

FOCUS - 11 of 33 DOCUMENTS

Copyright 2004 Star Tribune
Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN)

October 18, 2004, Monday, Metro Edition

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 8A

LENGTH: 677 words

HEADLINE: High-stakes registration efforts fuel an industry;
Controversy can sometimes follow the groups helping the major parties.

BYLINE: Mark Brunswick; Pat Doyle; Staff Writers

BODY:

The push to register new voters for the hard-fought 2004 election has created a cottage industry and more than a little controversy.

The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) organized a massive voter-registration effort that targeted low- and moderate-income Minnesotans, on whom Democrats are counting. It paid some canvassers \$1 for each new registration they gathered.

When police stopped a former ACORN canvasser in September for speeding, they found 323 completed registration forms in his car. ACORN had fired the canvasser in July after the Hennepin County attorney's office told the organization that he was suspected of submitting duplicates of completed registration cards to double his fee, said Becky Gomer, head organizer for ACORN in Minnesota. He was charged Friday with failure to turn in voter registration cards.

"The fact that a former ACORN employee is under investigation ... calls into question the voter-registration practices of pro-Kerry organizations like ACORN," the Minnesota Republican Party said after the arrest.

"A lot of states are starting to see problems with these organizations that pay bounties for voter-registration cards," said Christine Iverson, a Republican National Committee spokeswoman. "It's just an incentive to fraud, especially when the people they are hiring might not be the most above-board people."

In contrast, she said, Republicans "tend to use largely volunteers. It's a big difference between the way we do things."

But in fact the Republicans in Minnesota have a paid ground game of their own: the Arizona-based political consulting company Sproul and Associates, operated by Nathan Sproul, a former executive director of the Arizona Republican Party.

Records show that the Republican National Committee has paid Sproul and Associates almost \$500,000 this year for voter registration and political consulting.

While declining to give specific numbers, Sproul and Associates estimates it registered thousands in the months the company was operating in Minnesota prior to the preregistration deadline last week.

Justin Lee, 30, who was registering people this month on Nicollet Mall, said he was being paid by the Bloomington office of Sproul and Associates.

Lee said he participated in a pro-Wellstone effort a few years ago and voted for Gore in 2000. Why was he working now for Bush?

"Politics is just a business," Lee said, adding that he made \$8 an hour and could earn an additional \$3 per registration. Lee also said he's supporting Bush because "has done a lot of good work."

High-stakes registration efforts fuel an industry;Controversy can someti

Asked about the Republican Party's use of Sproul and Associates, Iverson said that the "vast majority" of the registration work is done by volunteers but that the company was working for the GOP in Minnesota and other hotly contested states. Ron Eibensteiner, the state party's chairman, said he was unaware that the party was using paid voter-registration workers.

Sproul is facing problems in other states. Democrats in Nevada charged in a lawsuit last week that a Sproul-run company, Voters Outreach of America, destroyed voter-registration forms its workers had collected from Democratic voters. Similar allegations have surfaced in Oregon and West Virginia. Sproul and Associates has denied the Nevada allegations and said the man making them was a disgruntled employee who had been fired.

In an interview with the Star Tribune, Nathan Sproul said his company put extensive safeguards in place to guard against inappropriate behavior and blamed the Democratic Party and affiliated groups for "baseless allegations" to discredit him.

"What you are beginning to see is that the Democrats realize that the Republican efforts to register voters have been extremely successful in the last couple of months and there is a lot of anger about that," he said. "In some ways it's a compliment."

The writers are at pdoyle@startribune.com and mbrunswick.com.

LOAD-DATE: November 1, 2004