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In Lincoln County, a vote-buyer runs for sheriff

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Old habits die hard in West Virginia, especially when they are the "good ol' boy" political habits of parts of southern West Virginia. This month, former Lincoln County Assessor Jerry Weaver filed to run for sheriff. Weaver knows all about how to win elections. In fact, he helped fix them for years when he served as assessor. In 2005, Weaver pleaded guilty, along with former Lincoln County Circuit Clerk Greg Stowers, to federal charges of conspiracy to buy votes in elections dating back as far as 1990. Chuck Miller, the acting U.S. attorney at the time, said: "For too long, the taint of election fraud has hung like a cloud over southern West Virginia. "I hope these guilty pleas send a message." It doesn't look like Lincoln County got the message. Two years ago, several Lincoln County political hacks cooked up a way to change the outcome of the primary election by dispensing hundreds of absentee ballots to people they knew would vote for their slate of candidates. Protests were filed, 309 absentee ballots were tossed out, and the result of the nomination for circuit clerk was changed. Attorney Harvey Peyton, who represented two candidates challenging the election, said following his investigation: "This couldn't have happened had any number of people along the food chain, who have the responsibility to do their jobs, done their jobs." But back to Weaver. He was sentenced to one year in federal prison for vote-buying. After Weaver's release, Lincoln County Assessor Tracy Dempsey hired him to work in his office as an appraiser mapper at \$1,900 a month. Now Weaver is one of four candidates who has filed to run for sheriff in Lincoln County. Apparently Weaver – vote-buying aside – is a likable guy, so he may well win. And there's nothing that would keep him from holding office. The West Virginia Secretary of State's interpretation of the state Constitution is that only someone "currently under conviction" would be prevented from serving in office. Weaver has served his time. Additionally, if Weaver becomes sheriff, he could strap on a gun. U.S. Attorney Booth Goodwin says an exemption in the law allows a convicted felon to carry a gun "as an agent of a state or federal political subdivision." So technically, Weaver would be able to put on a uniform and a badge as Lincoln County's chief law enforcement official and help make sure that folks are following the straight and narrow, all the while serving as the county tax collector. Lincoln County is a notoriously politically factional place where vote-buying and fraud have been part of the culture for years. Fortunately, federal investigators have made it harder for some of these scofflaws to fix the outcomes, but a lot of the familiar faces just keep popping up. *Kercheval is host of TalkLine, broadcast by the MetroNews Statewide Radio Network from 10 a.m. to noon Monday through Friday. The show can be heard locally on WCHS 580 AM.*

