

Dead voted in governor's race

King County investigating 'ghost voter' cases

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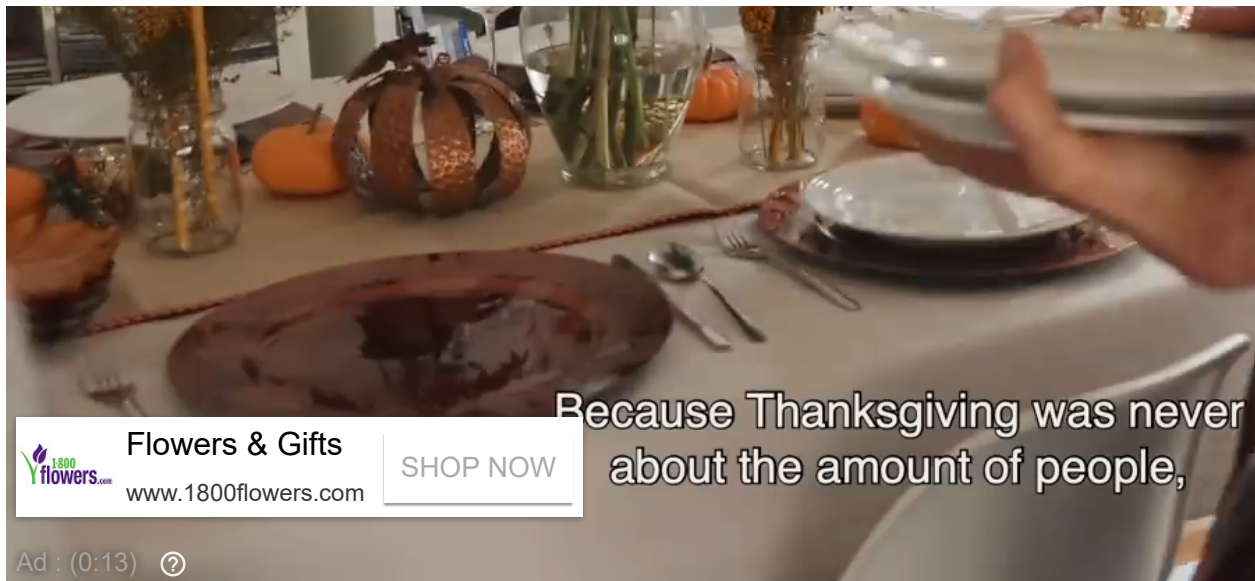
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At least eight people who died well before the November general election were credited with voting in King County, raising new questions about the integrity of the vote total in the narrow governor's race, a Seattle Post-Intelligencer review has found.

The evidence of votes from dead people is the latest example of flaws in an election already rocked by misplaced votes and allegations that there were thousands more votes counted than actual voters.

County officials say they are investigating the cases pointed out by the P-I. "These are not indications of fraud," said **Bill Huennekens**, King County's elections supervisor. "Fraud is a concerted effort to change an election."





The P-I review found eight people who died weeks before absentee ballots were mailed out, between Oct. 13 and 15, but were credited with voting in King County. Among them was an 81-year-old Seattle woman who died in August but is recorded as having voted at the polls.

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The state is required by law to send monthly lists of the deceased to county auditors so they can purge those names from their voter rolls. But those lists are sent only every few months. That means thousands of deceased voters may have been sent absentee ballots.

"If we don't receive a notice that they're dead, then we have no way of taking them off the rolls," said **Dean Logan**, the county's elections director. Relatives of the deceased can and do cancel some registrations, he said.

Doris McFarland said she voted for her husband, Earl, who died Oct. 7.

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"I called up the elections board and said, 'Can I do it because he wanted me to vote?' " the Duvall woman said. "The person ... said, 'Well, who would know?' I said, 'I don't want to do anything that is wrong.' "

Huennekens disputed that election workers would say such a thing.

McFarland said she signed her husband's name and mailed in his ballot, along with her own. She said she had power of attorney for her 92-year-old husband, who was blind.

"If I did something that wasn't right, you can just throw that ballot out," McFarland said last night.

Huennekens said one of the P-I's eight cases involved an administrative error that showed a deceased person as voting and would be corrected. In four cases, the signatures on the ballot matched. Huennekens said officials needed further information or could not track down enough information on the other cases.

Election officials said that if cases merit potential fraud, they would forward them on for prosecution.

King County keeps a voter list as a record of who voted in elections and to establish requirements for levies and bonds, Logan said.

The preliminary voter list shows that **Mary Coffey** mailed in a ballot. But the 51-year-old Seattle woman died about two weeks before absentee ballots were mailed.

"She couldn't have (voted). She died on Sept. 29," said her husband, **Michael Coffey**. He added that he voted by mail, but destroyed his wife's ballot when it arrived in the mail.

"I don't see how she could have voted. It doesn't make sense. There has to be some kind of error that happened."

Election officials were still looking into what happened in her case.

Bob Holmgren said yesterday that he voted on behalf of his late wife, **Charlette Holmgren**, who died Sept. 29. The West Seattle man filled out his own ballot and hers, and signed both of them.

"Her vote was important to her," Holmgren said. "She was very strongly against Governor-elect Gregoire." Election officials said all signatures on absentee ballots were doubled-checked against the signature on record.

"Our system of allowing people to vote absentee and never checking anything is designed for voter convenience at the expense of security," said **Chris Vance**, chairman of the state **Republican Party**.

He said the GOP has found cases of dead people casting ballots, and it plans to challenge the race results.

Votes from the 2004 election have been heavily scrutinized . With Democrat Christine Gregoire set to take office on Wednesday, Republicans are searching for ways to contest the election and force a revote.

Kirstin Brost, spokeswoman for the state **Democratic Party**, said, "We're very satisfied with the results of this election. It's the most closely examined election in our state's history."

James M. Courneya of Auburn died three months before the election. But the King County voter list shows that he voted absentee.

"He couldn't have. He died Aug. 7," said his wife, **Anna Courneya**, who resides at the same address as her late husband. She said her husband didn't receive a ballot but she did. She voted absentee but the King County voters list doesn't register her vote, only his.

Huennekens said Anna Courneya voted using her husband's ballot, and because she didn't cast a separate one, that ballot was valid.

The state **Health Department** sends out lists of the deceased "every two to three months," not every month as the law states, said **Jennifer Tebaldi**, who helps oversee the department's vital statistics operation.

"We have an informal understanding with the counties that we send it when there's a bulk of information to send."

County auditors received lists of the deceased from the state three times last year -- on Jan. 28, May 5 and Nov. 1, a day before the election. Most of the names they received in May were of people who died in 2003, because of a lag of four to six months in collecting and sending data.

Secretary of State **Sam Reed** said a statewide voter database, expected in 2006, would improve the process.

He said he hasn't seen the problem of dead people voting occur in Washington. Voter fraud is a serious crime that may be punished with up to 10 years in prison and up to a \$10,000 fine, he said.

"We do not expect people to sit down and vote a ballot just because it happens to arrive in their homes," Reed said. "Double-checks are in place."

Rosalie B. Simpson, 81, died of a massive heart attack Aug. 4, but voter rolls show she voted at the polls.

If a voter dies after having voted, it's still perfectly legal, Logan said.

Owen Skau of Federal Way made his choices before he died last October, said his wife, Maya.

"He filled it out," she said. "He always voted. ... He filled out his vote before he fell and had a heart attack. But he had it filled out. I went ahead and mailed it in."

Other voting problems may also be raised. **Timothy Harris**, general counsel for the Building Industry Association of Washington, which is preparing a court challenge of the governor's race, said his group has documented about 50 felons who did not have their voting rights restored but voted in Pierce County.

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