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## Palm Beach County sparked voter fraud cases across Florida

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The brass-knuckled Republican political operative with the choirboy face and the Boynton Beach man hired to register voters for him both lost their jobs in 2012.

This week, one went to jail.

William Hazard, 52, became the third person charged with falsifying Florida voter registration applications while working on a get-out-the-vote campaign for Nathan Sproul, the once high-flying Arizona political consultant.

Hazard got his walking papers from Sproul's company in September 2012. But soon after, when Hazard's doctored voter documents came to light, Sproul was fired by the Republican Party of Florida, the Republican National Committee and parties in three other states.

The same Florida Department of Law Enforcement investigation leading to Hazard's arrest included a close look at whether Sproul's company orchestrated fraud. Investigators concluded it hadn't — but not before three of Strategic's voter registration workers said they were coached to not sign up Democrats.

### **Elections staff flagged forms**

It was the Palm Beach County Supervisor of Elections staff which pinpointed 106 suspect registration forms gathered and turned in by Hazard.

That was just the beginning. After Elections Supervisor Susan Bucher blew the whistle, reports of suspect registrations started coming in from supervisors of elections all over the state, all of them linked to Sproul's Strategic voter registration drive.

Among the surprises: In Palm Beach County registration paperwork, Anna and Abraham Abramovich's listed home address was a Miami Beach gas station. George and Carolyn Schiessl expressed surprise when told they were registered Palm Beach County Republicans. The couple live in South Carolina.

Several of the people Hazard registered had something in common: They knew him.

Hazard's uncle in Iowa found he was registered to vote here; he hasn't been to Florida in three years. Home addresses on two people's registrations were car dealerships where the two had worked with Hazard. A couple who get an annual Christmas card from Hazard were told by investigators he registered both, writing that one was born in 2012.

Bogus registrations turned in by Strategic workers extended beyond Hazard. In Miami-Dade County, a 77-year-old woman discovered she had been registered to vote under her maiden name — which she had not used since 1962. A Washington, D.C. man found that his vacant Homestead vacation property was the home address for the recently registered "Jose Lopez." Lopez has never been found. In Okaloosa County, a mother got on the phone to the supervisor of elections when her son's mailed absentee ballot listed his party affiliation as Republican. He had registered as a Democrat.

### **Signing up a dead person**

In Santa Rosa County, a woman rose from the dead long enough to register.

When the allegations surfaced, Florida's Republican Party quickly severed ties with Sproul and asked for a state investigation.

FDLE obliged. Two years later, Palm Beach County's is the final of five investigations, including whether Strategic orchestrated the fraud. FDLE concluded the company did nothing wrong, agreeing with Sproul that it was individuals, not Strategic, behind the fake voter registrations.

But agency investigative files showed there was more than fraud going on.

Former Strategic supervisor Danielle Alvarez told the state investigators that Strategic employees in Lee and Charlotte counties were given a “vetting question” to weed out people likely to vote for Barack Obama in 2012. Employees would approach people and ask, “If the election was held tomorrow, would you vote Romney or Obama?”

If the person said Obama, the employee would respond “thank you” or “have a nice day.”

If the person said “Romney,” said Alvarez, then the employee would encourage the potential voter to register or re-register to update their information.

Other employees interviewed by FDLE denied they had been given that instruction. However, Rebekah Joy Paul, who admitted to falsifying Duval County voter registration information, told investigators that’s exactly what she was told to do. Also in Lee County, Strategic worker Angelica Rivera told investigators the group wanted to register only Republican voters.

Sproul could not be reached for comment.

### **Allegations dog company**

Accusations that Sproul’s companies refused to register Democrats — or destroyed their registrations — are one reason attorneys general in three states have looked into those companies’ voter registration activities. None has resulted in criminal charges.

- In 2004, a presidential election year, a trio of Minnesota employees reported they were paid bonuses for signing up George W. Bush supporters — though not John Kerry supporters — a fact the attorney general’s office described as “troubling.”
- In Nevada, a former Sproul employee said that a supervisor destroyed voter registration forms filled out by Democrats. Sproul dismissed him as a disgruntled employee and threatened to sue. Also in Nevada, a couple reported they registered as Democrats with a Sproul worker; their registration never made it to the supervisor of elections.
- In Oregon, Katheline and John Gomez registered with a Sproul worker in 2004. Katheline registered as a Democrat, John as a Republican. Only John’s registration made it to the county clerk’s office. A subcontractor

working for Sproul later said employees were paid only for registering Republicans or for non-Republicans who planned on voting for Bush.

- In Pittsburgh, where a Sproul firm set up outside a library to register voters, librarians got complaints that workers were asking about party affiliations and who voters might cast ballots for before they would register them.

The allegations didn't put a dent in Sproul's booming business. The Republican National Committee paid Sproul firms about \$10 million between 2004 and 2012. The Mitt Romney campaign paid a Sproul company about \$71,000.

Florida changed all that.

Initially the issue was dismissed publicly by the GOP as a political red herring, but privately, some Republicans were furious when word began trickling out about doctored voter registration documents. Not only did the Florida Republican Party fire Strategic Allied, so did Republican parties in Colorado, North Carolina and Virginia. The Republican National Committee cut Sproul loose as well, its spokesman saying the party had "zero tolerance" for voter fraud.

Two years later, FDLE has charged three Strategic workers in Florida: Rebekah Joy Paul and Christian David Price, who admitted faking a total of 27 Duval County voter registrations, were sentenced to community service in 2013.

Hazard was released on Wednesday from the Palm Beach County jail after posting a \$24,000 bond. He could not be reached for comment.

Sproul continues to do political work from Tempe, Ariz., where his Lincoln Strategy Group is headquartered.

Told Hazard had been arrested, Bucher expressed surprise. She hadn't heard from FDLE since it took the 106 suspect voter registration forms her staff found.

In her six years as supervisor in Palm Beach County, and 20 years working in elections, the Strategic case is the first fraud case Bucher said she's come across. "Voter fraud still isn't as big of an issue as many think."