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As primary season ramps up, an e-voting snapshot

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January 08, 2008 (Computerworld) Even as the 2008 U.S. presidential primary [election cycle](#) kicks into gear today in New Hampshire, many states across the nation are still trying to figure out just what e-voting systems they'll be using to tally votes when they hold their own primaries later this year.

But in New Hampshire, the site of the nation's first primary, there's apparently no controversy about what to use -- the state's voters will all be casting paper ballots in one form or another.

"We've found them to be very reliable," said David Scanlan, New Hampshire's deputy secretary of state. Between 450,000 to 500,000 voters are expected to turn out for the nation's first presidential primary this year and none of them will be using electronic touchscreen machines, which have been the cause of controversy in other states.

"In our minds, they haven't been proven yet," Scanlan said of touchscreen machines, which are also called Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) units. "We like to go with something simple and reliable that maintains the confidence of the voters." In fact, he said, touchscreen voting machines have never been used in the state.



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About 75% of New Hampshire's voters will have their votes collected using optical scanning machines that read and count votes from paper ballots filled out by the voters.

Another 25% of the voters will vote on simple paper ballots which are then counted by hand in

their polling places. For visually impaired and other disabled voters, the state uses a telephone keypad-based voting system that allows them to listen in to the ballot choices and make their selections by pressing buttons on their telephones.

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Around the nation, things aren't quite so calm in other states as they prepare for their own primary elections. Touchscreen machines, touted in the past as efficient replacements for bulky old lever-operated machines and for the infamously troublesome paper punch ballots with their hanging or pregnant chads, have had a tough time gaining trust from voters and election officials in recent years.

Some of the major vendors of the touchscreen devices, including Premier Election Solutions Inc. (formerly Diebold), Election Systems and Software (ES&S), Sequoia Voting Systems and Hart InterCivic Inc., insist that their machines are secure and accurate when properly used. They say that much of the controversy arises when election officials change their requirements for the devices before they can be redesigned and recertified in time for upcoming elections.

That opinion gap between the vendors and state election officials continues.

For example, in Colorado, California and Florida, ongoing concerns about touchscreen machines used in previous elections have officials scrambling to make quick changes for this year's races. And in Ohio -- the scene of ferocious e-voting controversy during the past two national elections -- a very recent decision from the Secretary of State's office has made national headlines.

- In Ohio, a scathing 86-page state EVEREST study on e-voting systems there [concluded](#) last month that the state faces a host of potential security, equipment and process changes as its elections approach. The report said that security shortcomings in the e-voting systems are a continuing danger to the accuracy of elections in the state.

One of the first changes in light of the report was a directive issued last week by Ohio Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner, who ordered all state election officials to provide paper ballots to every voter who requests one in lieu of using a touchscreen machine.

"This is basically a step for those voters who might be skeptical of the machines," said Patrick Gallaway, a Brunner spokesman. "There will be a stash of paper ballots when they do go to the polls and they can opt out and use paper ballots," which will then be counted by optical scanning machines. "Offering the voters the option is very important."

Even the move to avoid using the touchscreen machines has engendered legal controversy. In late December, the ACLU [warned](#) Ohio that collecting paper ballots and counting the votes at a central location, rather than tallying them at the precincts themselves, might be a violation of state law.

Because there's not a lot of time before Ohio's March 4 presidential primaries, the state legislature will be meeting later this month to go over the recommendations in the [EVEREST study](#) to find the best options to increase e-voting system security and reliability before the elections, Gallaway said.

Some changes can be brought in before the March primary, such as new rules on handling memory cards that hold the votes from touchscreen machines, but the bulk of changes won't be possible until after the primaries are over, he said. Ohio officials, including the legislature, hope to have a plan for handling future elections by mid-April so it can be implemented before the Nov. 4 presidential election. "The perfect plan is for all counties to use the optical scanning machines with highspeed scanners that would tabulate the results" in central offices in each county, Gallaway said. All options will, he added, be considered by the legislature in drawing up the final plans for upcoming elections.

Cuyahoga County, which includes the city of Cleveland, is moving away from the touchscreen machines and going completely to optical scanning machines, he said. In the past, Cuyahoga County had a host of election problems, including long lines at the polls caused by issues with touchscreen e-voting machines. "They think it's going to be much smoother for them," Gallaway said of the move to all-optical scanning devices.

The state has about 7.2 million registered voters.

- In California, a top-to-bottom [review](#) of that state's e-voting systems last year by incoming Secretary of State Debra Bowen has resulted in severe restrictions on the use of touchscreen voting machines due to concerns about their security, accuracy and reliability, said Bowen spokeswoman Nicole Winger. Following the review, a variety of machines from various vendors were decertified for use in the state. Some were later recertified, with lists of conditions making them eligible for use in upcoming elections.

Under the new rules, which go into effect for the state's Feb. 5 presidential primary, only one touchscreen machine will be permitted to be used in each polling place. That single machine in each polling place will be available only to handicapped voters who may use it because of its special features, including audible ballots for visually impaired voters, Winger said.

Most voters in California -- about 75% -- already use mail-in ballots or optical scanning voting systems featuring paper ballots, Winger said, so most voters won't see any changes when they vote under the new rules. Most affected by the new rules will be 21 of the state's 58 counties, which in recent years had moved more heavily to touchscreen e-voting systems. The state has about 16 million registered voters.

"This is a turn in the road," Winger said of Bowen's moves toward making the state's voting systems more secure and trusted. "For now, there really is no [touchscreen machine] on the market that really can be as secure, accessible and reliable" as desired by state officials, she said. "Generally, this is the picture in California until we see some new e-voting systems come down the line that could be tested and certified as being better."

- In Florida, the Jan. 29 primaries will be the final elections held in the state to use touchscreen machines, said Sterling Ivey, a spokesman for Florida Secretary of State Kurt S. Browning. Legislation passed last year requires all counties in the state to buy and use optical scanning machines for all elections after July 1 of this year, although one touchscreen machine will be permitted to remain in each polling place for use by disabled voters.

Fifteen of Florida's 67 counties, comprising more than 50% of the state's residents, presently use touchscreen machines for all of their voting. One of the major issues for moving away from the

touchscreen machines was their lack of a reliable paper record to ensure that a voter's choices were properly being tallied, Ivey said. The state has about 10.1 million registered voters.

- In Colorado, the pending e-voting infrastructure is a "moving target right now," said Richard Coolidge, a spokesman for Secretary of State Mike Coffman. The state's e-voting system certification [processes](#) underwent a legal challenge from a local citizens' group in the last couple years, and the situation is still not resolved, he said. Two possibilities are being examined by the state legislature -- whether there is enough time left to fast-track a certification for optical scan and touchscreen e-voting machines before the primaries, or whether existing laws can be changed to allow a presidential election that would be conducted entirely via mailed-in ballots. State law presently forbids all mail balloting in partisan races, he said.

"The legislature has shown an interest in getting this [resolved] as soon as possible, Coolidge said. "By the end of January, we should know a lot more, unless there is a standstill or gridlock -- then we're going to have a lot of problems."

Coffman supports paper ballots for the state's voters, whether those ballots are optically scanned or manually counted, Coolidge said.