FOCUS - 94 of 244 DOCUMENTS

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HEADLINE: Electronic Voting Has No Safety Net, Critics Say

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INADEQUACIES SHOW NEED FOR BACKUPS, THEY SAY

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TALLAHASSEE - A South Florida Election Day foul-up in November demonstrates shortcomings in the way the state counts votes, a reform group said Monday as it urged the Division of Elections to strengthen rules and accounting policies.

The triple tally of votes from a faulty machine in a south Miami precinct suggests there are "extremely serious voting security problems" with touch-screen voting systems, said Martha Mahoney, a University of Miami law professor and member of the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition.

Members of the group testified before the elections division in Tallahassee, saying a previous rule on recount procedures doesn't go far enough.

They cited the case of Miami-Dade's Precinct 816, where 945 voters signed in to vote at a church, but 1,116 votes were sent to the official county canvass. It was later determined that one machine had sent results three times.

The discrepancy went unnoticed for months.

"Obviously, electronic ballot stuffing is possible," Mahoney said. "Yet we don't have a recount rule that can catch it."

The reform coalition wants the secretary of state's office to require pollworkers to compare the number of voter signatures within a precinct with the number of ballots counted at that precinct, they should, of course, match. Many counties do so, but often after results have been certified.

Under an emergency rule enacted for the Nov. 2 election, Florida required a machine recount when the margin of victory was within one-half of 1 percent of all votes cast. An even closer result, with final numbers within one-quarter of 1 percent of all votes cast, required a manual recount.

The emergency rule has expired, and the elections division is crafting a permanent rule. The voter advocates fear the division will re-enact the old rule, which must be approved by the Legislature.

Neither of the recount strategies - machine or manual recounts - would have caught the Precinct 816 problems, Mahoney said.
"There is no safety net," she said. "This machine being counted three times is literally sliding through into the certified canvass."

Election Systems and Software, the Omaha, Neb.-based manufacturer of the iVotronic system used in Miami-Dade County, acknowledged that a memory failure triggered last fall's incident. That should have been caught by a poll worker, whose repeated attempts to shut down the machine sent the results to the county over and over. Backup memory systems performed as expected and preserved the data, said Meghan McCormick, a company spokeswoman.

"We absolutely are confident in the equipment," McCormick said. She said ESS recommends that poll workers compare signatures with vote totals, the procedure the reform group is pushing.

The ESS iVotronic system is not used in Hillsborough or Pinellas counties. In Pasco, where it is, Elections Supervisor Kurt Browning said it could be "problematic" to require large counties to compare signatures and vote tallies before certifying the results. "If the Legislature tells us that's what we have to do, then that's what we'll do," he said. "But they'll have to give us more time to get it done."

Jenny Nash, a spokeswoman for the elections division, said the reform coalition "gave us some very good suggestions - most importantly, talking about ballot accounting on the front end."

The division is expected to propose a rule and hold additional hearings in about a month.

Monday's testimony rekindled a debate that flared as the November 2004 election approached, with critics calling for a paper trail on touch-screen voting machines.

Last month, Miami-Dade Elections Supervisor Lester Sota recommended getting rid of the machines in favor of optical scanners that use paper ballots. He said voters were losing confidence in the electronic systems.

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GRAPHIC: PIOTO
Tribune photo by COLIN HACKLEY Martha Mahoney of the University of Miami School of Law and Dan McRae of the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition urge better polling safeguards.

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