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HEADLINE: Thousands of new-voter cards in Ohio undeliverable

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BODY:

COLUMBUS - Thousands of cards mailed by county election boards to newly registered voters in Hamilton County and throughout the state are being returned because the people can't be found.

John Williams, director of the Hamilton County Board of Elections, said the situation indicates that there might not be as many new voters as some expect in a state deemed crucial in the presidential election.

Ohio Republican Party Chairman Robert Bennett on Tuesday said it's a result of statewide registration fraud conducted by independent groups that support Democratic candidates.

"By most accounts, their work can only be considered sloppy, haphazard and, in some cases, downright illegal," Bennett said, noting that the state party plans to take out full-page ads in Ohio newspapers encouraging citizens to stop voter fraud.

Democratic Party spokesman Dan Trevas said the fraud uncovered in Ohio equates to "minor errors" when viewed in the bigger picture.

"The vast majority of those registered for the first time are intent on voting," he said.

Bennett cited instances in 10 counties where potentially fraudulent voter registration forms were submitted.

He said many were submitted by groups he terms "auxiliaries of the Democratic Party": the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and America Coming Together.

The groups paid people to register voters. Some registrations were filled out for dead people, some contained fake addresses, and others named fiction characters such as Dick Tracy and Mary Poppins.

Jess Goode, spokesman for ACT in Ohio, has denied wrongdoing by his group. He said the Republican Party is scared of the number of new Democratic voters headed to the polls in two weeks.

An estimated 7.9 million people have registered in Ohio, up from 7.1 million at the beginning of the year.

Williams is currently investigating fraud by someone working for ACORN who he said submitted voter registrations for about 35 people who don't exist.

Newly registered voters in Hamilton County are mailed a card telling them where to vote and what political districts they live in. But thousands of those cards were returned because the people, or the addresses listed on voter registration forms, couldn't be found.

"There is quite a number," Williams said, noting that not every returned card is a suspected case of fraud. "People do actually move."

State GOP records, confirmed by Williams, show that through Oct. 4, Hamilton County mailed 63,403 cards to new registrants, and 4,152 were returned - a rate of 6.6 percent.

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The number was third-highest in the state behind Cuyahoga County's 14,461 and Franklin's 6,917, according to GOP records. In Butler County, 255 cards mailed to new voters were returned, while 24 were returned in Warren County, according to GOP records. Clermont County numbers were not available.

Tim Burke, chairman of the Hamilton County Democratic Party and the county elections board, said an updated number of cards returned is 5,808 out of 150,000 mailed not only to new voters, but also to those changing addresses, for a return rate of less than 4 percent.

Burke said fraud makes up a small percentage of the hundreds of thousands of newly registered voters in Ohio.

"I think Republicans are attempting to justify what they intend to do on Election Day by raising questions of voter fraud and overplaying this," he said.

What both the Democratic and Republican parties in Ohio intend to do is use a 51-year-old law that allows them to place challengers at polling sites. The parties are recruiting lawyers, law students and others to ensure that people are allowed to vote, or to potentially challenge voters' eligibility.

Bennett said his efforts are likely to focus on heavily Democratic areas where many new voters have been registered. Democrats expect to match the effort.

As further evidence of registration fraud, Bennett said the Ohio Republican Party sent out its own letters to newly registered Ohio voters, encouraging them to vote Republican.

In the counties where new registration was highest, 3 percent to 9 percent of the letters were returned because the people were not located.

"I can say . . . as someone who's been in state politics for 40 years, that the normal rate of return is less than 1 percent," he said. "These results are really unprecedented and frightening."

Ed Gillespie, chairman of the Republican National Committee, joined Bennett Tuesday and said Ohio's issues of voter registration fraud cases are alarming and part of a national problem.

"Whether it's for profit motive or political motive, fraud is being committed in the registration process in a way that makes more possible fraud on Election Day," he said.

"I'll bet you this. If Mary Poppins and Dick Tracy vote on Election Day, they'll vote for John Kerry."

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