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Governor O'Malley Pledges to “Do Everything in My Power” to Fund Paper Ballots Bill

Responding to a question from a caller on a Baltimore talk radio show on September 6, Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley reaffirmed his commitment to moving the state from electronic touch-screen voting machines to an election system that uses voter-marked paper ballots counted with optical scanners by 2010.

Appearing as a guest on the Marc Steiner Show on WYPR radio, Gov. O'Malley said, “I think, given what other Marylanders are sacrificing for democracy abroad, we certainly have the ability to invest in protecting our election system here at home — protecting democracy in Maryland. So that's a promise I intend to be able to keep; and I'm going to do everything in my power to do so.”

Last April the Maryland House and Senate unanimously passed a bill requiring that State elections be held using paper ballots beginning with the 2010 election. But a provision in the law renders it null and void unless the purchase of the necessary equipment is funded in the next State budget, which the Governor's office is currently preparing.

Public opinion polls show that 69% of Maryland voters want a paper record of their votes, and 57% would prefer to use optically scanned paper ballots compared with 41% who favor the paperless touch-screen voting machines. Nineteen of the state's 24 election jurisdictions used optical scan systems before switching to touch-screen voting machines in 2004, so the equipment is already familiar to voters as well as to elections administrators and poll workers. All absentee and provisional ballots are currently cast and counted this way throughout the state.

Maryland's switch to paper ballots is part of a national trend as one prestigious study after another confirms the riskiness of using direct-recording electronic (DRE) voting machines. California recently decertified most of its DREs and imposed strict limitations on those in use for disability access, requiring that all votes cast on them be hand-tallied solely from the paper print-outs already mandated on all their machines. Florida decided to move to paper statewide by 2008 after DREs failed to record 18,000 votes last November in a hotly contested Congressional race that was decided by less than 400 votes.

New Mexico was the first state to eliminate its DREs and implement optical scan systems statewide less than a year before the 2006 elections. A recent study of New Mexico's 2006 elections by the CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project reported a high satisfaction rate with the new system among both voters and poll workers. The study found that, “Poll workers gave the new process particularly high marks on reliability, privacy, and ease of use” and that “over eight in 10 voters (81.9%) voters rated their voting experience excellent or good.” The full report is available at <http://vote2006.unm.edu>.

A transcript and an audio file of the Governor's remarks may be found at www.saveourvotes.org.