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## Election advocates urge new security measures

The Verifiable Voting Coalition of Virginia (VVCV) will seek new legislation this year to provide meaningful recounts in close elections and to ensure that new paper-based election systems are audited for accuracy.

In hallmark legislation last year, the General Assembly banned further purchases of touchscreen voting machines, known as direct record electronic, or DRE, machines. The machines have been shown to be vulnerable to manipulation and error, and do not permit voters to verify that their choices have been correctly recorded. The decision to phase out DREs puts Virginia in line with a number of other states that have recently decided to abandon DREs in the face of security concerns.

Local Virginia jurisdictions that use DREs are expected to replace them over the next few years with optical scanners that read paper ballots. The scanners tally the votes, and the paper ballots are retained as a “paper trail.” But there are currently no requirements for anyone to examine the paper trail – and that, say VVCV members, is a critical next step.

“Optical scanning is a more secure, less expensive, and voter-verifiable technology,” says Jeremy Epstein, a nationally-recognized expert in election machine security and a co-founder of Virginia Verified Voting, one of the coalition members. “But the point of having a paper trail is to look at the paper. Any machine can make errors, and some can potentially be tampered with. So until you actually have a system in place to audit a small, randomly-selected set of machines by comparing the machine tallies with the paper ballots, voters still can’t have confidence in the integrity of the vote count.”

The paper ballots should also be examined in the case of a recount. Carol Doran Klein, a lawyer with the New Electoral Reform Alliance for Virginia (New Era), another coalition member, points out that current law does not permit election officials to examine the paper ballots even when they exist. “Right now in Virginia, a recount basically consists of going back to the machine and asking it to give you the same number it gave you the first time,” she says. “It’s not a real recount, and that’s unfair to both the candidates and the voters.”

Virginia has seen a number of very close races in recent years, adds Sharon Henderson, another New Era lawyer, but it’s rare for the outcome to change as the result of a recount conducted under current law. Citing this year’s Senate race between Ken Cuccinelli and Janet Oleszek, Henderson says Oleszek is

fighting an uphill battle. “The law simply doesn’t let officials look at the actual ballots that were cast, even to the extent they’ve got them.”

Olga Hernandez, President of the League of Women Voters of Virginia, says her group joined the VVCV last year because they were worried about not having an actual ballot to recount. Last year the state took the first step by disallowing future DRE purchases. “We need legislation that provides for meaningful recounts and regular, random audits. We need to have verifiable election machines, so we need to take the obvious next step, and put the ‘verify’ in ‘verifiable’.”

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