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## Voting officials work to fix flaw in the system

### Bug leads to inaccurate reports

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With a presidential primary less than a year away, Wisconsin election officials are grappling with a new technological bug blamed for two confusing results in recent local elections.

A school board race in Waukesha County and another for town chairman in Racine County both tilted by the narrowest of margins from one candidate to another April 3 when votes were counted from electronic touch-screen balloting machines.

The machines, required at every polling place since last November, are designed to help disabled voters or anyone else who has difficulty with the traditional computer-scanned paper ballot system.

But incompatible software means the touch-screen votes are not tabulated automatically along with other results, and that has slowed the process and led to election night confusion about winners and losers in some places.

"It's a chance for me to make an error," said Racine County Clerk Joan Rennert, whose office corrected early results in a race for Burlington town chairman April 3 when the touch-screen votes changed the outcome.

Incumbent Barbara Ruud, who saw victory turn to defeat, demanded a recount but still came up short, 645 to 644, to Kurt Petrie.

In Waukesha County, a race for the Hartland-Lakeside School Board likewise took an unexpected turn when touch-screen results were added to the other unofficial totals.

Candidate Hugh Davis, who ended up losing to Kristi Korpela by a razor-thin margin of 533 to 531 after initially thinking he had won, later decided against a recount and said he would not fault the election process.

But, he added, "Obviously, I think everyone would prefer if the unofficial results were as accurate as

possible."

The stakes will be higher in February when voters go to the polls for the Wisconsin presidential primary, helping to pick the Democratic and Republican nominees in the 2008 race for the White House.

State election officials say they hope to overcome the technological difficulties before then.

Ross Hein, voting equipment certification coordinator for the State Elections Board, said officials are working with touch-screen vendors to develop software that will allow polling places to report consolidated results electronically.

"Everything is going to be worked out," Hein said.

The issue has developed since hundreds of touch-screen machines were put in service statewide last November under the federal Help America Vote Act, which mandated technology to make voting easier for people with disabilities.

Although the machines allow voters to vote simply by touching an electronic screen, Wisconsin election administrators do not have the technology to combine those results with other ballot scanners and report a single polling place's total figures all at once.

In some counties, polling places have resorted to using a telephone or fax machine to register their touch-screen results with the county clerk - often after other unofficial results have been posted.

Two touch-screen vendors - Sequoia Voting Systems of Oakland, Calif., and Diebold Election Systems of McAllen, Texas - are working with Wisconsin state officials.

Sequoia spokeswoman Michelle Shafer said her company has addressed the issue in other states through a device called a Hybrid Activator, Accumulator & Transmitter, which automatically tabulates touch-screen results and merges them with other results at each polling place.

But because Wisconsin has different hardware and software in place for vote scanning machines than those states, Shafer said, a device is being developed that will be compatible.

### **System not flawed**

State election officials emphasize that the situation does not mean touch-screen voting is flawed or that Wisconsin elections are tainted.

Elections Board spokesman Kyle Richmond said that voters, candidates and the news media must remember that election results do not become official until a county clerk has certified the outcome - a process that sometimes takes several days.

"Just because we don't have it instantly doesn't mean anything's wrong," he said.

Rennert, however, said she felt rushed to implement touch-screen voting in Racine County. She said poll workers had little time to familiarize themselves with the machines.

"Technology is great," she said. "But you've got to make sure that it's really what you want."