E-Voting Experts Cautiously Optimistic, Call for Audit Trail

Agreeing that no reliable data on machine malfunction was yet available, a group of experts on electronic voting technology pushed for long-term improvements at the "Were All the Votes Counted?" forum at the National Press Club Wed., while most acknowledged that there were at least some glitches in the Presidential election Tues. Speaking for the National Committee for Voting Integrity (NCVI), Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) Pres. Marc Rotenberg said neither group would be involved in specific election litigation "yet."

"There were a lot of things that went wrong," said Peter Neumann of SRI International Computer Science Laboratory and NCVI, but it's "extremely difficult to say what happened because there is a lack of oversight" over electronic voting standards. Neumann said ATMs and lottery machines, often designed by the same manufacturers as electronic voting machines, "are held to an extremely high performance standard. Election machines are not." While Neumann, like others, avoided allegations of fraud, he said malfunctions and glitches were the result of this lack of accountability by machine makers.

Iowa. State U. Computer Scientist Doug Jones said "there were problems; many, many problems," with voting, but most were identified due to the intense scrutiny of this particular election.

Jones added, however, that problems are much more difficult to locate with touchscreen machines, especially those with no verifiable paper ballot. "Right now there is a gap in the auditability" of e-voting machines. Paul Hyland of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility agreed that verifiable ballots should at least be a short-term solution, noting it would be "very unlikely that [e-voting machines] are 100% secure."

Several speakers blamed confusing over e-voting results a lack of national standards. American U. Law Prof. Jamin Raskin said that because voting is overseen by the states, many issues with e-voting may never be addressed. "It remains to be seen," he said, "where we didn't have fair elections, where we did have fair elections." EPIC Senior Policy Analyst Lillie Coney blamed shortfalls in funding for the Help America Vote Act

Diebold and Sequoia, issued a statement saying "reports from electronic voting machine vendors and media coverage today indicate that electronic voting machines are recording Americans' votes efficiently and effectively...Electronic voting machine issues that have been cited are related to human error, process missteps or unsubstantiated reports."
However, e-voting watchdog groups like the Election Reform Information Project mostly reported small instances of problems with touchscreen machines, though Verified Voting says the reported problems represent only "a small percentage of the problems that are actually out there." Verified Voting has long called for paper receipts in electronic machines as backups in case of close elections or reports of fraud. -- Ian Martinez