

## The touch-screen holy grail

### E-VOTE PROTOTYPE HAS RIGHT STUFF

An electronic voting system that's cheap, secure, accurate and easy to use. One that uses off-the-shelf hardware and publicly examinable software. One that voters can trust.

A prototype of such a system — the holy grail of election officials — was on display last week in San Jose. It looked like the real deal.

Had the federal government underwritten the research behind it years ago, such a system might now be making its debut in voting booths. Instead, the demonstration took place in a conference room at the county government building with its creators in search of financial backers and government grants.

The government unwisely ceded development of electronic voting machinery to private companies like Diebold Voting Systems, whose proprietary software is under electronic lock and key. The secrecy of the source code, a slew of malfunctions, and a lack of a paper copy that voters can look at have eroded confidence in touch-screen voting.

The founders of Open Voting Consortium, a non-profit group of software engineers and computer scientists, built the system in their spare time. It features open-source software, which means that the public can examine the software code to make sure there are no bugs or digital shenanigans built in. It also produces a paper version of the ballot cast, converted to a bar code, so that voters can privately verify that the choices they made on a touch-screen

are just as they intended.

California Secretary of State Kevin Shelley has mandated a voter-verifiable trail in all counties by 2006, but so far, the big voting-machine companies are not marketing machines that do that.

Open Voting Consortium's system has appeared too late for Santa Clara and other counties that have been plunking down tens of millions of dollars for touch-screens that lack some of the new system's virtues. But many counties that weren't under pressure to replace equipment have put off the decision, for good reason. For them, this next generation of voting systems may be worth the wait — if not too long.

Open Voting Consortium appears to have what it takes to inspire faith in electronic voting. Its system can't come to market soon enough.