

BALLOT FRAUD TARS ALL INVOLVED

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Who acted more deplorably with regard to the recent \$10,000 fine pinned on Hartford political operative Prenzina Holloway, who got caught committing absentee ballot fraud?

We can start with Ms. Holloway herself. She's such a whiz at working the absentee voting scam that Hartford Democratic leaders say they'd be lost without her. The votes of supposedly sick, infirm or otherwise indisposed people sometimes spell the difference between victory and defeat in elections.

One reason Ms. Holloway harvests so many absentee ballots, however, is that she cheats, as so many Connecticut pols -- especially from Hartford -- have done. Absentee ballot fraud has prompted arrests or complaints against at least eight city politicians, including two state representatives, in the past decade. Careers have been ruined, but that doesn't seem to deter the next round of cheating.

In this case, the State Elections Enforcement Commission found that Ms. Holloway forged the signature of at least one voter, who told investigators he never asked for an absentee ballot, let alone completed and signed one. The commission found other violations of state election law as well and assessed a rarely imposed \$10,000 fine.

But the commission turned out to be a toothless watchdog. Ms. Holloway will have to pay only \$2,000 because the elections panel said she demonstrated financial hardship. Too bad. She should have been made to pay it all, over time. Nor was her case referred to the state's attorney for prosecution, as it should have been. The commission's executive director, Jeffrey Garfield, said her case wasn't referred because she may not have been as well-versed in election law as someone like former state Rep. Barnaby Horton, who was prosecuted. What a joke. Ms. Holloway knows the system inside and out. Finally, the commission banned her from distributing absentee ballot applications for only two years, instead of a lifetime ban, as Mr. Horton received and which Ms. Holloway deserved. The watchdog rolled over and played dead for Ms. Holloway.

The General Assembly, for its part, passed a "reform" law this year that doesn't change anything in a fundamental way. It still allows the Prenzina Holloways of the political world to manipulate the absentee voting process.

So there you have it: cheating politicians, a wimpy enforcement commission and an equally spineless legislature -- all conspiring in a never-ending perversion of a procedure that is supposed to be a convenience for voters who for legitimate reasons can't get to the polls on Election Day. Instead, it is used cynically and often

on democracy. It undermines people's faith in fair
: of the law and be sentenced to prison for serious

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Next year, the legislature should change the law to keep absentee ballot applications and the ballots themselves out of the hands of campaign workers. Voting absentee should be a matter between voters and election officials only.

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