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**HEADLINE:** Colorado to tackle voter-fraud fears

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**BODY:**

Multiple registrations reported

Colorado lawmakers yesterday sought to ease concerns about the integrity of the state election process, despite growing accusations of fraud amid an overwhelming flood of new voter registrations.

Republican Gov. Bill Owens said yesterday, "I am extremely concerned about the widespread allegations of serious and sustained criminal activity surrounding voter registration in Colorado."

Earlier yesterday, he told local television station KUSA-TV, the local NBC affiliate, "Clearly, there were some people trying to cheat the system."

Colorado's status as a battleground state in the tight presidential race has turned the state into a magnet for voter-registration efforts, pushing the number of new registrations to more than 100,000 in this state of 4.3 million.

With the voter drives has come a surge in fraud accusations. Some registration drives pay their workers \$2 per application, which gives them a financial incentive to cheat by forging signatures or registering the same voter multiple times.

In one blatant example, Gerald Obi told KUSA that he had registered to vote "about 35 times" after coming under pressure from registration gatherers.

In another case, the same signature was affixed to 10 applications.

Secretary of State Donetta Davidson, who has come under fire in the past week over reports of fraud, took a swing at Attorney General Ken Salazar, saying his office had failed to keep her posted on its investigations.

Mrs. Davidson said she turned in several hundred cases of fraud accusations to his office in April, but had heard nothing since then.

"I have been kept out of the loop, but I have been the one held responsible," said Mrs. Davidson at a press conference yesterday.

Ken Lane, spokesman for Mr. Salazar, said the attorney general's office had been investigating the cases, but that "these investigations take time."

The office has filed charges against one voter-registration worker, accusing him of forging about 50 applications.

Mr. Owens yesterday called on Mr. Salazar and others "to place the highest priority on attacking potential voter fraud."

"With new allegations arising on virtually a daily basis, it is essential that all parties involved - and particularly the attorney general and district attorneys - act decisively and rapidly to root out fraud and prosecute it to the fullest extent of the law," the governor said.

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The role of politics in the registration surge also has become a topic of speculation. Mr. Owens and Mrs. Davidson are both Republicans, while Mr. Salazar, a Democrat, is running in a tight race for the U.S. Senate against Republican Pete Coors.

A number of the voter-registration groups tilt politically to the left, such as the Colorado Progressive Coalition and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), which describes itself as "community organization of low- and moderate-income families" that works closely with labor unions.

Jim Fleischmann, ACORN Western regional director, said he was cooperating with Denver authorities to track down several hundred fraudulent applications collected by the organization, but he downplayed the severity of the problem.

"Registration fraud is different than voter fraud. Just because you register someone 35 times doesn't mean they get to vote 35 times. They can only vote once," he said. "The local press is having a feeding frenzy on this."

Betty Ann Habig, a Centennial council member who has been volunteering in the busy Arapahoe County Clerk and Recorder's office, says she is seeing a partisan tilt to the new registrants, coming from about 20 groups, in her county - a traditional Republican stronghold.

"I'm seeing very few Republicans," she said. "It's almost a 50/50 split so far between Democratic and unaffiliated voters."

"Is there a concerted effort to perpetuate fraud? No," she said. "But you have to remember, these folks are getting paid by the piece."

Mrs. Davidson made headlines earlier this week when she announced that polling places would accept provisional ballots. The rule allows Coloradans who say they registered to vote but whose names do not appear on the rolls to cast ballots as long as they swear an oath and produce identification. Authorities will determine the voter's eligibility after the election.

The decision came after county clerks reported receiving many applications that lacked supporting identification. Another problem was tardiness, with some clerks saying they received packages of applications that were dated in June or July, but were received after the Oct. 4 deadline.

Mrs. Davidson said she would hold a meeting with county clerks and district attorneys on Saturday to grapple with voter-fraud issues.

The problem lies not with would-be voters, but with disorganized voter-registration organizations, said Davidson spokeswoman Dana Williams.

The fear is that some voter-registration workers might have signed up voters but then failed to turn in their applications to election clerks. If necessary, she said she would call for a grand-jury investigation.

The secretary of state "doesn't want voters to be turned away when they registered in good faith," Miss Williams said.

The Colorado fracas comes as numerous other swing states are fighting over voter registration and fraud accusations.

\*The swing states of Ohio, Florida, Missouri and Michigan already face Democrat and liberal-inspired lawsuits seeking to extend provisional ballots to all who request them, even if the voter is not in his proper precinct, as laws in 26 states and the District of Columbia require.

\*Elections officials in Nevada have rebuffed a bid by a former head of the state Republican Party to purge about 17,000 Democrats from the voter rolls as inactive. Nevada law requires that voters go on "inactive status" if they move and don't update their addresses within 30 days of receiving notice to do so.

But Clark County Registrar of Voters Larry Lomax rejected the move on Tuesday, saying Dan Burdick could only challenge voters in his precinct, and then only if he has personal knowledge that they are inactive.

\*Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker refused a request from Mayor Tom Barrett, a state co-chairman of Mr. Kerry's campaign, to have more than 900,000 ballots printed, citing concerns about voter fraud and "serious questions" about the need for that many ballots.

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Milwaukee reported having 382,000 registered voters in September and a total of 423,811 residents old enough to vote. Mr. Walker said "chaos" could occur at understaffed polling places where voters could grab ballots.

\*Several Democrat-leaning unions sued Florida elections officials on Tuesday, arguing that thousands of voters have been disenfranchised by the rejection of their incomplete voter registration forms. The suit accuses Secretary of State Glenda Hood of violating federal law for telling the state's 67 elections supervisors that they should reject incomplete voter-registration forms.

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