

Arkansan pleads guilty in vote fraud

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A former city official in Helena, Ark., a historic old Mississippi River town, has pleaded guilty to fraudulent voting in an agreement that dismisses further charges of intimidating a witness by brandishing a gun.

Larry Gray, former sanitation director for the city of Helena, was charged with submitting more than 25 absentee ballots for the May 21 primary election in Phillips County, where there is a history of voter fraud.

But authorities say Mr. Gray falsely applied for 200 absentee ballots, and submitted at least 98 ballots in the Democratic primary for state Senate, state House and sheriff. The investigation is ongoing.

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Mr. Gray's guilty plea Thursday in the U.S. District Court of the Eastern District of Arkansas is the first to emerge from an FBI investigation into charges of election fraud in Phillips County.

The plea agreement avoids a grand jury investigation, but Mr. Gray faces five years in prison and up to a \$10,000 fine.



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During the investigation, Mr. Gray was accused of "pointing a gun at someone he believed to be a witness and threatening him, and we arrested him pretty quickly," Mr. Cummins said.

Charges of election fraud and abuses are widespread in the state this year, where incumbent Republican Sen. Tim Hutchinson is even with Democratic challenger and Attorney General Mark Pryor, according to polls.

Republicans say Democrats are trying to steal the Senate election by registering dead people and businesses as voters, illegally allowing early voting on weekends and not requiring identification to vote.

The Democratic Party of Arkansas concedes that earlier this year a former staffer hired two teenagers to register voters, but said they instead copied names from the phone book.

"We've got copies of 600 absentee-ballot applications and I can tell you there are a lot of questionable ones either everyone in Phillips County writes exactly alike or we have problems," said Marty Ryall, Republican Party chairman. Phillips County, once one of the wealthiest counties in the Mississippi River Delta, has fallen on hard times in recent decades.

Democrats complained Monday when Republican poll-watchers challenged county clerks to require that voters provide identification before receiving an early voting ballot and said they were harassing black voters

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"This underscores our point of why we have poll-watchers to make sure clerks are complying with the law and requesting identification," Mr. Ryall said.

Mr. Cummins said his office is getting reports that activities similar to Mr. Gray's are ongoing during the early voting period.

"Enforcing the laws that guarantee voting rights and punish voting fraud is the duty of the Department of Justice. More than mere law enforcement, our responsibility to protect the access to and integrity of elections is the responsibility of upholding freedom itself," Mr. Cummins said.

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