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**HEADLINE:** Florida probes activists' voter-registration effort

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**BODY:**

Law-enforcement authorities in Florida have begun a statewide investigation into suspected voter fraud, focusing on accusations that a liberal activist group used a statewide petition drive for a constitutional amendment to raise the minimum wage to improperly register anti-President Bush voters.

Amid accusations that voter registration applications have been switched, duplicated, destroyed, forged and otherwise improperly obtained, the investigation has centered, in part, on petition and registration efforts by the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN).

ACORN, which claims to have registered 1.1 million new voters nationwide since July 2003, has actively been collecting signatures on petitions for a constitutional amendment to raise the state's minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$6.15 an hour. That proposal, now on the Nov. 2 ballot, is expected to boost turnout among 300,000 poor and blue-collar voters in the state, who would be expected to support Democratic candidate Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts rather than Mr. Bush.

Voter fraud is of particular interest in Florida, a battleground state, where recounts and legal challenges after the 2000 presidential elections delayed final results for five weeks before Mr. Bush was declared the winner in Florida by 537 votes.

ACORN claims to have registered 212,000 new voters in Florida for the Nov. 2 elections. An ACORN offshoot, known as Floridians for All, a political action committee, says it has collected signed petitions from nearly 1 million people in the state to increase the minimum wage.

Officials at the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) confirmed that the matter is under investigation, noting that the department has received "numerous complaints and has initiated several investigations related to voting irregularities."

FDLE officials described the complaints as "widespread," adding that many appeared to be "organized efforts to commit voter fraud," including voter registrations, party affiliation forms and absentee ballots.

The department, in a statement, also said workers for ACORN "have been connected with the widespread voter irregularities," noting that ACORN workers and their voter registration efforts also are under investigation in several states, including Colorado and Ohio.

"While we conduct this investigation, we are mindful that our number-one priority will be to protect the rights of those individuals that are eligible to vote, and allow them the opportunity to do so," said FDLE Commissioner Guy Tunnell. "Our agents will do nothing that will impede or hinder that process."

The investigation, according to FDLE officials, also has focused on accusations that in some instances, persons who believed they were signing various petitions later found out their signatures or possible forged signatures were used to complete a fraudulent voter registration.

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In other instances, they said, it appears that workers hired to obtain legitimate voter registrations filled in the information on the registration forms that should have been completed by the registrants.

On several occasions, they said, workers appear to have signed multiple voter registrations themselves using information obtained during the registration drive.

ACORN employees reportedly were paid \$2 for each voter registration card they collected.

The state's attorney's office in Jacksonville is investigating similar voter fraud issues that may have occurred in that jurisdiction.

FDLE officials said regional task forces have been created to address voter safety issues and they have focused their investigative efforts on groups "such as ACORN, to identify those persons responsible for illegally hiring workers to obtain fraudulent voter registrations or absentee ballots as well as those workers who are suspected of falsifying thousands of voter applications."

In Florida, most violations of voter fraud are a third-degree felony, punishable by up to five years in prison and a \$5,000 fine. Each fraudulent voter application, registration or absentee ballot can constitute a separate felony charge.

ACORN's chief Florida organizer, Brian Kettenring, said that, while the group registered thousands of Florida voters, he denied the organization used fraudulent methods or deception. He said the FDLE "appears to be back in the voter-intimidation business" - a reference to accusations made by Democrats during the 2000 presidential election, which proved to be untrue.

Meanwhile, voter registration problems are also being investigated in other states, including:

\* Ohio, where election officials are reviewing the voter registration of Jive Turkey Sr., who was among 1,284 suspicious applications that Cuyahoga County, Ohio, election officials will turn over to prosecutors to investigate for potential fraud.

Earlier this week, officials in Defiance County, Ohio, questioned the voter registration applications of Dick Tracy, Mary Poppins and Michael Jordan, obtained by a man who police said was paid in crack cocaine for his registration efforts.

\*California, where state election officials are attempting to process a deluge of new voter registrations. A high number of new applications flooded several county offices after the registration deadline on Monday, although they had not been able to hire additional staffers and are now working overtime to process the documents.

\*Missouri, where three Kansas City area residents were charged this week with double voting in past elections and were warned they would vigorously prosecuted for any future election fraud. The three were accused of casting ballots in both Kansas City, Mo., and Kansas City, Kan.

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