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Shelley Cohen Fudge: Maryland needs secure, verifiable voting system

Commentary | Shelley Cohen Fudge

The state of Maryland will be making a foolish choice if it decides to renege on its promise to replace our risky paperless touchscreen voting machines with a paper ballot, optical-scan voting system. The new voting system, with just one-fifth the equipment of the old one, would be much cheaper to operate and maintain. It would reinstill voter confidence by finally putting in place a safe, reliable voting system that records the votes as voters intended, and allows recounts to be conducted in close races.

Maryland voters overwhelmingly favor a paper record of their votes and the transition to the new system is mandated by a law that passed the General Assembly unanimously in 2007. After years of debate and reams of data from computer security experts exposing a vast number of security vulnerabilities in touchscreen voting, as well as information from other states about the cost benefits of transitioning to optical scan voting, it appears that a well orchestrated effort has resurfaced at the 11th hour to mislead the Board of Public Works and others about the true costs of purchasing the new system versus the cost of trying to keep the old system on life support.

If Maryland follows the example of other states that have made the switch, the savings in operating costs would offset the cost of purchasing the new system. But our election officials, some of whom oppose the change, have structured the purchase in such a way as to frontload millions of dollars in voting system costs into next year's budget instead of spreading them out across the five-year loan period for the rest of the equipment. This includes about $8 million on unnecessary frills in a year when budgets are extremely tight. For example, the $4 million proposed for voting booths could be slashed to less than $100,000 if the state instead purchased simple folding privacy screens that would accommodate twice as many voters at once, reducing wait times and allowing voters to sit and mark their ballots thoughtfully instead of feeling rushed.

By contrast, the state Board of Elections has vastly understated the costs of sticking with the touchscreens, which cost more than $13 million to operate in the last gubernatorial election cycle. This aging equipment is likely to be even more error-prone and expensive to operate this year, especially in the most populous counties, Montgomery and Prince George's, which use some of the oldest equipment in the state.

Another concern raised by election officials is the monopoly created by the merger of the nation's two largest voting machine vendors. While it is indeed troubling that one privately held corporation will now be counting about 70 percent of America's votes, we are no better off in sticking with our current system, which would be serviced by that same company. In fact, this increases the urgency of moving to a voting system where paper ballots marked by voters can be used to independently verify election results, especially in a year which may include some very close races.

Tens of thousands of votes have been lost all across the country by paperless touch-screen machines, and those lost votes have very likely changed election outcomes. We can put this risk behind us if we move to paper-ballot voting. Let's make the smart fiscal choice and have election results that we can verify.

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