

# LEARN FROM HIALEAH BALLOT FIASCO, FIX ABSENTEE VOTING TO DETER FRAUD

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**A** judge has just sent a tough, welcome message: Election fraud won't be tolerated in Florida.

In response, state lawmakers, elections supervisors, Secretary of State Jim Smith and his successor, Sandy Mortham, should work to reform election laws and absentee ballot procedures to deter fraud.

A Dade County judge properly threw out the results of the Nov. 9, 1993, **Hialeah** mayor's election, calling it tainted by absentee ballots forged by "unscrupulous" campaign workers. He ordered a new election Dec. 6, saying non-residents and even some mentally incompetent people voted.

His ruling came in a lawsuit by mayoral loser Nilo Juri claiming fraud. Juri lost by only 273 votes, due to a 2-1 margin in absentee ballots, many witnessed by winner Raul Martinez' campaign workers.

The judge's ruling sets the stage for another shocker: a dozen expected federal indictments for voter fraud.

Broward and Palm Beach counties aren't immune to the threat of voter fraud. Local elections officials report people picking up suspiciously large numbers of absentee ballots for others. Every election, large numbers of absentee ballots are thrown out when the signature doesn't match official records.

Major reforms are needed:

-- Elections supervisors statewide should follow Broward's lead in using elections officials to monitor absentee ballot voting in nursing homes. The likeliest targets of absentee ballot fraud are people who are illiterate, old, infirm or mentally ill, like the nursing home patients targeted by Hialeah campaign workers.

-- Lawmakers should approve a bill (HB 733) passed by the House Ethics and Elections Committee this spring. It bans anyone from picking up more than one absentee ballot for someone else outside his immediate family. It bans candidates from picking up any absentee ballots for someone not a family member. It requires a signed affidavit stating a person is authorized to pick up the ballot.

-- Lawmakers should abolish Florida's practice, rare in the United States, of letting voters request absentee ballots by phone. Mail requests allow signature verification.

-- Elections offices statewide should follow a Broward practice of requiring those picking up absentee ballots for others to register and show a photo identification card.

The voting process is a cornerstone of democracy. Its integrity must be preserved and strengthened.

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