

Georgia's New Voting Machines by Sally FitzGerald, LWV Capitol Observer

The League of Women Voters has been advocating in Georgia for retiring the current digital recording electronic (DRE) voting machines for several years. Initially, we were told it would not happen until 2023, just in time for the presidential election of 2024. Instead, it happened this year and we will use it in all elections in 2020, another presidential election year.

The type of equipment was specified in statute this legislative season, HB 316, as recommended by the SAFE, Secure Accurate and Fair Elections, committee. It is to be a ballot marking device with a touch screen for the voter to make choices which will be printed out on paper. The voter will take the ballot to a scanner within the precinct which will tabulate the choices and drop the paper ballot into a lock box for any future audits. The voter may verify if the paper ballot reflects the correct choices before it is scanned, or recreate a corrected ballot if it does not. The incorrect ballot will be destroyed.

A selection committee chosen by the secretary of state reviewed all equipment on the market which manufacturers this type of equipment and chose Dominion Voting as the vendor. The statute specified a touch screen to make it an easier transition for voters who have been using a touch screen with the current equipment since 2002. The ballot marking devices were thought to be more desirable because hand marked ballots can result in stray marks which confuse the scanners when counting. Some people don't even fill in the bubble, but instead circle the name of the candidate of choice or write in the candidate's name in the WRITE IN slot, or both. Others X or check the bubble, both of which are not understood by the scanner. Ballots which the scanner cannot determine the voter's choice require a team of three (one each to read, write, and watch) to duplicate the ballot indicating the voter's choice, a slow and costly process.

Each precinct will also have a new Express Poll machine, a special purpose computer which holds the registered voter list for the entire state. If the voter presents a GA driver's license or a GA Department of Driver Services issued ID card, the Express Poll will populate a digital voter certificate with the voter's information, which the voter will sign on the screen, similar to signing for a credit card purchase. Voters who present other valid identification will fill out a paper voter certificate as in the past.

The ballot marking devices, printers, scanners, and express poll machines are electric but not connected to a digital transmission line. Therefore, they cannot be 'hacked'. If a virus is to be introduced, the devices must be accessed physically. So, as with the DRE's, security of transportation and storage at the warehouse and precinct become most important to protect the viability of the hardware and software. The county central elections departments, however, do use digital transmission to and from the secretary of state's office. But individual voter ballots are not transmitted, only totals of votes received for each candidate in every race, or the number of YES's and NO's made for a question on the ballot.

The purchase order is for 31,000 ballot marking devices, BMDs, and printers and 3500 scanners. The number of new express poll devices was not announced, but each precinct should have at least two, and perhaps as many as 8 or 10, depending on the number of voters assigned to that precinct.

The voting equipment cost is about \$107 million. The costs of the Express Polls may be extra. The bond package of the 2020 budget approved in the 2019 General Assembly session included \$150 million in 20 year bonds for this purpose.

Up to six counties will pilot the new equipment this November in the municipal elections. Statewide the equipment will first be used on March 24 for the Presidential Preferential Primary, again for the General Primary on May 19 and any subsequent runoff, the General Election on November 3 and any runoff on December 1 and if required for a federal runoff on January 5, 2021, and for all early voting periods associated with these dates. Absentee-by-mail and provisional ballots will continue to be hand marked paper ballots.

Administrative procedures will be developed by the State Election Board. Those currently in place are for the DRE units and must be modified or rewritten for the new equipment. Forms used by poll workers to turn into the county election department and then held for state review must be redesigned. All of this needs to be in place by January so that counties can modify their training programs and get workers trained for the advanced voting periods and primary elections later in the spring.

It is possible that voters will experience longer lines in March when they go to vote. Poll workers will be a little slower as they learn the new equipment and use new forms and see new screens. Voters will be a little slower as they encounter the new devices and work through their interface with the changed process. The good news is that the first encounter, the Presidential Preferential Primary, has an uncomplicated ballot. Only candidates for president for the political party ballot chosen are on it. By the general primary in May, which has candidates for many partisan and all nonpartisan offices, all poll workers and most voters will have had prior exposure.

The choice of this equipment was not universally accepted. Those desiring a hand-marked paper ballot brought suit against the state. The judge ruled that new equipment could be used, but if all was not ready, the old DREs could not be used as a fall back. Hand-marked paper ballots would have to be used. Presumably, the hand-marked ballots would be taken by the voter to the scanner to be tabulated and stored. Scanners are not new technology and are already used to tabulate absentee and provisional ballots.

Abraham Lincoln said it a long time ago, paraphrased – “One can please some of the people all the time, and all of the people some of the time, but cannot please all of the people all of the time.” This seems to be true with the choice of voting machines. The complaints about the devices chosen are very similar to those made against the DRE’s from the very first use in 2002. Yet, there has been no system-wide infiltration of that system during the 18 years it has been used. Without question, such hacking is possible. But the probability of it escaping all the logic and accuracy testing done on each machine before every use and the security enforced for storage and transportation makes such an opportunity for access very difficult indeed. Currently, at the end of a voting day, poll workers must have the same number of voter certificates as cast ballots and as names on the list of voters who came to the precinct. The paper ballots used for provisional votes are pre-numbered and the number of provisional ballots cast plus the number of ballots unused and any ballots ‘spoiled’ must equal the number of ballots issued to the precinct. Such controls will probably stay in place with the new equipment.

Now, there will be another level of security – the ballot itself. Because it is paper, it can be read by the human eye and can be used to verify any voter’s choice and to count the votes for any race, both manually and electronically. More checks on any malfunction of the equipment.

Voters can be very proactive in helping election officials insure that votes are counted. Insure that your voter registration is up to date, that it reflects your current address and name, before you go to vote. Make sure you show up at the precinct to which you are assigned. Print out the sample ballot for your precinct. You will find these resources at www.mvp.sos.ga.gov. Voter registration closes about one month before any election date, and if you find you need to update your registration, you’ll have time to do it before you go to vote. You’ll also be informed if your polling location has changed.

You will be given any number of opportunities to use the new equipment in demonstrator mode. Take one of them. When you go to vote, the equipment will be more familiar to you. Study the sample ballot and make your choice for each office and question before you go to vote. Take it with you to vote. Compare that to the ballot printed out before you take your ballot to the scanner.

Spending a few minutes doing your research on your voter registration will save you time when you do go and vote. You will then have the confidence that you have helped create a countable ballot because you are an informed voter.

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