



Florida Fair Elections Coalition
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Looking for Fraud in All the Wrong Places ¹

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Originally published in May 2008, this opinion piece remains relevant as allegations of voter fraud are still being promulgated to justify making it more difficult for some people to vote. ID laws won't do anything to address the only known venue for voter fraud—absentee balloting, but onerous restrictions on in-person voting will suppress turnout among some groups of voters.

On [April 28, 2008], the U.S. Supreme Court upheld an Indiana law requiring that voters provide a government-issued photo ID at the polls. Proponents of the law argued that the state had an obligation to combat voter fraud. Civil rights groups countered that there is no evidence that voter impersonation at the polls is a problem and the effect of the new law will be to impose a burden on poor and elderly voters who do not have drivers' licenses or passports. Florida and Georgia have similar laws that limit what voters can use to establish their identities at the polls.

One of the justices opined that the identification rule treats all voters equally, *but that isn't so*. This fall (2008), one group of voters will not have to show *any* identification in order to vote. They will vote by absentee ballot. Here in Volusia County, about 20 percent of the votes cast in the 2004 Presidential election were absentee ballots, and more voters are likely to choose that option in 2008. Their ballots will be authenticated by merely checking to see if the signature matches, just as it has been done in the past at the polls.

While there is no evidence that voter impersonation is rife at the polls, there is plenty of evidence that absentee ballots have been the venue of choice for illegally cast ballots. Florida history is full of examples. In Volusia's controversial 1996 Sheriff's race, hundreds of absentee ballots were counted even though they lacked legally required voter or witness signatures or addresses. In March 1998, the Miami mayor's race from the previous fall was invalidated because hundreds of absentee ballots were found to have

¹ While the content of this opinion piece has not been altered, we have made minor corrections, clarifications, and formatting changes in order to post it on the FFEC website.

been cast by deceased or fictitious “voters.” In response, the Florida legislature passed more stringent rules for absentee balloting.

But those measures were fleeting. Even while politicians have been railing publicly against voter fraud and making ID requirements for voters at the polls more stringent, they have quietly been relaxing the rules for absentee voting, the tried-and-true method for committing fraud. We now have “no-excuse” absentee balloting, which means any voter can choose to vote by absentee without giving a reason. Affidavits and witness signatures, put in place to guard against fraud, are no longer required. Both political parties now push absentee balloting. Democratic Representative Keith Fitzgerald of Sarasota introduced a bill in the Florida House this year to allow vote-by-mail, a benign-sounding synonym for absentee balloting, which would eliminate polling places and force all voters to cast absentee ballots. So where in these actions is the concern about voter fraud?

Perhaps this differential treatment for absentee voters has something to do with the demographics of that portion of the electorate. Those who vote by absentee ballot tend to be white, affluent, and supporters of the party currently in power. Elderly, minority, and poor voters, who usually support the opposition party, are more likely to vote at the polls or during early voting. Are concerns about voter fraud merely a front to disguise a strategy for vote suppression?

As we approach the 2008 election cycle, our elections are still far from fair, transparent, secure, and accurate. To ensure the integrity of our elections, we need to address real, not imagined problems. Large-scale fraud is much more likely to happen via absentee ballots than at the polls where the would-be impersonator would have to commit his crime in person and stand a good chance of getting caught. Absentee balloting allows vote buying or coercion to take place in private, at any location. Why would anyone be foolish enough to pay for votes at a polling place, where voters’ choices remain secret -- and thus free from outside coercion, when they can pay people to vote absentee and inspect their ballots before handing over the cash?

Absentee balloting offers a host of opportunities for illegal ballots to be cast or legally cast ballots to be “lost.” Even blank ballots mailed to voters are a target, such as the 56,000 blank ballots that mysteriously vanished in Broward County in 2004, or the 1,100 ballots that disappeared just a few months ago in Pinellas County. Absentee ballots pass through many hands, where there are myriad chances for ballots to be intercepted, altered, purchased, or to go astray. The process inherently lacks transparency and citizen groups such as ours find it impossible to monitor absentee ballots.

Requiring a government-issued photo ID at the polls will not do anything to prevent voter fraud; only reasonable reforms of absentee balloting can do that. But it will make it more difficult for many voters to vote. And that is, no doubt, the intent.