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Worse to Come in Fall Elections, Officials Fear

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As officials investigated the human errors that disrupted Maryland's primary election, there were renewed fears yesterday that electronic malfunctions could cause even greater problems in November.

Computer scientists at Princeton University released a study, including a video, that demonstrated how they were able to hack into the type of electronic voting machines used in Maryland and install malicious software that could sway an election. The machines' manufacturer swiftly denounced the study as "unrealistic and inaccurate."

Meanwhile, frustrated election judges and voters continued to report widespread trouble with voting apparatuses during Tuesday's primary -- machines that froze, access cards that stopped working and computerized voter lists that crashed. The glitches led to long lines at many polling places and caused some voters to worry that their ballots had not been recorded properly, if at all.

After the 2000 presidential election debacle in Florida, many states overhauled their voting systems and abandoned paper ballots. Maryland has spent \$106 million over the past four years on new voting technology. Since 2002, four counties, including Montgomery and Prince George's, have used the Diebold AccuVote-TS voting machines. This year, they were used in every jurisdiction and are planned for use in the general election.

But election watchdogs have long cautioned that the machines are vulnerable to manipulation and failure -- and critics pointed yesterday to the Princeton study as the latest evidence.

Edward W. Felten, a professor of computer science and public affairs, said that he and two of his graduate students spent several months studying a Diebold AccuVote-TS voting machine. They were easily able to break into the machine and insert malicious software, he said.

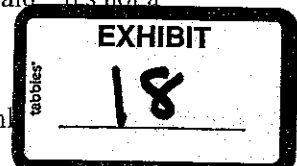
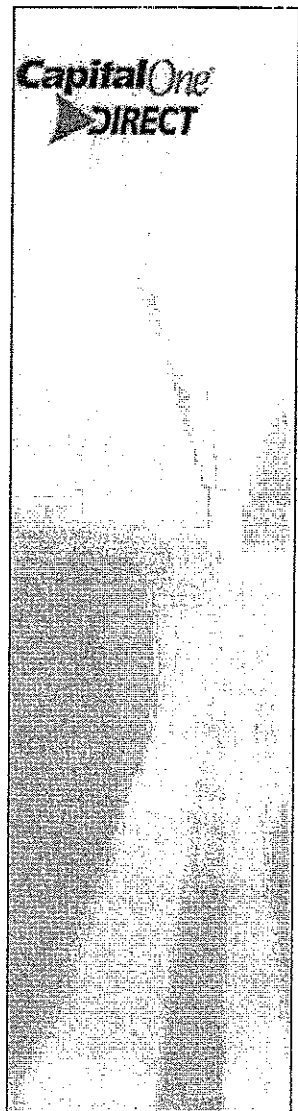
"The malicious code can steal votes in a manner that's undetectable or nearly undetectable," Felten said. "And the code can spread like a virus from one machine to another."

In their study, made public Wednesday, the trio said they obtained the machine from "a private party." Felten declined to elaborate.

In the video, which has been widely distributed on the Internet, Felten and his students showed how they were able to sway a mock election between Benedict Arnold and George Washington. Washington won the election 4 to 1. But the computer scientists said they were able to manipulate the machine's software so that it reported a 3 to 2 victory for Arnold.

"We think it's plausible a clever person could steal an election with this kind of attack," Felten said. "It's not a

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Manhattan Project. It's something one or two competent programmers could do "

Dave Byrd, president of Diebold Election Systems in Allen, Tex., said the machine used in the Princeton study "has security software that was two generations old and to our knowledge is not used anywhere in the country."

"Normal security procedures were ignored" by Felten and the students, Byrd said. He added, "Numbered security tape, 18 enclosure screws and numbered security tags were destroyed or missing so that the researchers could get inside the unit "

Byrd sought to reassure voters that users of an AccuVote-IS will not be disenfranchised.

"Secure voting equipment, proper procedures and adequate testing assure an accurate voting process," he said.

State election officials have staunchly defended the machines, saying they are among the most secure in the country. In the 2004 election, the state had a 0.3 percent residual vote rate -- votes that don't count because of voter error or other problems -- which was among the best of 37 states in an academic survey.

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R), who is up for reelection, has been an outspoken critic of the machines. He supported a bill this year that would have replaced the Diebold equipment with paper ballots and optical scanners. The bill passed the House unanimously but died in the Senate. Some legislators vow to press the issue again next year.

Joseph M. Getty, Ehrlich's policy director, said the Princeton study "reinforces that we're in very tenuous territory."

"The General Assembly's failure to act last session made it very difficult for something to be done in the seven weeks we have remaining" before the general election, Getty said.

A day after Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) called for the dismissal of Margaret Jurgensen, the elections director, the members of the Montgomery County Board of Elections said they had confidence in her. The board also said yesterday that it has asked the Election Center, a nonprofit Texas organization of state election officials, to review its procedures.

During Tuesday's primaries, voting was delayed at nearly all of Montgomery's 238 precincts after elections officials forgot to distribute the plastic cards required to operate the voting machines.

There were also technical glitches, many associated with the electronic polling books that were used in the state for the first time. The books, which resemble laptop screens, are electronic versions of the voter rolls that election judges use to verify a person's voter registration.

The Diebold touch-screen books were bought in June and July and were delivered to counties in waves afterward. But some didn't arrive until the week before the primary, meaning some election judges had little time to become familiar with them, said Ross Goldstein, the deputy administrator for the Maryland State Board of Elections.

Avi Rubin, a Johns Hopkins computer scientist who served as an election judge in Baltimore County, said he wasn't trained to use the machines until Aug. 24. At the training session, he said, he got three minutes of hands-on experience with the book. "But that was a lot more than a lot of the other people who were [elderly] and were not comfortable with the technology," he said.

Rubin, who issued a report in 2003 that said the machines were vulnerable to manipulation, has called them "inherently insecure."

Linda H. Lamone, the administrator of the State Board of Elections, said this week that all election judges should receive refresher training before November.

Technology glitches frustrated voters in several areas Tuesday. When Bruce Hathaway tried to vote at Little Flower School in Bethesda, he figured he had plenty of time. So he began poring through voting literature after a poll worker inserted the voter access card to fire up the voting machine.

After two minutes, Hathaway, an editor at Smithsonian Magazine, realized the machine's screen had frozen. There was an ominous message: Go see an election judge. And then bad news from the judge -- the machine said Hathaway had already voted so he couldn't finish his balloting.

"I was disenfranchised," he said.

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