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Touch-screen voting still an act of faith [*3 letters*]

It is impossible to say, as Donald F. Norris and Paul S. Herrnson do in their column "Don't replace voting system" (Opinion • Commentary, Feb. 26), that the paperless touch-screen voting system has performed well.

We simply do not know how the system has performed because we cannot audit or recount the results.

Paperless touch-screen voting is a faith-based system.

Before being forced to switch to touch-screen voting, 19 of Maryland's 24 counties used optical-scanning systems. In that period, Maryland had the lowest rate of nonrecorded votes in the nation.

In the presidential election of 2004, 12 percent of Montgomery County's voting machines malfunctioned.

The current voting system has also been exorbitantly expensive to purchase, store and use.

In 2001, the year the decision was made to purchase the touch-screen machines, Baltimore County paid $366,620 to maintain its optical-scan system.

This year, the county will pay more than $1.3 million to maintain the Diebold AccuVote TS system.

And the process used to seek to guarantee that the touch-screen machines are not tampered with from outside on Election Day requires procedures that greatly increase setup and breakdown time.

Yet none of the external protective measures can prevent an internal software virus or code from altering election outcomes.

Such an event would remain undetected.

For these reasons, the majority of states have already moved to optical-scan voting technology.

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist is the latest state executive to demand that his state abandon paperless voting in favor of optical-scan technology ("Voting reform seen unlikely until 2010," Feb. 2).

It is the only voting technology on the market that offers both rapid, computerized vote tabulation and a permanent paper ballot, which can be verified by the voter, for audits and recounts.

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It was hard to accept the credibility of Donald F. Norris and Paul S. Herrnson's column "Don't replace voting system" when their most important claims are misleading at best.

For example, they describe as "dubious" the "claim that voters lack confidence in the touch-screen system."

But a poll Mr. Norris himself conducted for the Maryland State Board of Elections in 2006 found that:

• 55.1 percent of voters agreed the machines could be corrupted by malicious software.

• 29.1 percent felt that the machines were not secure against tampering.

• 24 percent felt the machines could not be trusted.

• 69.4 percent felt that voters should be able to confirm their vote with a paper record.

The authors claim that there have been no problems with the machines in Maryland.

But this is inconsistent with reports in The Sun about Diebold Election Systems' providing Maryland with defective motherboards that caused the machines to crash in mid-vote, the use of uncertified software, machine breakdowns and reports of names missing from ballots, among other problems ("Diebold machine glitch fixed quietly," Oct. 26).

The authors claim optical-scan systems result in undervotes and overvotes.

But, in fact, optical-scan systems are designed so that when a voter puts the ballot in the machine, it will give the ballot back to the voter if he or she votes for two candidates in one race or fails to vote in a race.

Finally, the authors make outlandish claims about the cost of optical-scan systems in comparison with the touch-screen machines the state is using.

In fact, optical-scan systems are much less expensive. Each precinct needs only one optical-scan machine but five to 10 touch-screen machines.

With nearly 2,000 precincts in Maryland, that adds up to more than 10,000 more machines to store, operate, maintain, upgrade and repair.

Worse still, the touch-screen machines have a 7 percent yearly replacement rate.

So, in reality, switching to optical-scan systems would save Maryland significant money.

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Donald F. Norris and Paul S. Herrnson missed the point when they argued against switching from touch-screen to optical-scan voting machines.

They claimed that the existing machines have performed well and "no results have been challenged based on the performance of these machines."

While this may be true in Maryland's experience, it is not true in other states.

Let me give two examples of problems - both of which could have been avoided with optical-scan voting equipment.

Florida's 13th Congressional District spans five counties. The Republican candidate claims to have been elected by a 400-vote margin, which is being challenged in court by the Democrat.

In four of the counties, and on paper absentee ballots in Sarasota County, 1 percent to 5 percent of voters left the congressional race blank. But as a result of a poorly designed touch-screen ballot unique to Sarasota, 13 percent of voters there (18,000 ballots) left it blank.

In this county, the Democrat won with 53 percent of the vote. It is extremely likely that if a single voting procedure had been used in all counties, the Democrat would have easily won the race.

But with touch-screen machines, there is no way to check paper copies of the ballots to see what the voters intended.

In Virginia, Democratic Senate candidate Jim Webb was declared the winner over Republican Sen. George Allen by less than 9,000 votes out of 2.4 million, all recorded on touch-screen machines.

There were reports in Florida (and Maryland) of voters touching the name of the Democratic candidate but having the machine record a vote for the Republican. What if this bias were reversed in Virginia, and Republican votes were recorded as Democratic? If this happened with only 0.2 percent of the votes, or 1 in 500, it would mean that Mr. Allen should have won, and the Republicans should still control the U.S. Senate.

It is important to note that adding a paper trail to touch-screen machines wouldn't help in a case such as the one I outlined in Virginia.

But such a calibration error couldn't happen with an optical-scan system.

And in a close election, the paper ballots could be compared with the results from the machines, which would help re-establish trust in our election procedures.

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