



NEWS

Ohioan gets 5-year prison term for illegal voting

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Story Highlights

Melowese Richardson was a poll worker starting in 1998

She took a plea deal to plead guilty to 4 counts of illegal voting

4 additional counts were dismissed

CINCINNATI — Calling her a common criminal who abused her authority as a poll worker, a judge Wednesday sent a Cincinnati woman to prison for five years following her illegal voting conviction.

In a case watched around the country, Melowese Richardson was a Hamilton County poll worker from 1998 until her arrest earlier this year when she was charged with eight counts of illegal voting. In May, she accepted a plea deal and was convicted of four counts in exchange for the other four being dismissed.

"This is not a little thing. It's not a minor thing. This is what our country's based on — free elections," Judge Robert Ruehlman of Hamilton County Common Pleas Court told Richardson, chastizing her for violating the principle of one person, one vote.

She was convicted of voting twice in the 2012 election and voting three times — in 2008, 2011 and 2012 — for her sister, Montez Richardson, who has been in a coma since 2003.

Richardson told the judge she was bothered that Amy Searcy, the Hamilton County Board of Elections director, had criticized her moments before the sentencing. Richardson, 58, said that for years she helped register Democrats to vote but now was being persecuted despite her decades as a poll worker.

"I think the board has shown me nothing but total disrespect for the 30 years I've served them," she told the judge. "I believe in the system and I've done nothing to harm the system or cause disgrace to President Obama."

The conservative, outspoken judge responded with scathing comments, blasting Richardson for suggesting she was being prosecuted because she was a black Democrat helping a black Democratic presidential candidate.

"It has nothing to do with race. It has nothing to do with politics. It has nothing to do with disrespecting you. You did this to yourself," Ruehlman told her. "You're very selfish, self-centered. I really believe President Obama, if he were asked about this today, he would be appalled. He would not want anybody to cheat to get elected."

Ruehlman noted that two others convicted of illegal voting before Richardson received much lighter sentences but stressed that their cases were different.

The judge said Richardson deserved a prison sentence, which was one year less than the maximum possible, because she has a lengthy criminal record, schemed repeatedly over five years to cast several illegal votes and used her training and expertise as a poll worker to try to evade detection.

" 'I'm Melowese Richardson. I can take the law into my own hands,' " the judge said, mocking what he believes is Richardson's attitude.

Richardson previously was convicted of threatening to kill a witness in a criminal case against her brother, of stealing, of drunken driving and of beating someone in a bar fight.

Anything short of a prison sentence, Assistant Prosecutor Bill Anderson told the judge, would be an attack on the voting system.

As a poll worker, "her job is actually to protect the integrity and sanctity of the voting system," Anderson said. "(She) is an ideologue who was hell bent on stuffing the ballot box with as many Obama votes as possible."

The Republican National Lawyers Association maintains a list of voting fraud stories on its website, and in the past year has featured cases in more than two dozen states. The outcomes of all the cases are not known.

Bill Gallagher, Richardson's lawyer, suspected she would be sent to prison but was surprised with the sentence.

"I thought prison was a real possibility because of her record of 25 years ago," Gallagher said. "I don't think that the length of it was anywhere near what we expected."

Tim Burke wasn't surprised.

Burke, chairman of the Hamilton County Democratic Party, had no sympathy for Richardson.

"It's very sad how she doesn't understand how she abused the trust that was placed in her as a poll worker," Burke said. "She frankly embarrassed the board and, in the process, all of us who trust in the system."

Others convicted

Melowese Richardson was the third person convicted this year of illegal voting in the Cincinnati area:

- **Sister Marguerite Kloos**, 55, of Delhi Township, Ohio, voted last fall via absentee ballot for another nun who died before she could cast her vote. Kloos lost her job as a dean at the College of Mount Saint Joseph and was placed on probation. She could have her conviction erased and be eligible to vote again.
- **Russell Glassop**, 76, of Symmes Township, Ohio, submitted his wife's absentee ballot after she died in 2012. He was placed on probation but could have his conviction erased and be eligible to vote again.
- **Richardson**, 58, of Cincinnati, was convicted of casting illegal votes in 2012 when she was a poll worker. She was sent to prison for five years.

Three others — Margaret I. Allen, 64, formerly of Loveland, Ohio; Ernestine Strickland, 84, of Memphis, Tenn.; and Andre Wilson, 49, of Cincinnati — have cases pending.