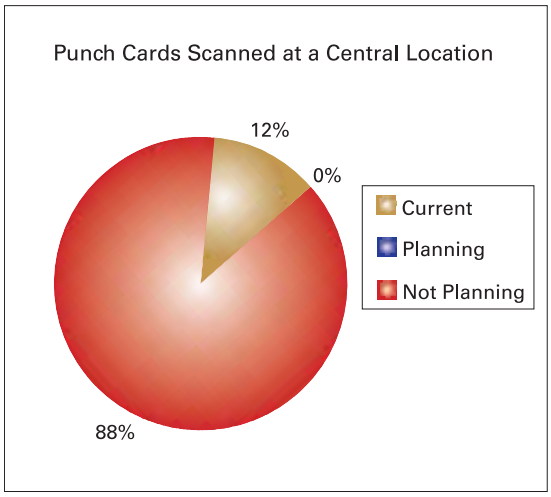
IFES Survey Reveals Trends in Election Technology Use

by Jeffrey Fisher

Between November 2002 and May 2003, IFES surveyed state and local election officials to determine the status and trends



in the use of election technologies in the United States. A total of 1,497 completed surveys were received from all regions of the country, providing a fairly accurate indication of the current election technology environment. With much of the $3.6 billion in HAVA funding to be spent on upgrading election technology over the next four years, this initial survey serves as a valuable pre-HAVA baseline. Subsequent surveys will reflect the technological impact of HAVA implementation.

The survey addresses technology use in five areas: voter registration; balloting and tabulation; results and information dissemination; boundary delimitation; and administrative functions. Survey respondents were identified based on the election administration framework in each state. In 36 states, the surveys were completed by secretary of state election division offices; in Alaska and Hawaii, by the lieutenant governors' offices; and in thirteen states, including Washington, DC, by state boards of elections. Local election officials were approached at the county or municipal level, depending on the state. Key findings of the survey include:

Voter Registration

Nearly all (95%) of the state and local election districts in the United States have computerized their voter registration lists, but only 8.7% have the list of voters available electronically at the polls. Thirty-three percent indicated that they use or plan to use electronic storage of voter registration signatures. Electronic reporting of registered voters who are petition signers or political contributors was reported by 13.8% of the respondents and planned by another 8.4%.

Balloting and Tabulation

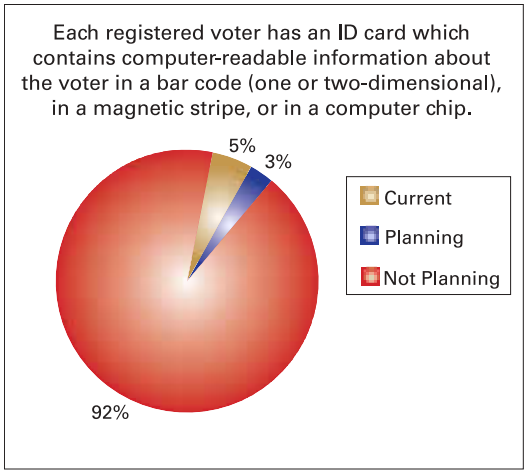
Slightly more than 16% of the election authorities use Direct Recording Electronic (DRE)—generally push-button or touch-screen voting machines—and another 21.3% plan to convert to DRE. Optically scanned ballots are used by 60.2% of the election authorities with another 13.2% planning to adopt this option. Nearly 12% of the respondents use punch-card systems, and 13.5% use lever action machines, but virtually no respondents said they planned to convert to either of these technologies.

Results and Information Dissemination

In most cases (71.2%), the election results are made available through hard copy computer printouts. In 23.2% of the cases, the results of contests are made available by direct electronic feeds into outside computers. Statistical reports on the vote distribution are available from 47.2% of the electoral authorities.

Boundary Delimitation

More than a quarter (28%) of the election authorities indicate that they use Geographical Information Systems (GIS) for boundary delimitation, and another 17.6% plan to use GIS in the future.



Administrative Functions

The survey indicates lower than expected use of technology for administrative functions. Only 36.8% of election authorities use computers for personnel management or poll-worker support, 24.4% use technology for procurement and inventory functions, and 46.2% use computers for budget or resource planning.

For additional survey information please visit www.IFES.org/TechSurvey or contact Jeffrey Fischer, jeff@ifes.org, for detailed results at the state or county level.

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HAVA Resources

For a compreshensive collection of HAVA resources online including links to state plans and related sites, please visit the IFES U.S. Election Reform website at:

www.IFES.org/new_initiatives/US_elections.htm

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Making Technology Choices

There are three general types of technology applications for election management: 1) determinant applications, which are used to determine political outcomes and include systems for voter identification and registration, boundary delimitation, and balloting and tabulation; 2) influential applications, which communicate a viewpoint, complaint, fact or instruction and include civic education, public information and training applications; and 3) administrative applications, which assist with logistics, communications, inventories, planning, budgeting and word processing.

Key questions to assess a particular technology application include: Is the scope of the application appropriate to the infrastructure of the state, county or city? Will the application generate excessive political debate? Is it cost-effective? Has the funding been identified to establish and maintain the system? What are the opportunity costs? What other public services will not be funded because monies are directed into this application? Regardless of the type of application, the following six principles can guide the effective implementation of new technologies:

1. A needs assessment by an honest broker should be conducted to provide the first set of technology recommendations.
2. The assessment should result in a comprehensive planning document that sets forth the technology's scope, scale, timetable and funding options.
3. Technologies should have security; easy and sustainable operation; and backup or recovery features to prevent system failure during critical periods.
4. The implementation should consider not only the technical aspects of the application, but also its legal, organizational, educational and training requirements.
5. The process of assessing technology applications should be open, inclusive and invite participation from government agencies, political parties, nongovernmental organizations, business and labor leaders and voters.
6. Finally, the implementation should have benchmarks for progress and measures of effectiveness. The rationale for the new technology should be quantified to determine how the technology has performed and what it has contributed to the electoral process.