

Georgia Gets Tough on a County Tradition: Vote-Buying

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Some sold their votes right in the grimy corridors of the Dodge County courthouse. One woman turned down one campaign's offer of cash on her way into the courthouse, only to be solicited by another campaign on her way out.

Dozens voted despite felony convictions that made it illegal for them to cast ballots. Many made questionable claims of illiteracy or physical disability so they could take campaign workers into the polling booth to "assist" them. And following an age-old Georgia tradition, at least two votes were cast despite a condition that typically precludes political participation: death.

State election monitors realized that something smelled in Dodge County several weeks before the Democratic primary last July 9 when they heard about a surge in pre-election absentee voting. The officials, well into an ongoing investigation that has already invalidated two elections and produced 21 indictments, can only shake their heads at the brazenness and pervasiveness of vote-buying practices that are regarded by many here as more of a social custom than a crime.

"This type of activity has been going on here for quite some time, and there's a side that thinks it's nothing wrong, that it's a way of life," said Glynn Meeks, the special agent in charge of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's office in Eastman, the seat of this small, rural county in middle Georgia. "Some of them can't wait till they turn 18 so they can get paid to vote."

Wayne B. Pruett, who has lived here all of his 57 years, remembered an election a while back when a man approached him in the courthouse as he was waiting to vote.

" 'Why don't we go back in the bathroom and talk a bit before you vote?' " Mr. Pruett recalled the man's asking. "I said I already had my mind made up so it wouldn't do any good. He said, 'Well, it might be worth 20 bucks to you if you vote the right way.' "

Lewis Massey, Georgia's Secretary of State, who oversees elections, said he was shocked by the magnitude of the wrongdoing in Dodge County, despite the long history of vote-buying in the rural South.

"In the 1990's, it's amazing that this level of fraud can occur," he said.

But Dodge is an isolated county where the median household income in 1990 was barely \$18,000 and where a series of textile plant closings has pushed the unemployment rate to 7.3 percent, nearly double the state average. In that economy, the \$20 to \$60 offered for votes in July turned plenty of heads.

The investigation by state and Federal agents has disrupted civic and political life in Dodge County, population 17,000, like nothing before. It has already created a gaping political void and, with investigators crawling over the county, has made county leaders edgy and defensive.

Like many elected officials, John Kelly, the probate judge and county elections superintendent, said he had heard about vote-buying in Dodge County all his life but had never witnessed it. Rather than taking responsibility for last summer's debacle, Mr. Kelly attributed it to lax election laws.

"If anybody wants to violate an election law," he said, "it's so lenient that it's there for them to do it."

In August and September, the results of the July elections for the all-powerful positions of sheriff and sole county commissioner were thrown out by state court judges, who found evidence of gross irregularities. New elections were held last month, strictly monitored by state and Federal agents.

The incumbent commissioner, J. Don McCranie, won both elections for that post, but the incumbent sheriff of 30 years, T. Jackson Jones, lost the second election after winning the first contest by six votes. The victor, Theo M. Parkerson, who had been Mr. Jones's chief deputy for 23 years, suffered a heart attack only 23 days after taking office. He remains hospitalized.

Investigators were struck that Mr. Jones lost the Election Day voting by 589 votes out of 6,437 cast but won the absentee balloting by 595 votes out of 1,493 cast. Many of the absentee voters were assisted in voting by supporters of various candidates after claiming that they could not read (sometimes despite high school or college degrees) or that they suffered from physical maladies (one saying he had been kicked in the head by a mule).

"Obviously, if you're a vote purchaser, assisting a voter is your best guarantee that you're getting what you paid for," said Chris Riggall, a spokesman for Mr. Massey.

Last month, a Federal grand jury indicted 21 Dodge County residents for a variety of illegal voting practices, the largest number ever indicted at one time in a Federal vote-buying conspiracy, said John K. Russell, a Justice Department spokesman. Three other people have been named as unindicted co-conspirators. Nine of the defendants have pleaded guilty and, along with the unindicted co-conspirators, are cooperating with law-enforcement authorities who are trying to make cases against the candidates.

It is widely assumed here that Mr. Jones, Mr. McCranie and Doyce M. Mullis, a former two-term county commissioner who was ousted by Mr. McCranie in 1992 and then challenged him in 1996, will all face charges.

If Mr. Jones is indicted, he would become the 30th Georgia sheriff to face criminal charges since 1981. Many have been accused of protecting drug dealers. Encountered in his van while he drove down the dirt road to his house, Mr. Jones said he would not comment on the investigation. "That's what the courts are for," he said, before driving off. Lawyers for Mr. Mullis and Mr. McCranie also declined to comment.

With so many politically connected people suddenly provided with so much incentive to talk to investigators, many here think vote-buying charges may be the least of the troubles facing some of the county's political leaders. For nearly five years, the Federal investigators have been examining accusations of kickbacks and other forms of corruption in government and social service agencies in Dodge County.

In July 1993, shortly after the investigation started, a potentially crucial witness, Donald Purser, an accountant for the county and a number of quasi-governmental agencies, was shot to death in bed at his home. Before then, Mr. Purser, one of Dodge County's most prominent residents, had been meeting with Federal agents investigating the corruption case. The killing remains unsolved.

Mr. Meeks said there was no evidence at this point linking anyone implicated in the election fraud case to Mr. Purser's killing. But the revival of investigative activity in Dodge County has encouraged plenty of talk about the shooting, and the memory of Mr. Purser's death has apparently been used to intimidate witnesses in the vote-buying case.

One defendant told investigators that she had received anonymous telephone calls warning her not to deal with law-enforcement agents, a person who has read investigative files on the case said. "If you want to know what will happen to you for telling on these people, ask Donald Purser," the caller is reported to have told the woman.

Those indicted so far are primarily midlevel players in the vote-buying conspiracies. One indictment charges that Wayne Cartwright, the former Mayor of nearby Milan, Ga., waited in his truck on Election Day and paid voters \$30 or \$40 after another man had taken them to vote for Mr. Mullis and Mr. Jones.

Mr. Russell said that the Justice Department, as a matter of policy, did not usually prosecute people who sold their votes, considering them primarily to be victims of the crime. In places like Dodge County, vote-buying can be so ingrained in the political culture that many simply do not accept that it is wrong.

"We literally had people who said they had no idea that selling your vote was illegal," Mr. Riggall said. "One guy said, 'It's my vote, I can do what I want with it.' "