

Maryland Registered Voters' Opinions about Voting and Voting Technologies

Prepared for the Maryland State Board of Elections

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Executive Summary

This survey of registered voters in Maryland found that voters have a high level of confidence in Maryland's touch screen voting system. Most voters surveyed agreed that the current voting system was easy to use (99 percent), made voting quicker (85 percent), and recorded and counted the votes accurately (82 percent). Voters also felt that, even given the controversy around them, touch screen systems are reliable (73 percent), can be trusted (64 percent), accurately record and count votes (73 percent) and that security measures prevent tampering or hacking (53 percent). Seven in ten (70 percent) respondents agreed that that Maryland has done all it could to prevent fraud or tampering.

While the majority of respondents voiced confidence in the current voting system, they expressed concerns about external threats to the system. Forty-seven percent agreed that touch screen systems could be tampered with and hacked into, while over half of respondents (55 percent) said they believed that that the systems could be corrupted by malicious software programming.

The telephone survey, requested by the State Board of Elections, asked 800 registered voters who voted in the 2004 general election in Maryland their opinions about a series of issues around voting and voting technologies in the state. The survey had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percent at a 95 percent level of confidence.

The survey found that Maryland's registered voters are computer-literate, with 81 percent reporting that they use computers daily or several times a week. Of those, 85 percent use the Internet daily or several times a week. While a large majority of respondents (70 percent) said they have a high level of trust in computers, only 44 percent of Maryland voters have a high level of trust in government.

The use of alternatives to touch screen voting systems, as well as the introduction of vote verification systems, has been the subject of debate in Maryland and other states. Nevertheless, fewer than half (45 percent) of respondents said they had heard or read anything about touch screen systems within the past year, with 49 percent of those reporting they heard positive things and 48 percent reporting they heard negative things. Further, only one in five (23 percent) of registered voters said they had heard or read anything about people calling for different voting technologies to be added to or substituted for Maryland's touch screen voting system.

Voters were also unfamiliar with the concept of a paper trail (i.e., a system that produces a paper record or receipt that the voter can use to confirm his vote), one of the vote verification systems under discussion in Maryland. Of the 23 percent of voters who had heard or read about different voting technologies to be added to or substituted for Maryland's touch screen voting system, only 35 percent (about 8 percent of all voters sampled) responded that the primary thing that they had heard or read about involved a paper trail.

When the entire sample was asked what paper trail meant, nearly one in four (38 percent) said that they did not know. Only about 6 percent correctly indicated that paper trail means that a voter views a paper record of his vote behind a glass screen to verify the vote. Notwithstanding the confusion about the meaning of a paper trail, 69 percent said that voters should be able to confirm their votes through paper records or receipts.

The results of this survey indicate that there is no crisis of confidence among voters about Maryland's touch screen voting system as it is currently implemented. At the same time, voters are concerned about security of the system, but unfamiliar with one of the vote verification methods under discussion (paper trail). Given voter concerns, SBE should work with local boards of elections and interested groups to inform and educate the public about what is being done to secure the touch screen voting system used in Maryland from hacking, malicious programming and acts that might compromise elections.