

City Room

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A Call to Continue Voting by Lever

As skepticism grows over computerized voting systems nationwide, a growing push is emerging in the state to keep the once-disdained lever voting machines. Proponents argue that now is not the time to be spending millions of dollars on upgrading decades-old machines that they say are more reliable than the new systems.

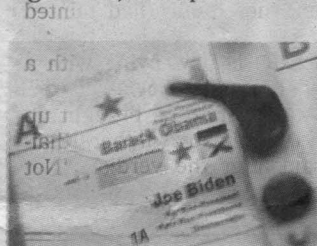
In the last several weeks, four counties — Dutchess, Ulster, Columbia and Schuyler — and the Association of Towns have passed resolutions urging the state to keep the lever machines. The city's Board of Elections held a hearing last week to let lever supporters make their case.

"We're where lever machines were born, and if I have my way, it's not where they are going to die," said Andrea Novick, founder of the Election Transparency Coalition.

The push comes now in large part because accessible machines for impaired voters were installed at each poll site for the 2008 election. Lever proponents argue that these machines bring New York into compliance with the federal voting reform legislation, passed after the 2000 recount debacle.

Lever machines work by incrementing counters in the back each time a voter pulls the lever. At the end of the day, the machines are opened in public, and the counts are tallied, though some people criticize this procedure for lacking a paper trail.

New York has long been a laggard in complying with voting reform, to the point that



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the Department of Justice took legal action against the state in 2006 because it was further behind "than any other state in the country."

The lever machines were invented in 1888 in Britain and were used in New York City by 1892. They became widely adopted because they were seen as more resistant to tampering — a big problem during 19th-century elections.

"There were so many meltdowns in the elections in the 1890s," said Bryan Pfaffenberger, a professor at the University of Virginia, who is currently writing a book on the history of lever machines. "We started the 20th century with people preferring a machine that didn't have a paper trail."

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