Maybe the Democrats Don't Want Janet Reno

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Florida suffered a lot of bad national publicity about the 2000 election, with weeks of television coverage of hanging chads, undervotes and overvotes. So 15 Florida counties bought new modern computerized touch-screen voting machines to replace the butterfly punch-card machines, while 26 counties chose upgraded paper-ballot systems.
Miami-Dade County spent $24.5 million to buy 7,250 machines and Broward County spent $17.2 million to buy 5,200. The model they bought has the oh-so-sophisticated name "iVotronic."

But Florida learned some costly lessons. Technology can't solve the problem of election frauds and mistakes, and the Democrats can't seem to run an election.

Janet Reno charged that thousands of votes were not counted in Miami-Dade and Broward counties in the primary on September 10. She hoped to uncover enough uncounted votes to overcome the 8,100-vote margin by which she was defeated by Bill McBride.

Reno claimed that the new touch-screen voting machines used in Miami-Dade and Broward counties cost her the Democratic nomination for Governor to run against incumbent Jeb Bush. Since the Democrats control both those counties and the irregularities were so numerous, one can't help but wonder if the Democrats just didn't want Janet Reno to be their nominee.

Reno asserted that the touch-screen machines suffered from a buildup of smudges that created inaccuracies, some voters saw the wrong candidate's name light up when they touched the screen, and many machines did not properly tally the votes. In a couple of dozen precincts, computer cartridges failed to retrieve the cumulative results and the data had to be manually retrieved.

Reno charged that some votes were mysteriously uncounted, and she has some evidence. Reno is challenging 81 precincts in Miami-Dade where the Democratic overall turnout rate was less than 6 percent, and in Broward where 11 precincts reported turnout below 5 percent.

Broward has 5 precincts where 498 Democrats are registered but no Democratic ballots were cast. Some machines showed more than the typical percentage of ballots with non-votes for Governor.

In Broward precinct 5K, 1039 voters are registered but only 56 votes were tallied. The official count in Precinct 32X shows no votes, although 832 people are registered.

In Miami-Dade, 32 precincts reported no Democratic ballots cast despite more than 12,000 Democrats registered there, but 7 precincts reported Democratic turnouts of more than 100 percent.

The task is to go back and check the counters on the voting machines. Miami-Dade's supervisor of elections is starting to check the computer logs of all 7,250 machines.

However, Miami-Dade's machines are stacked helter-skelter in a warehouse, requiring a one-by-one search. Many machines no longer have external tags or labels with serial numbers, so the cover of each machine will have to be laboriously removed to find the serial number inside.

Reno is also collecting affidavits from voters who either had trouble voting or who were turned away from polls that opened late. It took extra time to program the machines in Miami-Dade because the lengthy ballot came in three languages: English, Spanish and Creole.

The modern touch-screen voting machines were first used last summer in South Florida in a local election for mayor and city council. After that election, we heard all the same complaints about undervotes and the inability of poll workers and voters to follow instructions.

Two candidates claimed they were cheated out of victory by malfunctioning voting machines, and that there were just as many undervotes with the new touch-screen machines as with the old punch- card machines. One close race was decided by only 4 votes, but had 78 undervotes.

Some voters complained that the touch-screen machines selected the wrong candidates. In August, national voting machine expert Rebecca Mercuri demonstrated how it's possible that a voter using these new voting machines could touch two candidates' names at once and register a vote for a third candidate.

Some claim the South Florida problems were the result of operator error, not mechanical malfunction. There were too few poll workers, inadequate training of poll workers, and failure to provide checklists for the operation. Some poll workers quit because they were intimidated and frustrated by the new machines.

The problem in 2000 wasn't the punch-card ballots anyway. I voted a punch-card ballot in November 2000 and didn't have any problem with it, and the sign on the ballot box in my precinct clearly told voters to "Remove your hanging chads."

We should not use any voting machines unless they print out a receipt confirming that the machine registered your vote for the candidates you chose. If the machine doesn't do that, the technology is subject to all kinds of fraud, and we should junk the voting machines altogether and go back to paper ballots