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Voters will see a change when they hit the polls

by Stephen Geffon
Jan 26, 2010 | 195 views | 0 💬 | 6 👍 | ✉ | 🖨

When you go to the polls in September, the old Shoup 3.2 mechanical voting machine - used in city polling places for about half a century - will be gone, replaced by Elections Systems & Software's (ES&S) DS200 Scanner and the AutoMark Ballot Marking Device.

ES&S will provide 5,000 to 7,000 voting machines to the city under a $50 million contract. According to the City Board of Elections, the board selected ES&S after completing a thorough evaluation and public hearing process.

"This change is part of the City of New York's compliance with the federal Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), which mandated, among other requirements, the replacement of lever machines and implementation of voting systems with a permanent paper record," read a BOE statement.

The ES&S DS200 Scanner is a portable electronic voting system that uses an optical scanner to read marked paper ballots and tally the results. This system allows for paper ballots to be immediately tabulated at the poll site. The DS200 also notifies voters of any voting errors and allows voters to immediately correct those errors.

The ES&S AutoMARK is a ballot marking device which allows any voter, including voters with disabilities, to mark a paper ballot privately and independently by using either its touch screen, Braille-enhanced keypad, sip & puff device, or rocker paddle. Voters may view the ballot on an adjustable screen or may listen to the ballot over headphones.

According to the BOE, the DS200 complies with New York State Election Law, State Board regulations, and the federal Elections Assistance Commission (EAC) 2005 Voluntary Voting System Guidelines.

"Ensuring that every New Yorker's vote is counted accurately remains the Board's number one goal," continued the statement. "We believe the DS200 poll site voting system will provide the accuracy and security that are essential in the voting process."

"I look forward to and welcome the new voting machines in New York City, and I am hopeful that they will be a great improvement over the machines of years past," said Assemblywoman Audrey Pheffer of Ozone Park. "However, it is vital we ensure that poll workers are knowledgeable about these new machines since they will be the ones who are instructing voters."

"These machines have been tested harder and subjected to more requirements than any system in the nation," said State Senator Joseph P. Addabbo, Jr. of Howard Beach, who chairs the Senate Elections Committee, "and the voters of the State of New York should feel confident that they will produce accurate and reliable results.

"The testimony and reports we received, and the audits of the results produced by the machines, revealed that they accurately recorded and reported ballot selections made by voters," continued Addabbo. "The optical scan technology they use also preserves voters ballots, commonly referred to as a 'paper trail,' ensuring the ability to conduct an accurate recount as necessary."

However, according to published reports, some election experts remain concerned about the possibility of accidental "overvotes," when, for instance, someone fills in ovals for two candidates rather than one (something that the levers would not have allowed). Critics are also concerned that the design of the paper ballots might be too confusing or hard to read.

One citizens' group, the Election Transparency Coalition, is preparing to file a lawsuit against the state to halt the transition to the new machines.

For more information on New York City's new poll site voting system, voters should call 866-VOTE-NYC (866-868-3962) or visit the Board's website at www.vote.nyc.ny.us.