

GLOBE EDITORIAL

The Boston Globe

## Voter fraud fraud

December 13, 2007

IT MADE for a tantalizing news story: Thousands of people who cast votes in the 2004 presidential election in New Jersey were actually dead. Newspapers wrote articles with grabber headlines like "GOP Sees Dead People" and "Dead Man Voting." Except that a more careful analysis of the allegations found flaws in the match between the voting rolls and death lists, and none of the claims was ever substantiated.

New Jersey's state Republican Party also claimed that 4,397 people had voted twice in 2000, and another 6,572 voted both in New Jersey and in one of five other states. But a systematic review by the Brennan Justice Center at New York University Law School found most of the matches ignored different middle names, dates of birth, or other discrepancies. All told, the center found that eight of the 3.6 million New Jersey voters in 2004 intentionally cast invalid votes - a "fraud rate" of four ten-thousandths of one percent.

These fraud alarm bells - even if they are false alarms - distract Americans from real problems in the democratic process, from electronic voting machines that leave no paper trail to campaign tactics that confuse or intimidate voters. Also, supposed fraud is often used to build support for stiffer voter requirements, such as government-issued IDs, which would almost surely drive down participation among poorer, older, and less-educated voters. "The voter fraud phantom drives policy that disenfranchises legitimate voters without a corresponding benefit," the Brennan Center's report concludes.

The center calls its report the most systematic assessment of voter fraud claims ever published. It analyzed fraud allegations, case by case, from Wisconsin to New Hampshire to Missouri, and found most were "grossly inflated." The vast majority of claims or suspicions could be traced to a mere typo or other clerical error.

Overheated allegations that criminals with felony convictions were voting in the 2004 gubernatorial race in Washington state, for example, turned out to be explained by problems with the vote-by-mail system in that state, or by the fact that many of the voters in question had juvenile dispositions that do not disqualify a person from voting.

In the current anti-immigrant environment, charges of voting by noncitizens are on the rise. But given that criminal prosecution and deportation await anyone caught, it's no surprise that most claims turn out to be based on outdated or inaccurate information.

In fact, voter fraud is a remarkably inefficient way to steal an election. So many individual acts need to be coordinated - each with its own risk of discovery - that the cost is greater than the likely benefit. And yet lurid tales of massive fraud continue. It's enough to make a citizen wonder if what's really going on is an attempt at voter suppression. ■