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Voting Machine Printouts May Conceal Errors

Voters in Chicago and Cook County have an opportunity to review their choices on paper before leaving the touch-screen voting booth this month. But that paper record could have serious errors, and the voter would never know, say experts with the Illinois Ballot Integrity Project (IBIP).

Touch-screen voting machines in Cook County produce a paper record of the voter's choices. The record contains data in two forms: one is human-readable, the other is a bar code. The voter can easily verify the human-readable data, but cannot discern or verify data in the bar code. Yet the County has been considering relying on the bar code to confirm voting machine results.

"A match between the bar code and the machine doesn't prove that the vote count is valid," said Roy Lipscomb, IBIP Director for Technology. "The bar code might not match the human-readable data."

"At the grocery story, the price marked on a shelf of canned beans might not match the price which the bar code sends to the cash register," said Larry Quick, Chairperson of IBIP. "Computer error, human error, malfeasance—any of these can result in a mismatch. The same is true for bar-coded ballots."

"To guard against hidden errors, the Illinois legislature in 2005 instituted stringent protections for the voter," said Bob Wilson, Chair of IBIP's Cook County Chapter. "The Illinois Election Code requires that the paper record ' . . . be printed in a clear, readily readable format that can be easily reviewed by the voter for completeness and accuracy,' and bar codes fail to meet this standard."

Bar code advocates might argue that the County can be trusted to perform such verification in place of the voter. "That's like handing the voter a contract and saying, 'Hey, just sign it. Don't worry about the stuff you can't read,'" said Clare Tobin, Chair of the Chicago Chapter of IBIP. "That's unacceptable. It violates both the spirit and the letter of the law."

"It's a house of cards," continued Tobin. "The machine data is to be assured by the bar code. And the bar code is to be assured by the human-readable data. But election officials would be short-shrifting the human-readable data; so there's no assurance at all."

"The bottom line is this," says Quick, "If a paper trail is to serve as a trustworthy expression of the voter's intent—whether in the initial count, in the audit, or in a recount—then the human-readable record must be treated as the sole official record of each citizen's vote."

The Illinois Ballot Integrity Project is a not-for-profit, non-partisan civic organization dedicated to the correction of election system deficiencies and to ensuring fair, accurate and completely transparent elections.

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