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Section: NEWS

Dems blast GOP efforts on voter fraud

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WASHINGTON Efforts by the Justice Department and the Republican Party to guard against voter fraud have ignited a long-smoldering dispute that could have an impact on close national elections less than two weeks away. The Republican Party has compiled a national database of 3,273 names of people who it says apparently voted more than once in the 2000 elections. It is turning the list over to local authorities for investigation and possible prosecution.

But early looks at the data by state officials have found little evidence of multiple voting.

At the same time, the Justice Department is mounting what it calls an unprecedented effort to police voter discrimination at polling places and prosecute voting fraud. Attorney General John Ashcroft held a daylong "Voting Integrity Symposium" this month to train more than 300 representatives of FBI and U.S. attorney's offices across the nation in preventing election offenses and training witnesses to testify.

Some Democrats accuse the GOP of aiming to intimidate voters -- particularly minorities and new immigrants, who they believe lean Democratic.

"The last thing we need are partisan efforts that could make it harder for law-abiding citizens to vote on Election Day," said Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., chairman of the committee that oversees elections.

The stakes are immense. Majorities in the House of Representatives and Senate hang on a handful of races scattered across the nation. Both parties say the outcome will hinge on who does the best job getting supporters to the polls.

The skirmish is emblematic of longstanding tension between the Republicans and Democrats. It was evident most recently in the struggle over legislation in Congress to fix the election process after ballot problems in 2000. That legislation was stalled for months while Democrats and Republicans argued over whether to include anti-fraud provisions, including identification requirements for new voters, that had been sought by Republicans.

Connecticut, the first state to check the GOP's multiple-voting data, found it "highly flawed."

Officials said that at least 51 of 54 names listed as voting both in Connecticut
and elsewhere were erroneous.

Secretary of State Susan Bysiewicz, a Democrat, called the list "a deliberate attempt to distract election officials across the country from their responsibility to encourage voter participation."

In North Carolina, officials found that the first name on the double-voting list was that of state Rep. Martha Alexander, a Democrat who chairs the General Assembly's panel on election laws. "It's got to be two people with the same name and birth date," said Gary Bartlett, director of the state Board of Elections.

Shad Balch, a spokesman for California Secretary of State Bill Jones, a Republican, said, "It looks like we're going to be able to refute their claims."

Party spokesman Kevin Sheridan said the project was carefully done using publicly available voting records and other material.

"The intent was to provide it to authorities interested in our research . . . and to take any action they deem necessary to clean up the process or to bring legal action against people involved," he said. Although the GOP knows in some cases the political affiliation of the voters on its list, "we're not making that available," he said.

Regarding the Justice Department's anti-fraud effort, Wade Henderson of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights called it "a solution in search of a problem" and "a warmed-over plan for voter intimidation."

There is concern among civil rights advocates that Justice's investigation of alleged fraudulent voter registrations in South Dakota and near Indian reservations is scaring off potential voters.

Ashcroft spokesman Mark Corallo dismissed the concerns: "The only people intimidated are the people who were going to cast fraudulent ballots, and that's the only time the Department of Justice is going to go after them."

* Party officials in Arkansas are trading charges of fraud and voter intimidation. Republicans say Democrats have generated bogus voter registrations; Democrats say Republicans have tried to photograph and intimidate minority voters waiting in line to cast early ballots in Pine Bluff.

* The Texas GCP on Oct. 10 announced a "ballot integrity" program to guard against voter fraud by "our less ethical opponents." The effort, detailed on the state party's Web site, calls for recruiting poll watchers who will look for irregularities on Election Day.

PHOTO, B/W, AP

NOTES: Washington

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