

Keep Option To Recount Ballots By Hand

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Because of Madison's close School Board election, you may be witnessing the last manual recount of election results in Wisconsin for some time to come. A bill in the Legislature, poised to become law, will outlaw manual recounts for municipalities that use machine-readable ballots.

Under current law, the board of canvassers may use automatic voting machines for recounts, but the board may also perform a manual count of the ballots.

Senate Bill 612 would change that. Buried on page 18 of this 120-page bill is a requirement that all recounts be done by machine for machine-readable ballots, unless a petition for a manual recount is approved by a circuit court. The bill passed the Senate unanimously and is under consideration by a committee in the Assembly.

This bill should be changed. We need to preserve the ability to conduct a manual recount.

In September 2005, the non-partisan U.S. Government Accountability Office summarized the flaws in the computerized voting machines now being sold. The conclusion of the GAO was that "key activities need to be completed" before we have secure and reliable electronic voting systems.

In the Madison School Board race there was a large number of undervotes (ballots that were not counted by the machine). Seven wards had an undervote of more than 20, and three more were more than 10 percent.

During a manual recount, these ballots would be inspected to determine voter intent under state law, which describes in detail the procedure to ascertain intent. But if these ballots are sent through the machine, they will probably not be counted.

A 20-page study published in May 2005 in the Journal of Politics found that manually counting ballots resulted in the lowest rate of uncounted ballots, when compared to four different types of machines.

Manual recounts can serve as an audit of machine results. In fact, a letter from 15 Wisconsin county clerks to the State Elections Board earlier this year cited manual recounts as a method of verifying the accuracy of electronic equipment.

This could be a partial fulfillment of a state law calling for audits to determine the error rate of each voting system. This statute has yet to be implemented.

A manual recount is the best way to ensure that a major electronic snafu (intentional or unintentional) does not disrupt the accuracy of the count of votes. Manual recounts of the paper ballots will maintain voter confidence in our election results.

If we count the ballots two ways, and both methods substantially agree, there can be little doubt as to the outcome. We are already counting the ballots by machine on election night. Let's do recounts by hand where practical.

This does not have to be an all-or-none proposition. If recounts are performed by machine in large elections, let's do a 10 percent manual audit.

A proposal before the Joint Legislative Council calls for a committee to investigate the best way for Wisconsin to perform audits and recounts.