

Record number of U.S. voters may cast paper ballots in November

By Allison Hoffman

Associated Press Writer

SAN DIEGO – Come No-ve-ber, more Americans might cast their ballots on paper than in any other election in U.S. history. That wasn't supposed to happen. If everything had gone according to the government's \$ 3 billion plan to upgrade vot-ing technology after the hang-ing- chad fiasco in Florida in 2000, that sentence would read " electronic machines" instead of paper.

Instead, thousands of touch-screen devices are collecting dust in warehouses from California to Florida, where officials worried about hackers and fed up with technical glitches have replaced the equipment with scanners that will read paper ballots.

An Associated Press Election Research survey has found that 57 percent of the nation's regis-tered voters live in counties that will be relying on paper ballots this fall.

The number of registered vot-ers in jurisdictions that will rely mainly on electronic voting ma-chines has fallen from a high of 44 percent during the 2006 midterm elections to 36 percent. (Much of the rest of the elec-torate consists of voters in New York state, who will be using old-fashioned pull-lever machines.) In fact, because of growth in the electorate over the last decade, expansion of absentee voting rules, and expectations of high turnout for the contest be-tween Barack Obama and John McCain, some experts are pre-dicting a record number of Americans will cast ballots on pa-per this year.

" More people will be using computer-read paper ballots than at any other time in the na-tion's history," said Kimball Brace, head of Election Data Services, a consulting firm. "As you get more registered voters and more people in the pool, it exacerbates these bigger issues of paper."

In 2000, about 97 million reg-istered voters lived in counties that relied on some form of pa-per ballot, Brace said. That figure is expected to top 100 million this fall, according to the AP data.

The return to paper creates ex-tra stress on an already-strapped election system. Cash-poor coun-ties will have to spend tens of millions of dollars printing bal-lots. Voters, many of them first-timers, may wind up confused by the ballot formats and frustrated by long lines of people waiting to use the scanners. And counting all the paper could hold up the re-sults of the election.

"After 2000, there was a wide-spread revulsion about paper – everyone had the mental image of the guy cross-eyed looking at the punch-card ballot," said Doug Chapin, director of the watchdog organization Election-line. "But there's no silver bullet. You're trading one set of prob-lems for another."

All states but Idaho have junked the punch- card ballots that caused so much trouble in Florida. But many plan to use paper ballots that require vot-ers to fill in ovals with a pen. The ballots are then read by digital scanners.