

Voting Machine Experiences

My name is Judy Heald. I have lived in Potter Township for 27 years.

For several years I have volunteered as a poll watcher, observing three polling places in Potter Township: Centre Hall, Potter North and Potter South.

I want to share a few observations of my polling machine experiences.

When we first began using touchscreen in Centre County, I arrived as a volunteer poll watcher before 7 am and observed the process of setting up. The officials were very careful and followed all procedures to the best of my knowledge. As voters began to arrive, **MOST** were nervous, but since many had used touchscreen banking, had little difficulty using the machines.

The comment “That wasn’t **so** hard.” was one I heard many times during that VERY long day. No it wasn’t so hard – but sadly, they did not know if the machine had recorded what they had intended. And although the machines printed “zeros” at the beginning of the day, we did not know if the machines had been tampered with at some other level – outside the county.

I spent that day helping the officials explain how to use the machines and trying to allay fears than so many voiced.

Permit me to give an example of one woman’s experience. She had evidently never done anything with a computer screen, let alone a TOUCH SCREEN, but had promised someone she would vote for them. The official explained the process. 20 minutes later she had made no progress and the official was throwing up his hands. I asked the official if he wanted me to try to explain – no, officially I was not supposed to do this, but the woman wanted to vote.

When I stood at the back of the screen, I realized that when I asked her to find the button that said, “...” she was rubbing her finger across the screen and activating several things unintentionally. Explaining what she was doing made no sense to her. I finally reached across the screen and held her hand as she located the correct button, then briefly let go so she could press it. I repeated this step for the next 5 minutes. She finally left, after I had hugged her for perseverance. She believed she had voted for her candidate – I felt far less certain. The truly sad part is that we have no idea how often this has happened. No other experiences that day were quite the same, but several came close. About 40% of the voters that day were frustrated and many **intimidated**.

Some election officials will tell you that there IS a paper trail – that 50 foot strip that is printed after 8 pm on Election Day. But who is to say it is accurate? Most election officials will tell you the touchscreen machines have made their job easier, and they wish they could tally the absentee votes in the machines as well. But one official handed folks the voter receipt with the sad comment, “This IS your paper trail!”

As officials helped explain the touchscreen process, they used the example of touchscreen banking, and there are many similarities, making the process easier for most folks.

However, we typically receive a paper receipt when we deposit or withdraw money to verify the transaction at a banking machine. And if an error was made – i.e. amount deposited did not match amount stated on the machine – we get a notice in the mail a week later!

Two other points:

1. First, in every banking transaction, both sides get to audit the results: the bank controls the electronic information, and the customer can check the bank's monthly statement against her own records.
2. Second, banks operate in the free market. If you don't trust your bank, you can go to the competition. Elections, on the other hand, are **by their nature** run by monopolies. So while election officials have every incentive to make their elections run smoothly, the only outside incentives to make the process transparent and accountable come from watchdog organizations and active citizens like those of us here tonight.

Computer scientists can and **must** develop more reliable ways of verifying electronic votes.

Perhaps we have not yet had major problems in Centre County – but the opportunities are clearly in place. Do we want to wait for the horses to get out before we learn how to close the barn door?

Thank you.