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Another voting glitch

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The case of the Rockville absentee voters who weren't is a reminder that human error, not technology, is usually the biggest obstacle to those who run elections. The incident was unfortunate - roughly 10 percent of the city's electorate was accidentally classified as absentee for the Nov. 6 municipal election - but the consequences could have been far worse.

As it was, about 10 people were directed to go to Rockville City Hall to straighten out their situation. It's likely some didn't bother and therefore didn't vote. The snafu was certainly no fault of theirs. It was the result of a state worker giving local elections officials the wrong database (one that was deliberately manipulated to have high absentee numbers for training purposes only).

It was a far cry from the widespread problems experienced during last fall's primary election. But even in that case - not withstanding the software glitch that caused electronic polling books to malfunction - the human factor turned up as well. The shortage of adequately trained election judges was as great a problem as the \$18 million polling books.

A spokesman for the state elections board said the Rockville incident came down to a few misstrokes on a computer keyboard and a failure to double-check the database. Greater vigilance in the future is promised, and that may be all that's necessary. But the public is likely still skeptical about Maryland's election process - thanks to last year's problems and concerns about touch-screen voting in general.

The next election is coming sooner than many may realize. The primary is Feb. 12, less than three months away. One of the first registration deadlines - the opportunity to switch political parties - was last Monday. Officials insist they are ready.

That's good, because Maryland still has voting technology issues. State law calls for a switch to optical scan equipment in 2010 but only if the money is provided in next year's budget (which is expected to be tight despite new taxes).

We would urge Gov. Martin O'Malley and the General Assembly not to cut the \$3 million needed for the project. While we have reservations about optical scanning (both its accuracy and accessibility to the disabled), Maryland needs a voting system with a paper trail. To err is human, but a voting system without impeccable safeguards is really asking for trouble.

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