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Watchdog Group Questions 2004 Fla. Vote

AP Associated Press

By BRIAN SKOLOFF, Associated Press Writer

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An examination of Palm Beach County's electronic voting machine records from the 2004 election found possible tampering and tens of thousands of malfunctions and errors, a watchdog group said Thursday.

Bev Harris, founder of BlackBoxVoting.org, said the findings call into question the outcome of the presidential race. But county officials and the maker of the electronic voting machines strongly disputed that and took issue with the findings.

Voting problems would have had to have been widespread across the state to make a difference. President Bush won Florida — and its 27 electoral votes — by 381,000 votes in 2004. Overall, he defeated John Kerry by 286 to 252 electoral votes, with 270 needed for victory.

BlackBoxVoting.org, which describes itself as a nonpartisan, nonprofit citizens group, said it found 70,000 instances in Palm Beach County of cards getting stuck in the paperless ATM-like machines and that the computers logged about 100,000 errors, including memory failures.

Also, the hard drives crashed on some of the machines made by Oakland, Calif.-based Sequoia Voting Systems, some machines apparently had to be rebooted over and over, and 1,475 re-calibrations were performed on Election Day on more than 4,300 units, Harris said. Re-calibrations are done when a machine is malfunctioning, she said.

"I actually think there's enough votes in play in Florida that it's anybody's guess who actually won the presidential race," Harris added. "But with that said, there's no way to tell who the votes should have gone to."

Palm Beach County and other parts of the country switched to electronic equipment after the turbulent 2000 presidential election, when the county's butterfly ballot confused some voters and led them to cast their votes for third-party candidate Pat Buchanan instead of Al Gore. The Supreme Court halted a recount after 36 days and handed a 537-vote victory to Bush.

Palm Beach County election officials said the BlackBoxVoting.com findings are flawed, and they blamed most of the errors on voters not following proper procedures.

"Their results are noteworthy for consideration, but in a majority of instances they can be explained," said Arthur Anderson, the county's elections supervisor. "All of these circumstances are valid reasons for concern, but they do not on face value substantiate that the machines are not reliable."

Sequoia spokeswoman Michelle Shafer disputed the findings, saying the company's machines worked properly. Sequoia's machines are used in five Florida counties and in 21 states.

"There was a fine election in November 2004," Shafer said.

She said many of the errors in the computer logs could have resulted from voters improperly inserting their user cards into the machines. The remaining errors would not affect the vote results because each unit has a backup system, she said.

Jenny Nash, a spokeswoman for the Florida Department of State, which oversees elections, said she was not aware of the report and had no comment.

Harris said one machine showed that 112 votes were cast on Oct. 16, two days before the start of early voting, a possible sign of tampering. She said the group found evidence of tampering on more than 30 machines in the county.

However, Harris said it was impossible to determine what information was altered or if votes were shifted among candidates.

On the Net:

BlackBoxVoting: <http://www.blackboxvoting.org>

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