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Drug money funds voter fraud in Kentucky



By Eric Shawn, | Fox News



Votes for sale?

Cast your vote for cash in Kentucky

Voter fraud has a shocking new meaning in eastern Kentucky.

That is where in some cases, major cocaine and marijuana dealers admitted to buying votes to steal elections, and the result is the corruption of American democracy. The government continues to mete out justice in the scandal, as two people convicted in April in a vote-buying case face sentencing this week, and another public official pleaded guilty Tuesday to conspiracy.

"We believe that drug money did buy votes," Kerry B. Harvey, U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Kentucky, said of a separate vote-buying case.

He described a stunning vote-buying scheme that includes "very extensive, organized criminal activity, involving hundreds of thousands of dollars, and in many cases that involves drug money."

Harvey has led a recent string of federal prosecutions exposing the widespread and accepted practice of vote buying in eastern Kentucky. The soft-spoken federal prosecutor, along with his team and state authorities, are waging a battle against what he characterizes as a vote-buying culture embedded in many of the communities for generations.

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He says the problem is rooted in economic woes, which is why votes are routinely for sale. In that part of the state, jobs are scarce and poverty is high. Controlling local government means controlling jobs.

"These folks go out and hijack the local elections for their own purposes and then they use those jobs to enrich themselves and their confederates. It really is a terrible problem and it has to be stopped," Harvey explains.

In Clay County, according to court testimony, some of the funds to purchase votes came from massive cocaine and marijuana drug trafficking operations.

"They did use drug money to buy votes, and drug dealers felt they would be protected," Harvey said.

Prosecutors say more than \$400,000, part of it drug proceeds, was pooled by Democratic and Republican politicians over several elections, and spent to buy the votes of more than 8,000 voters, usually at \$50 apiece.

One voter was even able to bid up the cost of his vote to \$800.

In the Eastern District of Kentucky alone, more than 20 public elected officials and others have either been convicted or plead guilty in various vote-buying cases just in the last two years.

On Tuesday, former Breathitt County School Superintendent Arch Turner pleaded guilty to conspiracy during the 2010 primary election, admitting he handed out money to buy votes. On Thursday, two others will be sentenced after they were convicted of vote-buying-related charges in the same contest.

Vote buying "really has a corrosive effect on the very foundations of the freedoms that we enjoy," Harvey said as he sat with Fox News in his office in Lexington. "It's hard to imagine a more serious problem that would have a more pernicious effect across the whole community."

"When it comes to vote buying, it's an everyday thing. ... It's pretty much like jaywalking," admits former Breathitt County magistrate candidate Michael Salyers, who is now serving time in jail for buying votes in his 2010 race. While the funds in his case did not involve drug money, he describes how he was given \$500 and ended up buying about 10 votes. He would meet people seeking to sell their votes in the back room of a local store.

"The sellers in this situation would come to me and ask how much was I paying for votes, and ask me if I was buying votes or whatever, and I told them the most I could pay is \$25," Salyers described to Fox News. "They would go into the machine and cast their vote...They were supposed to vote for me. They would come back to me and I would pay them for going to vote. I had one gentleman come to me and say 'Mike, I have four votes,' so he took them to vote and I gave him \$100, \$25 a vote."

Salyers says vote buying has been so blatant that, "you used to be able to go behind the voting machine with voters, to make sure that if you bought their vote, that they would vote the way you wanted to." But the laws were strengthened, and now vote buyers have to trust that the people they pay to cast their ballots vote as they say they will.

He blames what he calls "the excitement of competition" for spurring him to buy his votes, but it turned out to not be money well spent. He lost the election.

"It's been going on ever since I was a young boy," says 54 year-old voter Richard Moore, who admitted he sold his vote to Salyers for \$25. "As soon as you become the age to vote, you have people hounding you to buy your vote."

Moore sat on a sofa in the house where he lives with his mother in Jackson, Ky., and described what happened.

"I knew Mike didn't have a chance of winning, and if he was wanting to give money away like that, then I was going to get some of it," Moore explained. He says the lack of jobs in eastern Kentucky also spurs people to make money through voter fraud.

"I don't feel good about it," he told us. "I wish I'd never done it. ... I think they ought to do something about it and fix it, so they can't sell votes. They should have some ways of doing things differently where people can't buy votes."

In the Clay County case, former Circuit Court Judge Cletus Maricle, 67, and seven others were convicted in 2010 in a massive vote-buying scheme that ran through several elections. Maricle, who was sentenced to more than 26 years behind bars, is appealing his conviction. Several convicted

major drug dealers testified during the trial about just how easy it was to spread many thousands of dollars around to buy votes.

'I always bought votes,' Kenneth Day testified.

The 60-year-old was serving 18 years in federal prison for multimillion-dollar drug trafficking. Prosecutors say he dealt in "millions of dollars in drugs, marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamine" and "had developed one of the most successful drug trafficking businesses in the whole entire region."

Day admitted on the stand to "selling tons of marijuana" and hundreds of thousands of dollars of cocaine every other week. He also dealt in votes.

"I bought my first vote with half a pint of liquor," Day testified. He described how that mushroomed to a seemingly routine method to buy protection from politicians and win their elections. He said he even bought votes for the sheriff.

"That showed people on the ground who had the power and who had the money to buy the votes," Day testified. "As time went on, \$5 a vote, \$10 a vote. I have paid as high as \$800 a vote. ... Election after election, day in and day out, every election I ever worked, it went on."

Day was not only an admitted drug trafficker, but he also had served as the longtime Clay County Republican commissioner of the Board of Elections.

Democratic Board of Elections Judge Eugene Lewis, 70, also a convicted cocaine trafficker and marijuana dealer serving a 12 years prison sentence, described how easily he bought votes over a period spanning three decades.

"I've also bought, traded, bought votes for different candidates," he testified. "I would pay them right in the booth. ... You would not believe the percentage of people, from school teachers down, that I have bought their vote from. It's unbelievable."

J.C. Lawson, another convicted marijuana and cocaine dealer, also explained the process of buying votes. The 55-year-old testified that he helped win elections by giving candidates "voters and people and money."

"Where did that money come from?" U.S. Assistant Attorney Stephen C. Smith asked.

"From drug dealing I made," Lawson testified matter-of-factly.

He said he even gave the sheriff about \$20,000 for his race, in exchange for protection.

In court, Smith described how Clay County public officials were "working to protect drug dealers" and that "voters were lined up in lines who had been bought and bribed by the group."

"The drug dealer (was) bringing them in," Smith said. "Lining them up. Pay to play, boys. How much is it gonna take? Show who's got the strength, who controls this county."

"Once you had the county clerk and once you had the Democratic commissioner, you had control," he said.

Lewis testified that in his case, he did not tell Maricle that the money he contributed to his campaign came from selling drugs, but that people "might have suspected it."

Since the convictions last year, prosecutors have continued to bring additional vote-buying charges and say they will pursue even more.

"The good news is, I think it is changing," Harvey, the U.S. attorney, said. He vows to continue the crackdown until the vote buying can one day be eliminated and elections run cleanly.

"When you think about how we honor people in past generations who have made great sacrifices to secure the freedoms for us, and of course the foundational freedom is the right to elect your officials in free and fair elections," he notes. "The fact that we would have people who would so willingly and so completely corrupt that process is just reprehensible. ... They deserve exactly what they are getting."

Kentucky Attorney General Jack Conway and Secretary of State Alison Lundergan Grimes, both Democrats, have established an election integrity task force and special hotline to try to prevent voter fraud.

"I think we're making a dent in it," Conway told Fox News. "We are doing our best to make sure there are free and fair elections throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky."

As Conway sat in a conference room in the ornate capitol building in Frankfort, he described how investigators have been placed across the state to investigate vote buying, and he decried the toll voter fraud has on the integrity of the election system.

"If you sell your vote, you are selling the heart of democracy. If the government belongs to someone who is out there buying votes, rather than the free will of the people, then it doesn't belong to everybody," he said. "It is very central to our democracy, so I think this work is very important."

Since starting the task force, Conway says there has been progress. He notes there were "only two allegations of vote buying" reported during the recent May primary.

"Our vigilance has stepped up," he said. "I want elections to be free and fair. I am an elected official. I am grateful that voters have placed their trust in me. I can't imagine being at the local level thinking that you got your office by something other than a free and fair election."

It is a message that Salyers now accepts.

He told Fox News that he regrets buying votes, for which he is now serving 60 days in jail. When he is released next month, Salyers will then spend six months in home detention.

"I made a mistake, and what I done I should have been punished and I have been punished. But even if I had got no jail time and walked off scot-free, I still brought shame on myself and on my family. And you talk about punishment, that's punishment," he said. "I lay in bed at night a lot of times just thinking what I've done to them, the community and so forth. You know the only thing I can say to the community and the citizens of Breathitt County is, I'm, sorry."

"When I look at someone like Mike Salyers, I don't see a bad person," his attorney, Jeff Rager, said. "Mr. Salyers is a good person with a good heart, and part of what he did wrong here is part of the culture."

Rager is one of the many who say the dire economic conditions mean selling your vote is a quick and easy way to make some extra money.

"We have a culture down there with a ton of poor people at the bottom and very few people with money and power at the top," Rager said. "And whenever you have a situation like that, those people in power will do whatever they can do to maintain that power, to keep the spigot open, to keep the money flowing. And that's why they can get people... to say, hey, 'do you want to make some money?'"

"I'm not sure who is more culpable in a situation like this," he said. "Whether it is the person buying the vote or the individuals who are actually selling them. On one hand, you have a person who is buying a right, and on the other hand you have somebody who has that right, that people have fought and died for, that this country is based upon, that is selling it for \$25 or \$75."

Richard Moore, who sold Salyers his vote, thinks despite the best effort by authorities, vote buying will never be fully eradicated.

"I don't think it will stop. They might slow it down some, and I hope they do," he said, but he doubts it.

Vote buying, he says is "where the money's at."

Meredith Orban contributed to this report. If you suspect voter fraud where you live, tell us: VoterFraud@Foxnews.com.

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