

Changes behind scenes in voting

California only state in which every county will have paper trail of votes

By Ian Hoffman, STAFF WRITER
Inside Bay Area

Most voters in California will not see much of a difference, but behind the scenes many counties are fielding new or upgraded voting machinery for the 2006 elections.

Gone is the punch-card ballot that, until 2000, was a mainstay of California polling places. For voters with disabilities, local elections officials are trying new blends of voting machinery to meet federal law on accessibility.

But in the biggest change, every county for the first time will have a paper ballot or backup record of votes as insurance against inaccuracy, fraud or breakdown of computerized voting systems. That means voters will see printers and paper, and lots of them.

This year, California will become the first entire state to have such a backup record, said Kim Alexander, a paper-trail proponent and president of the nonprofit California Voter Foundation.

"Election officials rely on proprietary software produced by private companies to count the votes," Alexander said in a statement. "The voter verified paper trail requirement ensures that election officials have a meaningful, independent audit trail to use when they publicly verify the vote."

According to data collected by the foundation and released Thursday, 18 counties are putting new voting systems before voters in the primary this June. Most are swapping optically scanned paper ballots or punch cards for electronic, touch-screen voting machines that meet state and federal laws requiring paper trails and unassisted voting for people with disabilities.

Primaries are the most complex California election to run because of the need to maintain partisan separation in ballots and tallies. Local elections officials prefer not adding to their headaches by rolling out new voting systems, so it is unusual for a third of the state to do so.

Yet most of those changes are in smaller, rural counties, and voters in most larger counties will use roughly the same kind of voting tools as in 2004, though the machines and software have been upgraded.

There are exceptions. Alameda County, for example, is leaving electronic-voting largely aside for paper ballots to be carried to a central location and optically scanned. San Diego County is loaning thousands of its ATM-like touch-screens to other counties and for the better part is relying on optically scanned ballots.

As a result, the share of California voters using touch-screens has fallen to 32 percent, down from 43 percent in the March 2004 primary. In that election, 57 percent of registered voters lived in counties using optically scanned paper ballots and punch cards. Now, that number has risen to 68 percent.

Many local elections officials were primed at the end of last year to buy new electronic voting systems. But

delays in the production of those machines and in winning approval for use in California elections produced confusion this year. Some counties charged ahead; others reconsidered and fell back on upgrading their older systems while adding anywhere from a few to hundreds of voting devices from different manufacturers to accommodate voters with disabilities.

San Mateo, Sonoma and seven other counties are doing something previously unheard of — running two voting systems by different manufacturers, in parallel. Most San Mateo voters will cast ballots to be read and tallied on ES&S machines, while voters with disabilities will use more accessible HartInterCivic touch-screens at regional voting centers.

Yolo County planned on buying ES&S' accessible ballot-marking devices, known as AutoMarks and selling for about \$5,000 each. But contract negotiations soured, and Yolo officials instead are using VotePad, a series of plastic ballot-marking booklets that come with an audiocassette guide for the voter.

State elections officials question the legality of the idea, since the VotePad has not formally been certified for use in California.

"I think it's a clever work-around," said Alexander of the California Voter Foundation. "I think a lot of counties are just trying to get through one election at a time. They're using this election to try out a system without making a long-term commitment to one system or vendor."

In many counties, manufacturers now are racing to deliver new software, new or rebuilt machines or new parts such as the printers that will supply paper trails for touch-screen voting machines. Warehouses where voting machines are stored are hives of activity these days, testing the newly arrived equipment and getting it programmed for the June 6 election.

"It truly is chaos out there," said Tom Stanionis, director of technology for the Yolo County clerk/recorder's office.

But two-thirds of the counties, including most of the large ones, are sticking with or returning to optical scanners, upgraded to the latest version.

"They are trying to play it safe. They don't want to be the guinea pigs," said Alexander. "There are some who are willing to experiment with the accessibility requirements, but they're mostly sticking with the systems they're familiar with."

Many elections officials also are eyeing the rise in absentee voting, already close to 50 percent in the Bay Area, and all of those votes are optically scanned.

Contact Ian Hoffman at ihoffman@angnewspapers.com.