

Hattiesburg American

CRIME

Former Hattiesburg candidate pleads guilty to voting irregularity; claims charges political

Lici Beveridge Hattiesburg American

Published 4:12 p.m. CT May 14, 2018 | Updated 2:25 p.m. CT May 15, 2018

A Hattiesburg man who ran for an open state representative seat in 2017 will serve a six-month suspended sentence for voting outside his legal district, Attorney General Jim Hood said..

Cory Ferraez, 28, also was ordered by Lowndes County Circuit Judge Lee Coleman to pay a \$200 fine, a \$200 assessment to the Crime Victims Compensation Fund and all court costs.

The offense is a misdemeanor.

Ferraez turned himself in Dec. 6 after he learned a warrant was issued for his arrest on two charges: one count of swearing to a false application for an absentee ballot and one count of voting outside his legal district.

The first charge was dropped after he pleaded guilty to the second, Hood said in a news release.

“The defendant is a lawyer, who appeared before the State Election Commission, and was warned by my Deputy AG on the record that it is illegal to claim residency in one place yet vote in another,” Hood said in a news release.

Ferraez's brother, Jace Ferraez, said in a statement that the motivation behind the charges against Cory was political.

Jace, who also is one of Cory's attorneys, said Hood's office attempted to keep Ferraez off the ballot based on his Lowndes County vote in 2015.

He said after the State Board of Elections approved Ferraez's candidacy and Forrest County residency, Hood's office pushed to convene a special grand jury so the case could be

prosecuted before the election.

"This is the first case of its kind to be indicted by any attorney general ever in Mississippi," Jace said. "The entire indictment was politically motivated and an abuse of process, which has no place in our judicial system."

Ferraez admitted to voting in a 2015 election in Lowndes County while he was living in Hattiesburg. He was arrested in December following an indictment by a Lowndes County grand jury.

Related: Former state representative candidate Cory Ferraez indicted for voter fraud

This case was investigated by Roger Wade and prosecuted by Assistant Attorney General Stanley Alexander, both with the AG's Public Integrity Division.

Hood said Cory was charged after filing a sworn statement that he lived in Hattiesburg for two years — the amount of time needed to qualify to run for the District 102 special election, vacated when Toby Barker was elected mayor.

"At the Election Commission meeting, he was confronted with his Lowndes County voter record during those two years," Hood said. "It is voter fraud to vote where you do not reside. Of all people, a lawyer should follow the law, especially after he was given the courtesy warning."

Read 2013 Mississippi code: Illegal voting behavior

Jace disagrees. He says his brother did not plead guilty to voter fraud.

"Cory only pleaded to voting outside his legal domicile or residence because he was legally registered to vote in Lowndes County," he said.

Now that the legal battle is over, Jace said his brother wants to move on.

"Cory wants this political witch hunt behind him, so he can focus on helping his clients all across the state," Jace said. "Cory has a long and established record of service in any community in which he has been involved. The politics of personal destruction will not win, and although we would have preferred a complete dismissal, this resolution allows us time to focus on what matters in our great state — representing the people."