoga County is replacing touch screen machines with paper ballots," says research team member Richard Niemi, a University of Rochester political scientist. "Based on our research, I'm convinced that the right kind of touch screen machine could be better than paper."

"The very act of changing the machines can cause problems," says research team member Michael Hanmer, a University of Maryland political scientist. "Both voters and election officials will be on unfamiliar ground Tuesday. Everyone needs to stay on their toes."

Source: University of Maryland

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