TARGETING GLITCHES

Mix of voting equipment is best

By HANS VON SPAKOVSKY

Georgia is preparing to make an important decision on replacing its aging voting equipment with new systems. The choice is between electronic voting devices, where a voter pushes a button on a computer screen, and precinct optiscan equipment, where a voter's paper ballot is scanned into a computer at the precinct.


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What we end up with is important, because the goal is to reduce the state's high residual vote rate — the combination of undervotes (failing to make a choice) and overvotes (choosing more than one candidate in the same race). Electronic voting devices do not allow overvoting but do allow undervoting, while precinct optiscan devices can be programmed to alert a voter to overvotes or undervotes.

Secretary of State Cathy Cox would like Georgia to use electronic voting equipment, although every recent study on election equipment, including the CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project and the U.S. House Government Reform Committee, has reported that electronic voting equipment has a higher rate of residual votes than precinct optiscan systems.

Even areas with high poverty rates and large minority populations, such as Alabama's 7th Congressional District, that have switched to optiscan equipment report some of the lowest residual vote rates of any equipment used.

According to Cox, optiscan equipment had an average undervote rate in the 2000 election in Georgia as high as punch card equipment. But Cox did not distinguish between different types of optiscan equipment and ballots. Different ballots also make a tremendous difference. The old-style "connect the arrow" ballot is more difficult to use than the "fill in the bubble" type used with the best optiscan equipment.

A recent study by Dr. Charles Bullock of the University of Georgia found precinct optiscan equipment using a bubble ballot had the lowest rate of uncounted votes of any equipment used in Georgia in the last election. At 2.29 percent, it was lower than the 3 percent national average cited for electronic equipment in the CalTech/MIT study.

Keeping in mind that there is no perfect voting equipment, we must consider the advantages of different kinds of equipment and minimize their disadvantages:

➤ Precinct optiscan equipment has the lowest residual vote rate of any election equipment; it has a fail-safe paper audit trail and it is three to five times cheaper than electronic voting equipment. Blind (and some disabled) voters need assistance to use it — as they do with our current equipment.

➤ Electronic equipment, with an attached audio feature, will allow blind voters to use headphones to listen to the choices and vote without assistance. It lacks an external paper audit trail and recount ability, costs much more, is more complex and has a higher residual vote rate.

In Fulton County during the last election, 88 disabled voters out of 270,000 who voted at precincts asked for assistance. Their right to privacy is important, but does not outweigh the rights of the vast majority of voters who are entitled to equipment with the best residual voting record that is also the best value for their tax money.

Counties could solve both their residual vote problem and meet the needs of blind and disabled voters by installing new precinct optiscan equipment, then adding one electronic voting machine in each precinct for the use of disabled voters.

This would require a change of Georgia law, which only allows one kind of equipment to be used in a precinct. But it's a cost-effective and considerate solution that maximizes the paper audit trail and should be seriously considered.

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