

Florida to Shift Voting System With Paper Trail



Alex Quesada for The New York Times

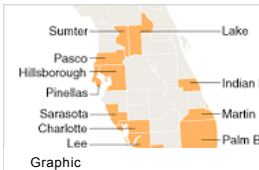
"The price of freedom is not cheap," Gov. Charlie Crist, right, said in outlining a vote-counting change expected to cost \$32.5 million.

By **ABBY GOODNOUGH** and **CHRISTOPHER DREW**
Published: February 2, 2007

DELRAY BEACH, Fla., Feb. 1 — Gov. Charlie Crist announced plans on Thursday to abandon the touch-screen voting machines that many of Florida's counties installed after the disputed 2000 presidential election. The state will instead adopt a system of casting paper ballots counted by scanning machines in time for the 2008 presidential election.

Voting experts said Florida's move, coupled with new federal voting legislation expected to pass this year, could be the death knell for the paperless electronic touch-screen machines. If as expected the Florida Legislature approves the \$32.5 million cost of the change, it would be the nation's biggest repudiation yet of touch-screen voting, which was widely embraced after the 2000 recount as a state-of-the-art means of restoring confidence that every vote would count.

Multimedia



Where Voters Will Find a New Type of Ballot

Several counties around the country, including Cuyahoga in Ohio and Sarasota in Florida, are moving toward exchanging touch-screen machines for ones that provide a paper trail. But Florida could become the first state that invested heavily in the recent rush to touch screens to reject them so sweepingly.

"Florida is like a synonym for election problems; it's the Bermuda Triangle of elections," said Warren Stewart, policy director of VoteTrust USA, a nonprofit group that says optical scanners are more reliable than touch screens. "For Florida to be clearly contemplating moving away from touch screens to the greatest extent possible is truly significant."

Other states that rushed to buy the touch-screen machines are also abandoning them. Earlier this week, the Virginia Senate passed a bill that would phase out the machines as they wore out, and replace them with optical scanners. The Maryland legislature also seems determined to order a switch from the paperless touch screens, though it is not clear yet if it will require the use of optical scanners or just allow paper printers to be added to the touch screens.

On Monday, Representative Rush D. Holt, Democrat of New Jersey, plans to introduce a bill in

More Articles in National »

Today's Headlines Daily E-Mail

Sign up for a roundup of the day's top stories, sent every morning.
[See Sample](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED

1. Atherton Journal: In an Enclave of Serious Wine Lovers, a Mesmerizing Theft
2. Molly Ivins, Columnist, Dies at 62
3. Unhappy Meals
4. Posing as a Family, Sex Offenders Stun a Town
5. Dark Days Follow Hard-Hitting Career in N.F.L.
6. Paul Krugman: Missing Molly Ivins
7. Basics: Better Shoeboxes for Digital Photos
8. Harry Potter's Final Act Is Set for July 21
9. Celebrity Architects Reveal a Daring Cultural Xanadu for the Arab World
10. The Minimalist: The Boring Old Broiler Turns Out to Be a Superstar

[Go to Complete List »](#)

Travel
nytimes.com/travel

Where to find an undeveloped surfer's paradise

Also in Travel:

- ➔ [Where to find "Las Vegas on the Steppe"](#)
- ➔ [Where to go hiking with the kids in a tropical rainforest](#)
- ➔ [Where you might find the "grooviest village in Italy"](#)



DEADLY INVADERS
Buy Now

Congress that would require all voting machines nationwide to produce paper records through which voters can verify that their ballots were recorded correctly. A majority of House members have endorsed the proposal, and the changes have strong support among Senate Democrats. Mr. Holt's bill would also substantially toughen the requirements for the touch-screen machines that have printers, and experts say this could give even more impetus to the shift toward the optical scanning systems.

Mr. Crist, [a Republican](#), at times drew whoops and applause when he announced his plan at the South County Civic Center in Palm Beach County, the epicenter of the 2000 election standoff and home of the infamous "butterfly ballot" that confused many voters. The touch screens had replaced the punch-card systems that caused widespread problems that year.

"You should, when you go vote, be able to have a record of it," Mr. Crist told a few hundred mostly older citizens at the civic center, in Delray Beach, where many residents said they accidentally voted for [Patrick J. Buchanan](#) in 2000 instead of [Al Gore](#) because of the confusing ballot design. "That's all we're proposing today. It's not very complicated; it is in fact common sense. Most importantly, it is the right thing to do."

Mr. Crist's renunciation of touch-screen voting one month after he replaced [Jeb Bush](#) as governor of the nation's fourth-most-populous state, suggested that the fight for paper voting records, long a pet project of Democrats, might become more bipartisan. Mr. Crist made the announcement with Representative Robert Wexler, a Democrat from Delray Beach who has ardently led the movement for a paper trail and has attacked Republicans along the way.

"I support this plan 100 percent," Mr. Wexler said before introducing Mr. Crist. "This governor means what he says, and he's coming to Tallahassee and he's spreading the message throughout Florida that this isn't about Republican or Democrat, it's not about this ideology or that; it's about unifying people and doing what's right for the people of Florida."

The 15 Florida counties that have adopted touch-screen voting in recent years, including Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach and Hillsborough, would move to optical-scan voting under the proposal before the presidential election of 2008. The plan would give them the option, however, of using touch-screen machines during the state's two-week early voting period that precedes Election Day, if the machines are modified to provide a paper trail. Those counties represent 54 percent of the state's registered voters. Broward County alone has bought about 6,000 touch-screen machines in recent years, and Palm Beach County has about 4,500.

Mr. Crist said county election supervisors would explore how to make optical-scan voting easier for blind people and for those who speak foreign languages. In some cases, they have been able to vote without assistance on the touch-screen machines.

Asked how he felt about discarding tens of millions of dollars worth of touch-screen machines just years after they were acquired, Mr. Crist said, "The price of freedom is not cheap. The importance of a democratic system of voting that we can trust, that we can have confidence in, is incredibly important."

Election experts estimate that paperless electronic machines were used by about 30 percent of voters nationwide in 2006. But their reliability has increasingly come under scrutiny, as has the difficulty of doing recounts without a paper trail. Federal technology experts concluded late last year that paperless touch-screen machines could not be secured from tampering.

Some states had bought early versions of the paperless machines before the 2000 recount, and one of them, New Mexico, switched last year to optical scanners. But most of the machines in other states were purchased with federal money provided under a 2002 law that required states to upgrade from old punch-card and lever systems.

New York is planning to buy either screens with printers or optical scanners, New Jersey is adding paper trails to its touch screens and Connecticut is buying the optical scanners. A recent survey by Election Data Services, a Washington consulting firm, estimated that 36 percent of the nation's counties have bought electronic machines, including some with printers attached, while 56 percent

have the optical scan systems.

Mr. Holt said his bill would require the return to paper ballots by next year's presidential primaries, and it would authorize \$300 million in federal money to upgrade the machines. Some state and county election officials say it could be difficult to make such sweeping changes by then.

But, Mr. Holt said, "it depends on how badly we want to do it. The public is getting very impatient here."

In Sarasota County last November, more than 18,000 voters who used touch-screen machines did not have their votes recorded in the close Congressional race between Vern Buchanan, the Republican, and Christine Jennings, the Democrat. Mr. Buchanan took office last month after a recount gave him a 369-vote victory, but Ms. Jennings has sued.

Former Governor Bush, President Bush's younger brother, generally defended touch-screen voting during his tenure and said skeptics had fallen prey to "conspiracy theories." But leading up to the 2004 presidential election, the Republican Party of Florida sent out fliers urging voters to use absentee ballots because of the absence of a paper trail.

Experts say the optical scanners are less expensive than the touch-screen systems. But Kimball W. Brace, the president of Election Data Services, said optical scanning systems had had a slightly higher rate of voter error than touch screens.

Abby Goodnough reported from Delray Beach, Fla., and Christopher Drew from New York.





[More Articles in National »](#)

[Need to know more? 50% off home delivery of The Times.](#)

Tips

To find reference information about the words used in this article, hold down the ALT key and click on any word, phrase or name. A new window will open with a dictionary definition or encyclopedia entry.

Related Articles

-  [Big Shift Seen in Voting Methods With Turn Back to a Paper Trail](#) (December 8, 2006)
-  [Winner Named For Florida Seat; Loser Files Suit](#) (November 21, 2006)
-  [THE 2006 ELECTIONS; In Florida, Echoes of 2000 as Vote Questions Emerge](#) (November 10, 2006)
-  [THE 2006 ELECTIONS: REFLECTIONS; Blogs Take Lead in Reporting Polling Problems, With Supporting Evidence on YouTube](#) (November 8, 2006)

Related Searches

- [Voting Machines](#)
- [United States Politics and Government](#)
- [Presidential Election of 2000](#)
- [Presidential Election of 2008](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



TimesSelect

ARTS »



Warner: The Irrational Voter



Screens: Noh Advertising

TimesSelect

A Question of Execution

Some death penalty cases are less equal than others, writes Clyde Haberman.

TELEVISION »



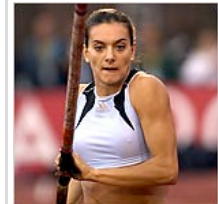
Pretending to Like the Little People

ESCAPES »



Ski Tour Brings Many Parties

SPORTS »



Pole Vaulter Keeps a Low Profile