

Electronic Voting

Coalition's support of voting machines causes confusion

By Lynn Landes

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WASHINGTON, DC, Nov. 20, 2004—The situation was somewhat surreal. At Thursday's press conference in The Governor's House Hotel, representatives of the 'Election Verification Project', a coalition of technologists, voting rights and legal organizations, seemed strangely out of touch with reality and their own past concerns, as they promoted a plan that leaves voting machines firmly entrenched in the election process.

Public doubt continues to grow over the 2004 election results. That doubt is rooted in suspicions surrounding the use of voting machines, suspicions that these very groups helped to cultivate.

Contradictory claims abounded. Kim Alexander, of The California Voter Foundation, sang the praises of touchscreen machines, despite the mayhem she admits their use caused in this year's election. "Problems were reported with all vendors and across most of the states that use e-voting. Electronic voting machines lost votes in North Carolina, miscounted votes in Ohio, and broke down in New Orleans, causing long lines and shutdowns at polling places," she said.

Alexander added to the confusion at the press conference when she boasted that ". . . there was no nation-wide meltdown." She didn't appear to grasp what computer scientists, including Dr. David Dill who was standing right next to her, have been warning for years—that widespread vote fraud or system failure could easily occur and no one would ever know. Over 99 percent of all ballots were counted by machines: lever, computerized ballot scanners, or touchscreens. Poll watchers can stare at these machines all they want, but they're not going to learn much.

While acknowledging that voting rights organizations across the country are still receiving thousands of complaints about voting machine malfunctions and complete breakdowns, project members continued to promote the use of ballot printers and spot audits as an adequate solution to the problem. The group even published a manual for poll monitors that had the appearance of an industry buyers guide and included only minimal coverage of problems associated with each type of equipment. Inexplicably, touchscreen voting machines with ballot printer attachments, although available, were not listed in the manual.

In an interview with this journalist, Dr. Dill of The Verified Voting Foundation, admitted that when a voting machine malfunctions or breaks down, the ballot printer is pretty much useless. Adding to that bad news (at what was clearly meant to be an upbeat press conference), one speaker noted that voters who were given provisional ballots in cases of machine malfunction, may not have had their votes counted at all in this past election.

According to their mission statement, the proposed reforms of the Election Verification Project are designed to increase transparency in the voting process from registration to tabulation, including: federal and state legislation requiring a voter-verified paper record, mandatory national electronic voting standards, and routine auditing of computerized vote counts. However, observers note that all these proposals taken together do not add up to a transparent process in any meaningful way. This is a

plan that leaves easily rigged and malfunctioning machines in the voting process, permits elections officials to control any audits, and denies citizens the right to have every vote counted at the local level.

Whatever the goal of the press conference organizers, their message seemed to sow more confusion than offer a realistic solution for angry and suspicious voters.

Other speakers included: Chellie Pingree, president of Common Cause; Lillie Coney of Electronic Privacy Information Center; Matt Zimmerman of Electronic Frontier Foundation; and Will Doherty, of Verified Voting Foundation.

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