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Expert says electronic checklists for voters need more testing

CONCORD — An expert on the use of electronics for elections said to date, no electronic voter registration and checklist system “is ready for prime time.”

Legislation allowing Manchester, Hooksett and Durham to use “electronic poll books” during the September primary and November general elections will be decided Thursday by the Senate.

Tuesday Andrew Schwarzmann, head of the Computer Science and Engineering Department at the University of Connecticut and director of the Center for voting Technology Research said every poll book system his center has tested has faults that need to be addressed and are not ready for implementation.

Schwarzmann’s center is in the process of testing several systems for the Connecticut Secretary of State and expects to make its report later this month.

While he said he could not be specific or talk about different brands, all have faults that would make their use problematic, he said.

“Just because a vendor believes their system is a fit, does not necessarily make it so,” Schwarzmann said. “We will never certify any system because that would give a false sense of security and all have security vulnerabilities.”

Schwarzmann has advised Secretary of State Bill Gardner’s office in the past, particularly on its optical voting machines. Gardner opposes the legislation, saying there is not enough time to properly test and customize the system to New Hampshire election laws before the primary and general election.

Yesterday Schwarzmann said the electronic poll book systems have had problems as serious as complete failure to hacking a centralized server.

Because of delays in the information recorded between devices, someone could vote twice, the software is easily manipulated and if a centralized service is used it is an easy target for a hacker or someone who seeks to influence an election, he said.

Where the electronic systems have been used, there is a parallel paper system for redundancy Schwarzmann said.

The three communities in the pilot project want to use an iPad-based system equipped with a reader for voters to swipe their driver’s licenses to check in. The person’s name, home address and age appear and if the information is correct, the voter receives a slip to give to an election worker to receive a ballot.

The system would also be used to register voters under the state’s election-day registration law.

A local vendor who services the state’s optical reader ballot machines will provide the iPad-based system for free for the two elections.

The electronic poll book system is separate from the ballot system.

The Senate is expected to vote on the plan Thursday.

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