

Public Hearing Testimony: Dana DeBeauvoir, County Clerk, Austin Texas - 05/05/04

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eSLATE VOTING IN TRAVIS COUNTY

By Dana DeBeauvoir, County Clerk

In my role as Elections Administrator for Travis County, I am asked questions about electronic voting in response to stories that have surfaced in the news and on the Internet. As we all know, these issues are complex .

The eSLATE voting system we use today is more accurate and tamper proof than any other voting method we have employed in the past. Could it be more secure and the risk of any problems be further reduced? The answer is yes. Computer experts; state, federal and local officials; and manufacturers are further studying the issues. While their analysis is underway, my paramount responsibility as your elections administrator is to ensure that the conduct of our elections be open, fair, and accessible to all.

Where does Travis County’s election process stand in all this? We are fortunate that the most serious issues facing other areas are not connected to the type of equipment Travis County purchased or the company we purchased it from. Some of the benefits of the eSLATE system are that it:

- Is not connected to the Internet or an intranet. There are no external communication pathways.
- Uses a selection wheel, touch-button method instead of a touch-screen, therefore avoiding errors caused from screen calibration problems.
- Allows the County, not the vendor, to do the programming of the ballot in full public view.
- Utilizes triple redundancy of data storage, and the ability to do electronic and paper audits in the process. Includes battery back-up on all voting equipment.
- Allows visually impaired voters the right to cast a secret ballot.
- Captures images of each ballot cast so that electronic or manual recounts can be conducted.

The move to electronic voting systems is driven by the federal Americans With Disabilities Act since it is the only voting method that allows blind or low-vision voters to cast a secret ballot. This group represents a growing segment of our population. County Clerks cannot design or modify election equipment. That direction must come from federal and state officials. In the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), Congress mandated that states must adopt electronic voting to make a secret ballot available to every citizen. HAVA also required states to discontinue punch card voting methods.

Equipment alone does not constitute the conduct of an election. Citizen involvement, transparency in the process, and many checks and balances go into the voting and counting process. Based on my international elections experience, I believe in constant vigilance and continuous improvement to ensure free and fair elections. Procedures play a crucial role in election security and are often not considered in the computer scientists' review of equipment. Here are some of the additional checks and balances Travis County employs:

- All election equipment is protected by lock and key, passwords, and camera security.
- All work is done in teams; no one person ever performs a task alone. Preparation of the voting equipment for Early Voting and Election Day is done in full public view.
- Numerous audits are performed during voting. For example, frequent examinations are made during Early Voting and again on Election Day to ensure that the number of signatures on the voter sign-up sheet and the number of ballots cast are the same.
- Procedures are in writing. All Election Judges, Early Voting workers, and County Clerk Elections staff must undergo extensive training in two areas: operation of the voting equipment, and procedures for the voting process.
- Logic and Accuracy Testing, above what is required by state law, is performed manually for each precinct ballot. Functional tests are performed manually on all pieces of election equipment. The tests are conducted in public and are usually filmed by local media.
- Independents, Democrats, Republicans, and other parties participate in the conduct of Travis County elections, including pre-election preparation, Early Voting, Election Day, and Election Night counting.
- Criminal background checks are completed on all permanent and temporary elections personnel.

Although these features and procedures provide great assurance and protection, we should hardly be complacent. The concerns being heard with regard to electronic voting systems should be carefully examined and taken seriously. While as County Clerk I do not have the authority to modify, design, or prescribe standards for equipment, I can help influence those who carry this important responsibility.

To that end, I am encouraging election equipment vendors to embrace their critics and find creative solutions to address concerns. Last month, I urged the Texas Secretary of State (the entity responsible for setting standards and certifying voting equipment) to convene a diverse, statewide group of election officials, technical experts, advocacy groups, and citizens to analyze and make recommendations on these complex issues. I serve on the Elections Security Subcommittee of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers IEEE (#1583) whose task is to study and make technical recommendations on statewide security standards for voting equipment. IEEE engineers are a major voice in the high tech industry, and prescribe standards and tests for computer software, hardware, and systems security in many industries.

When you cast your vote in the upcoming elections, you can feel confident that your ballot is safe. I promise to continue being your advocate on these issues and to listen to concerns about electronic voting. The beauty of our democracy is that our voices are strengthened when we embrace public scrutiny and open discussion. I welcome improvements as they come through the appropriate state and federal elections channels.

My thanks to our ever-vigilant voters who have been monitoring the technology as it continues to evolve in this area.

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