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Wrong Time for an E-Vote Glitch

By Kim Zetter Kim Zetter Also by this reporter

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It was simultaneously an uh-oh moment and an ah-ha moment.

When Sequoia Voting Systems demonstrated its new paper-trail electronic voting system for state Senate staffers in California last week, the company representative got a surprise when the paper trail failed to record votes that testers cast on the machine.

That was bad news for the voting company, whose paper-trail, touch-screen machine will be used for the first time next month in Nevada's state primary. The company advertises that its touch-screen machines provide "nothing less than 100 percent accuracy."

It was good news, however, for computer scientists and voting activists, who have long held that touch-screen machines are unreliable and vulnerable to tampering, and therefore must provide a physical paper-based audit trail of votes.

"It goes to our point that a paper trail is very much needed to (ensure) that the machine accurately reports what people press," said Susie Swatt, chief of staff for state Sen. Ross Johnson (R-Irvine), who witnessed the glitch in the Sequoia machine.

With a paper-trail system, the voting machines would print out a record when voters cast ballots on a touch-screen machine. Voters could examine, but not touch, the record before casting their ballot. The paper would then drop into a secure ballot box for use in a recount.

For nearly a year, voting companies and many election officials

have resisted the call for a paper record. Election officials say that putting printers on voting machines would create problems for poll workers if the printers break down or run out of paper, and the paper records will cause long poll lines with voters taking more time to check the record.

Voting activists maintain, however, that election officials don't want the paper trail because it opens the way for recounts and lawsuits if paper records don't match digital vote tallies. And they say that paper records would provide proof the machines are not as accurate as companies claim.

Acting on public pressure for a paper trail, Sequoia became the first of the four largest voting companies to add printers to their voting machines earlier this year. Two smaller voting companies have had paper-trail machines for longer, but have had trouble selling the machines to election officials.

During the demonstration of the Sequoia machine last week, the machine worked fine when the company tested votes using an English-language ballot. But when the testers switched to a Spanish-language ballot, the paper trail showed no votes cast for two propositions.

"We did it again and the same thing happened," said Darren Chesin, a consultant to the state Senate elections and reapportionment committee. "The problem was not with the paper trail. The paper trail worked flawlessly, but it caught a mistake in the programming of the touch-screen machine itself. For some reason it would not record or display the votes on the Spanish ballot for these two ballot measures. The only reason we even caught it was because we were looking at the paper trail to verify it."

Sequoia spokesman Alfie Charles said the problem was not a programming error but a ballot-design error.

"It was our fault for not proofing the Spanish language ballot before demonstrating it," Charles said. "We had a demo ballot that we designed in a hurry that didn't include all of the files that we needed

to have the machine present all of the voter's selections on the screen and the printed ballots. That would never happen in an election environment because of all the proofing that election officials do."

Charles said the machine did record the votes accurately in its memory, but failed to record them on the paper trail and on the review screen that voters examine before casting their ballot. Swatt and Chesin could not confirm this, however, because the company did not show them evidence of the digital votes stored on the machine's internal memory.

"We've been saying all along that these things are subject to glitches," Chesin said. "The bottom line is that the paper trail caught the mistake. Ergo, paper trails are a good idea."

Charles agreed the paper trail worked exactly as it was supposed to work. "If this happened in an election, the first voter would see it and could call a pollworker. They would take the machine out of service if they saw a problem," he said.

Ironically, just one week after the demonstration occurred, California took one step back from making sure voters in the state will have the reassurance that a paper trail provides.

On Thursday, a Senate bill that would require a voter-verified paper trail on all electronic voting machines in the state by January 2006 suffered a setback when the Assembly Appropriations Committee, where the bill resided, decided not to push the bill forward during this legislative session, which ends Aug. 31. This means legislators will have to reintroduce a new bill next January when they reconvene.

The bill (PDF), introduced by Johnson and state Senator Don Perata (D-Oakland), had bipartisan support and the backing of Secretary of State Kevin Shelley.

"I'm a little mystified why the committee has stalled the bill," Swatt said. "E-voting machines, like them or not, are here to stay in

California. It is clear that if we are going to be living with e-voting machines the only way to protect voters and to ensure that their votes are counted accurately is to have a paper trail."

Swatt said she hoped the public would pressure the legislature to push the bill forward before the session ends.

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