



We're loading your content, stay tuned!

Almost unrecognizable in a trim beard, Jeffrey Garcia, the former chief of staff to Congressman Joe Garcia, hugged his relatives, kissed his wife and stepped up to the lectern in a Miami courtroom Monday morning to apologize.

He had directed the Miami Democratic congressman's political campaign last year to request some 1,800 absentee ballots without voters' permission, breaking Florida elections laws that require voters or their immediate family to ask for the ballots themselves.

"I should not have done it," Garcia, 41, told Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Nushin Sayfie. "I'm sorry, and I accept responsibility for my actions."

TOP ARTICLES

'Absolutely surreal.' Florida Panhandle hit with severe flooding from Hurricane Sally

Then he pleaded guilty.

A few moments later, three police officers placed him in handcuffs and escorted him to jail. As part of a plea deal with prosecutors, he will serve 90 days behind bars.

During his probation, Garcia, a professional political operative who is not related to the congressman, will be prohibited from volunteering or working for any campaigns.

His sentencing marks the culmination of an investigation by the Miami-Dade state attorney's office, triggered by a Miami Herald report, into thousands of fraudulent absentee-ballot requests that rolled into the county elections department's website last year, a sign of a worrying trend of campaigns using technology to take advantage of the convenient online system.

"It was a very just resolution given the severity of the crime and the preciousness of the democratic process," State Attorney Katherine Fernández Rundle said.

The cases of two others who participated in the scheme under Garcia's guidance, former communications director Giancarlo Sopo and former campaign manager John Estes, will likely be resolved soon, given Garcia's admission of guilt.

Still pending is a federal investigation, also prompted by a Herald report, into Garcia's ties to Jose Rolando "Roly" Arrojo, a bogus tea party candidate who ran for Congress in 2010. The Herald found Garcia might have secretly funded Arrojo's campaign to siphon off conservative votes from Republican David Rivera, who defeated Joe Garcia that year but then lost to him in 2012.

Local news has never been more important

Subscribe for unlimited digital access to the news that matters to your community.

#READLOCAL

Separately, Rivera is also under federal criminal investigation for his possible connection to another ringer candidate, Democrat Justin Lamar Sternad, who challenged Joe Garcia in last year's primary and has pleaded guilty to campaign-finance violations.

Both Garcia and Rivera have denied any ties to the fake candidates.

In court Monday, Jeffrey Garcia emphasized that the campaign did not tamper with any ballots. It requested them to target infrequent voters the campaign thought could be persuaded to vote for Joe Garcia.

"My intent and actions were calculated merely to increase voter participation," Jeffrey Garcia told the judge.

The congressman, a friend of Garcia's for more than a decade, underwent the same

responsibility and apologize.”

As the congressman’s top political strategist, Jeffrey Garcia advised Joe Garcia’s campaign last year in the 26th congressional district, which runs from Kendall to Key West. Joe Garcia defeated Rivera in the Nov. 6, 2012, general election.

About a month later, a grand jury convened by the state attorney’s office disclosed that the elections department had identified more than 2,500 fraudulent absentee-ballot requests submitted through its website for the Aug. 14, 2012, primary election. None of the ballots were mailed.

Prosecutors said they couldn’t discern the origin of the requests targeting Republican voters in two state House districts because they were masked by foreign Internet Protocol addresses. But a Herald investigation in February found that almost 500 requests targeting Democratic voters in Garcia’s congressional district came from Miami and their origin could be pinpointed.

When they reopened the investigation, prosecutors led by Tim VanderGiesen found not only those primary-election requests but also an additional 1,400 or so previously undisclosed requests for the general election. They linked the IP addresses to the homes of Sopo’s cousin and Estes’ parents.

The day investigators raided the homes for evidence, Jeffrey Garcia told his boss he orchestrated the scheme and was fired. Sopo was placed on unpaid leave and later resigned.

Garcia pleaded guilty to one felony and three misdemeanor charges. The third-degree felony charge of requesting absentee ballots on behalf of voters carries a maximum five-year prison sentence, and each of the misdemeanors one year.

The three misdemeanor counts — for soliciting others to request the ballots — stem from directing Sopo and Estes; Sopo’s cousin, Laura Rossello; and Estes’ brother, Nicholas Estes, to submit the online requests.

One of Jeffrey Garcia’s attorneys, Henry Bell, indicated that his client had accepted what Bell called “relatively severe” punishment because prosecutors could have tried to charge Garcia with a more serious, first-degree felony for misusing voters’ personal information.

Dressed in a dark suit, checkered shirt and no tie, Garcia appeared somber in court but at peace with the punishment. He smiled occasionally and was affectionate with his lawyers, friends and relatives. He spoke in a clear voice as his wife, Patricia Rodriguez, sitting in the first row, wiped away tears.



CRIME

Civilian victims in UPS truck shootout sue Miami police, BSO, FHP, 3 other agencies

BY DAVID J. NEAL

SEPTEMBER 16, 2020 10:53 AM , UPDATED 6 MINUTES AGO



UPS driver Frank Ordonez's estate and Carlos Lara, shot in a 2019 robbery pursuit shootout, have sued six Florida agencies, including Miami, FHP, BSO and Doral.

KEEP READING →

Reporter Maria Taylor's obituary

UPDATED SEPTEMBER 15, 2020 03:31 PM

Florida sees lowest single-day count since June as death toll runs past 12,600

UPDATED SEPTEMBER 15, 2020 01:01 PM

Paulette to become powerful cyclone, while Teddy strengthens and Vicky refuses to weaken

UPDATED 1 HOUR 38 MINUTES AGO

Florida adds more than 100 new COVID-19 deaths as toll in Miami-Dade nears 3,000

UPDATED SEPTEMBER 15, 2020 03:05 PM

Local news has never been more important

#ReadLocal

Subscribe for unlimited digital access to the news that matters to your community.

#READLOCAL



POLITICS

Senate Democrats attempt to pass TPS for Venezuelans weeks before Election Day



CORONAVIRUS

These 18 hand sanitizers have been added to FDA's Do Not Use List in the past 19 days



CORONAVIRUS

Dozens of Miami city parks set to reopen after months of closure during pandemic

We use cookies and similar technologies. By continuing to use this website, you consent to our [Terms of Service](#) and our [Privacy Policy](#).

ACCEPT COOKIES

he’s running.
SEPTEMBER 16, 2020 6:00 AM

is it truthful? | Opinion
UPDATED 3 HOURS 25 MINUTES AGO

 BY THE PENNY HOARDER

Take Us With You

Real-time updates and all local stories you want right in the palm of your hand.

 MIAMI HERALD APP →

VIEW NEWSLETTERS →

- SUBSCRIPTIONS
- [Start a Subscription](#)
- [Customer Service](#)
- [eEdition](#)
- [Vacation Hold](#)
- [Pay Your Bill](#)
- LEARN MORE
- [About Us](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Newsletters](#)
- [News in Education](#)
- [Public Insight Network](#)
- [Reader Panel](#)
- [Archives](#)
- ADVERTISING
- [Place a Classified](#)
- [Media Kit](#)
- [Public Notices](#)

COPYRIGHT

COMMENTING POLICY

ACCEPT COOKIES

We use cookies and similar technologies. By continuing to use this website, you consent to our [Terms of Service](#) and our [Privacy Policy](#).