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guest commentary

## Coffman's voting plan is flawed

By David Beirne

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Colorado Secretary of State Mike Coffman last week issued his decision to decertify or require upgrades prior to the continued use of current voting technologies. While Coffman's objectives are laudable, the review's findings and lack of technical details raise more questions than answers with less than two months to go before Colorado's primaries.

The voting system industry takes its role seriously and has always assisted state and local election officials with user support, training solutions, and general assistance. To characterize the industry as unresponsive or subjecting Colorado to stall tactics is a gross misrepresentation of the facts.

Coffman takes exception to the quality of the federal certification process. However, the federal certification process has yet to mature under the Election Assistance Commission, which began its certification efforts in 2007 as part of

an overall improvement process outlined under the Help America Vote Act. That act was passed in 2002 in direct response to the challenges recognized in 2000. The certification process is an ongoing effort and should be permitted to operate and improve. Since the process began under the Election Assistance Commission, no manufacturer has received a final ruling on their products.

We share Coffman's frustration with the lack of leadership from Washington, D.C., but the pursuit of "software patches" unique to Colorado is a clear example of what the industry, election officials, and the public are trying to avoid and the very reason for a robust federal certification effort. Rushing "software patches" for Colorado will only reflect negatively upon public perception if these patches are found to be inadequate from a process that sacrifices thoroughness for speed.

The other concerns the industry has centered on are the lack of transparency in the decisions made by Coffman and the unwillingness to have industry representatives involved from an equipment training and support perspective. If the industry was on hand to witness the procedures and respond to questions during the review process, many of the troubling findings in Colorado could have been avoided or clarified.

No voting system provider hands over technology and training materials to customers without support, but this is exactly the approach taken by Colorado. A better approach would have been to include actual users of the various products (i.e.,

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county election officials), as they have already deployed the equipment successfully and have been adequately trained. These same officials could still provide valuable context to the review effort.

The benefits of current voting technologies are clearly documented: In 2004, more than 1 million votes were counted nationally that would otherwise have been lost using older technologies. What is not clear is the threat model applied to electronic voting systems. As an industry, we are seeing an attempt to establish an absolute standard for security with electronic voting systems not present with any paper-based system. If a match is dropped into a ballot box with paper ballots, would this system then be considered insecure? While extreme, this example speaks to the need for a better approach, one that incorporates a comprehensive view of technology with the importance of people and processes.

We would encourage Coffman to work with the manufacturers and local election officials to see that clear procedures are established to address his concerns. A practical approach will enable local election officials to focus on the conduct of their elections in what is already going to be a stressful year.

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