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## *'A Rich History of Corruption'*

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By John Fund

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HARRISBURG, Pa. -- Over five years after the near meltdown of the Florida presidential recount, politicians are still arguing over how best to reform state election laws. Ground zero in that battle now is Pennsylvania, which features two close statewide races, for governor and U.S. senator.

Democrats claim anything that impedes or discourages someone from voting is a violation of the Voting Rights Act. Republicans insist the state's rancid history of voter fraud requires preventive measures. The conflict of visions, to borrow Thomas Sowell's phrase, couldn't be more complete.

Take the bill the GOP-controlled Legislature passed, which would require voters show a form of official ID or a utility bill; another bill would end Philadelphia's bizarre practice of locating over 900 polling places in private venues, including bars, abandoned buildings and even the office of a local state senator. City officials admit their voter rolls are stuffed with phantoms. The city has about as many registered voters as it has adults, and is thus a rich breeding ground for fraud.



**Ed Rendell**

But Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell vetoed both bills last month, saying that in a time of voter apathy "the government should be doing everything it can to encourage greater participation." He warned that requiring an ID could disenfranchise the homeless, nursing-home residents and the poor. Mr. Rendell says there is no evidence people routinely impersonate others to vote. He also says requiring an ID at the polls doesn't combat absentee ballot fraud. True enough; election officials properly worry that some 25% of voters now don't show their face when voting. In 1998, Austin Murphy, a former Democratic congressman, pleaded guilty to fraudulently voting absentee ballots for nursing-home residents near Pittsburgh.

But Mr. Rendell's history doesn't inspire confidence that he takes fraud of any kind seriously. In 1994, Philadelphia Democrat Bill Stinson was booted from office as a state senator by a federal judge who found his campaign had rounded up 250 tainted absentee ballots. Mr. Rendell, then Philadelphia's mayor, had this reaction to the Stinson scandal: "I don't think it's anything that's immoral or grievous, but it clearly violates the election code." In 1997, Mr. Rendell admitted to the Journal's editorial board that Philadelphia judges had "a rich history of corruption" that called into question how fairly city laws are enforced.

Now governor, Mr. Rendell isn't eager to depart from business as usual. In 2004, a court had to order him to make changes in the deadlines for absentee military ballots so they would be counted. At the same time, his secretary of state asked prison wardens to post a document outlining how prisoners could vote absentee. When GOP Rep. Curt Weldon held a news conference to denounce illegal voting by prisoners, a TV camera crew captured voter operatives behind him carrying absentee ballots out of the prison.

Still, many liberals insist fraud isn't an issue in Pennsylvania. "Show us the fraud," said Elizabeth Milner, chairman of the state's League of Women Voters, urging a veto of voter ID. Well, Donna Hope of Philadelphia can show her, because in 2004 an organizer for Voting is Power, an offshoot of the Muslim American Society, registered her to vote despite her admission that she was a noncitizen. Although she was turned away from the polls for that reason that November, someone eventually voted in her name.

Ms. Hope, a citizen of Barbados, said the women registering her told her that if she "had been in the U.S. for seven years or more you can register to vote." Jocelyn Budd, the woman who is listed on Ms. Hope's registration form, recalls canvassing her street but not specifically registering her. "I heard that people were forging [registration] cards to meet goals, but I never falsified any information," she says.

As for the group that registered Ms. Hope, Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah of the Chicago Tribune reported in 2004 on internal Muslim American Society documents which showed it is the "public face" in the U.S. of the Muslim Brotherhood, an international group that has spawned violent organizations including Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas.

MAS leaders say the documents obtained by the Tribune are either outdated or inaccurate. Shaker Elsayed, a top MAS leader, says that while the group was founded by Brotherhood members, it is independent. An MAS spokesperson denies the group has any connection to registration fraud.

Irregularities like these are representative of mushrooming fraud, and the general public clearly believes some safeguards are needed. Despite claims by NAACP chairman Julian Bond that voter ID laws represent "an onerous poll tax," polls show upward of 80% favor them. Andrew Young, the former Atlanta mayor and U.N. ambassador, believes that in an era when people have to show ID to rent a video or cash a check "requiring ID can help poor people." He notes that his native Georgia is deploying a mobile bus to issue free voter IDs.

But no antifraud laws will work if prosecutors and judges don't crack down on election irregularities. Several tell me they fear being accused of racism and aiding voter-suppression tactics if they pursue touchy fraud cases. One district attorney told the U.S. Government Accountability Office that he doesn't pursue phony voter registrations because they are "victimless and nonviolent crimes."

Even those few who are prosecuted often view the punishment as the cost of doing politics. Barbara Landers, a former Democratic state Senate aide, was convicted in 1994 on 30 counts of misleading absentee voters in the Stinson scandal. She was given a suspended sentence and fined only \$1,000. Last month, she pleaded guilty to misappropriating up to \$115,000 in state grants meant to help the needy. "If the book had been thrown at her for voter fraud, she might have been deterred from subsequent behavior," one Philadelphia prosecutor told me.

The integrity of the ballot box is just as important to the credibility of elections as access to it. In not closing off opportunities for fraud and chaos, Pennsylvania is inviting trouble in its fall elections that could rival that of Florida in 2000.

Mr. Fund is a columnist for [OpinionJournal.com](https://www.opinionjournal.com).

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