

Votes Must Be Verifiable

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By Anna G. Eshoo

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Last November the voters of Sarasota County, Fla., made a wise decision when they approved a ballot measure to require future elections to incorporate the use of voter-verified paper ballots. Unfortunately for those same voters, the decision came too late for them to avoid landing in the middle of the latest controversy eroding confidence in our election system.

With our next presidential election just 18 months away, Congress would be equally wise to move swiftly to require voter-verified paper ballots for every federal election and eliminate the kind of doubt that continues to linger over the ballots cast in Sarasota County.

In early voting and on Election Day, 119,759 Sarasota County voters cast ballots using electronic voting machines. When the votes were counted, however, an astonishing 18,380 of those ballots failed to register a vote in the highly competitive open-seat race in Florida's 13th Congressional District.

The 15 percent undervote is far above historical norms. The combined undervote for the race in the other four counties of the 13th district was just 2.5 percent. The undervote for Sarasota County voters who cast absentee ballots counted with optical-scanning devices was also just 2.5 percent.

As with Palm Beach County's notorious "butterfly ballots" in the 2000 presidential election, some experts have criticized Sarasota County's ballot design and suggested that voters may not have seen the congressional candidates listed on the touch-screen machines. The truth is we may never know what happened to those 18,380 ballots because there's no way to know who cast them or what their intentions were.

What we do know is that the election in which Republican Vern Buchanan was declared the winner over Democrat Christine Jennings by a mere 369 votes is still unsettled and under review. Regardless of the outcome, Republicans and Democrats must work together to address the problems exposed in Sarasota County to head off bigger controversies down the road.

The House will soon consider House resolution 811, the Voter Confidence and Increased Accessibility Act of 2007, which I'm proud to co-sponsor. The legislation requires a voter-verified paper ballot for all voting machines and voting systems used in federal elections.

Paper ballots will enable voters to review the choices they've made for accuracy before they leave the voting booth, a safeguard that could have prevented the controversy in Sarasota County. The bill further increases voter confidence by requiring random, unannounced, hand-count audits of the voter-verified paper records in 2 percent of all jurisdictions, including at least one precinct per county.

H.R. 811 also addresses the concerns of states and counties that must implement the new requirements. While states that currently have no paper-ballot requirements for their electronic voting machines will have to comply with this law by 2008, those which already have a paper-ballot requirement - including California - will receive a waiver until 2010. The bill also authorizes \$1 billion in funding to help states and counties acquire the necessary equipment for voter-verifiable paper ballots, including a verifiable paper trail for the disabled.

The legitimacy of our democracy depends upon the will of the people being accurately reflected at the polls. No citizen who exercises the right to vote should ever walk out of a polling place wondering if his or her vote will be counted, and counted correctly. Voter-verified paper ballots will increase confidence in our elections and greatly enhance our system of self-governance.

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