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HEADLINE: Will Ohio pull the plug on electronic voting? Most of the state's counties plan to introduce electronic voting machine early next year.

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BODY:

Columbus - After the 2000 election mess in Florida, electronic voting machines were pitched as America's saviors from hanging chads and voter uncertainty.

Now the country finds itself in a different place - with President Bush re-elected without a chad controversy and critics charging that electronic devices are expensive and error-prone.

That has some top Ohio lawmakers asking whether the state's rush to convert all counties to electronic voting is necessary. Only seven counties now use such machines.

Sen. Jeff Jacobson, a suburban Dayton Republican who helped pass a bill mandating voter receipts with all electronic machines by 2006, said he is concerned anew about the state's expensive plan to replace punch cards.

"I think DREs [direct recording electronic machines] are not the ultimate solution," said Jacobson, who will sit on Senate President-elect Bill Harris' leadership team next year. "I think you replace a whole set of potential problems with another whole set of potential problems."

House Speaker-elect Jon Husted, who will take the helm of the lower chamber in January, would like to review the entire election - including the machines used - next year.

He said legislators may have acted prematurely when they passed a bill in April.

That bill, passed within months of the election, mandated paper voter receipts statewide.

"The closer you are to an election, the more an elections reform bill gets politicized," he said. "Am I saying that's what happened? No. But certainly the environment gets created where those types of pressures exist."

Among the most worrisome electronic machine anomalies in the state was an addition error in a Columbus-area precinct where votes are cast on electronic machines made by Danaher Controls. That error gave 3,893 extra votes to Bush.

Also, electronic machines - celebrated for being more efficient than punch cards - did little to prevent long lines in Columbus and other parts of Franklin County, where some voters had to wait for several hours on Election Day.

In Mahoning County, electronic machines built by another vendor, Election Systems & Software, momentarily reported 25 million votes, or more than twice the population of Ohio.

Meanwhile, fears of hanging-chad nightmares and Election Day chaos because of antiquated punch-card machines did not materialize.
Will Ohio pull the plug on electronic voting?: Most of the state's

Carlo LoParo, spokesman for Secretary of State Ken Blackwell, said the office has spent 2½ years preparing to replace punch card machines, and further delays could jeopardize the state's ability to meet deadlines laid out in the federal Help America Vote Act.

"We're facing considerable time constraints," LoParo said. "This wasn't a process we went into willy-nilly. We will carry out whatever the legislature chooses to do; we just hope they choose to do it quickly."

The federal voter act requires that states conduct elections using some form of electronic voting in 2006. Most Ohio counties plan to introduce the machines in early 2005. That will give both poll workers and voters time to adjust before the next major statewide election - the 2006 governor's race.

Ohio will get more than $100 million to replace its paper-ballot systems with electronic ones.

Many counties, including Cuyahoga, the state's largest, remain eager to convert their paper-ballot voting systems to an electronic one. They believe the benefits - the elimination of hanging chads and a faster vote count - far outweigh the potential problems.

Cuyahoga's elections board hopes to introduce new machines to voters in May. But if state lawmakers reopen the issue, the deployment could be delayed, said board director Michael Vu.

Vendors have not yet addressed all security issues raised in the state's review, and Blackwell only recently began talking to machine makers about how to produce a voter-verified paper trail.

"If we are still going back and forth, then this tells me that we need to sit down and assess what really happened in 2004 and go from there," said Vu. "I think moving toward electronic is the progressive way of improving voting, but the question is how to get there."

Ohio, California, Wisconsin and Alaska all passed laws this year requiring paper receipts, and similar bills are pending in three other states.

Diebold Election Systems, which won contracts to provide electronic voting machines to 48 of Ohio's 88 counties, has completed a prototype that produces a paper receipt, but it has not been tested in an election. And it's not clear if it will meet state specifications, just released this month by Blackwell.

Diebold spokesman Mark Radke said the device - six months in development - will meet the state's requirements.

Still, Sen. Randy Gardner, a Bowling Green Republican who tried unsuccessfully to block the paper-trail mandate, said touch-screen machines are simply unnecessary.

"I haven't changed from my position that it was premature and not ready for prime-time in an election," he said.

Bob Bennett, who chairs both the Ohio Republican Party and Cuyahoga's elections board, said he has no hesitation about electronic voting machines.

"The paper trail, which I'm very much in favor of, will make the voting system a far superior voting system than we have now," he said.

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