

Glitches plague Florida election

High-tech voting machine woes force polls to stay open

By Deborah Sharp
USA TODAY

FORT LAUDERDALE — It was flashback time for Florida voters Tuesday as much-touted election reforms made a rocky debut in the state's primary.

Glitches plagued new multimillion-dollar touch-screen voting equipment. Confusion reigned at polling places. And political candidates stormed into court.

Florida Gov. Jeb Bush ordered polling places to stay open an additional two hours, until 9 p.m., to accommodate stymied voters. Earlier, gubernatorial candidate Janet Reno had sought a court order to keep the polls open past 7 p.m.

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The primary was the first statewide election since the presidential debacle of 2000. After the disputed race between George W. Bush and Al Gore, the state completely rewrote its election system. Election reformers nationwide

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pointed to Florida as a model. Punch-card ballots were banned, and election laws were changed. Lawmakers authorized \$32 million for new electronic voting equipment, and independent election supervisors in 67 counties spent millions more.

Yet voters were still frustrated: "It's outrageous," said Denetra Collins, whose Miami polling place was among many that were hours late in opening because workers could not get the high-tech machines to operate. Even Reno had trouble voting. She cooled her heels for 20 minutes outside her suburban Miami polling place while workers booted up voting machines.

Problems were most common in Miami-Dade and adjoining Broward counties, the most populous regions of the state.

Mike Limas, chief operating officer for Election Systems & Software, the company that supplied much of the state's new touch-screen technology, said most of Tuesday's problems were "people and first-time election use issues," not mechanical breakdowns. Of about 7,000 machines in Miami-Dade alone, Limas said, fewer than 10 had to be replaced Tuesday. Thunderstorms that sparked power outages also didn't help.

Some officials said glitches were not unexpected, given the broad changes in Florida. In addition to the new technology and widespread reform, population growth prompted changes in election districts and hundreds of new polling places.

"Anytime you've ordered massive changes all at once, you'd expect some problems," said Doug Lewis, executive director of the national Election Center.

"Anyone who expects there to be no problems at all in Florida is not being realistic."

The governor put much of the blame for Tuesday's problems on local election officials in Miami and adjoining Fort Lauderdale.

"It's shameful. That's the responsibility of the supervisors of election — to be prepared," he said.