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Ehrlich Says Md. Unprepared for Voting

Governor Raises Reliability Issues

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Seven months before Maryland's primary election, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) said yesterday that he lacks confidence in the State Board of Elections to conduct fair contests, and he called for a paper trail to verify results from touch-screen voting machines and a delay in plans for early voting.

"There are a lot of questions and not very satisfactory answers," Ehrlich said, emerging from a meeting he requested with House Speaker Michael E. Busch (D-Anne Arundel). "Maryland is not prepared to conduct an election, let alone early voting."

Ehrlich's criticism echoes questions that have been raised in states such as California and Pennsylvania about the reliability of the electronic machines, manufactured by Diebold Election Systems and used throughout Maryland.

And it comes a month after the Democrat-controlled General Assembly forced through measures, over the governor's veto, that allow votes to be cast five days before a scheduled election and voters to cast provisional ballots at any polling place.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller (D-Calvert) said Ehrlich's comments were an attempt to "create confusion and chaos" and dissuade the General Assembly from moving ahead with plans for early voting.

"What's wrong with having more people vote?" Miller said. "He should welcome it. It's expanding democracy."

Busch, after talking with Ehrlich, said he has "every confidence" that the Board of Elections is "doing a fair and competent job." Based on discussions with State Elections Administrator Linda H. Lamone, he said, there is "every indication" early voting can be accomplished.

The elections board has become a political football in Annapolis in recent years. In 2004, Ehrlich appointees sought to oust Lamone, a Democrat first appointed by then-Gov. Parris N. Glendening, only to be blocked by a judge. Democrats then passed a bill last year that provided her with additional job protections and gave party leaders control over positions on the board reserved for Democrats. Lamone did not return a call for comment yesterday.

Since 2002, the state has invested more than \$90 million to bring touch-screen voting statewide. Del. Sheila Hixson (D-Montgomery) has introduced legislation to require a paper record for the electronic machines, and the group TrueVoteMD.org has been pressing for such a verifiable system.

"It's been clearly demonstrated that the paperless voting machines have serious security and reliability problems," said Linda Schade, executive director. "They can be hacked, and due to defective parts, they can

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also lose votes."

But a pair of Maryland professors who studied the issue told legislators last week that the vote-verification systems currently on the market make it much more difficult to vote, increase the time to vote and invade the privacy of the vote. Even if legislation passed this session, they said, the systems would not be ready to use this election year.

Paul S. Herrnson, director of the Center for American Politics and Citizenship at the University of Maryland, said yesterday that the focus on security is "greatly overblown."

"In their minds everyone can invent a better voting system," he said. "The real problem is when you move from the world of ideas to the world of real voters."

Ehrlich submitted a long list of questions to Board of Elections Chairman Gilles Burger yesterday about the cost of early voting and any contingency plan if elections officials do not certify the Diebold machines for use in the election.

"I believe that it is time for the board to get aggressive in responding to citizens' concerns over public confidence in the elections system," Ehrlich wrote.

Staff writer John Wagner contributed to this report.

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