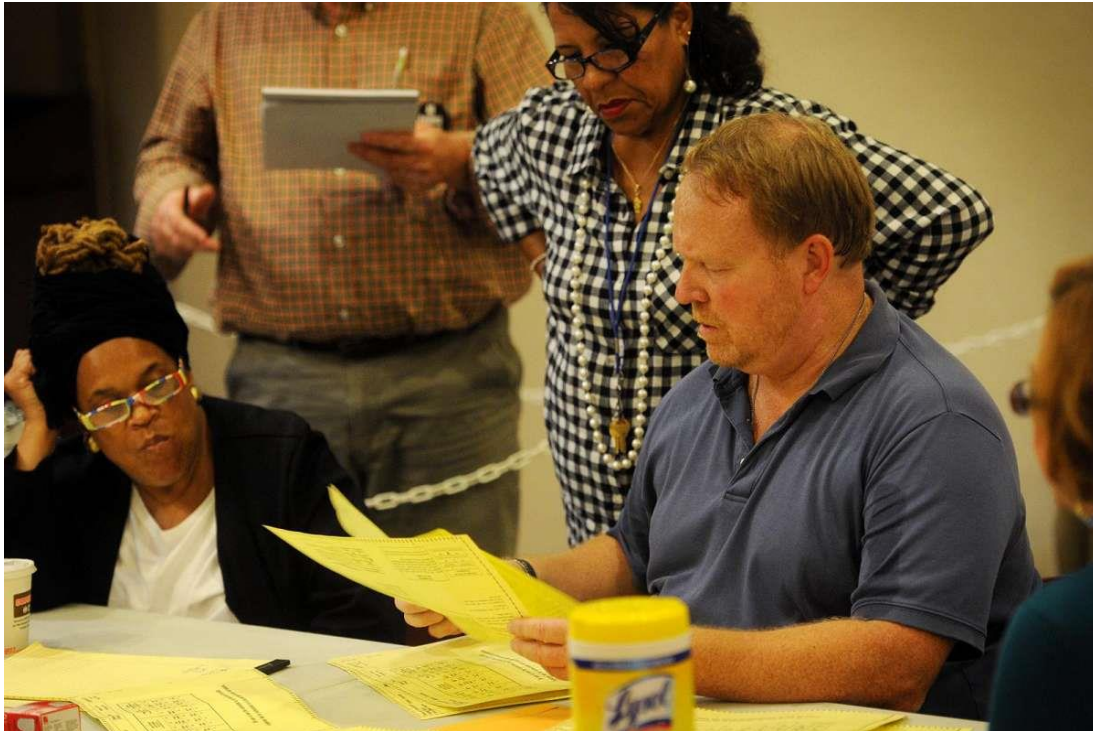


Bridgeport absentee voting rife with irregularities, Hearst CT probe reveals

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1 of 12 Absentee ballot head moderator Tom Errichetti, right, and deputy moderator Rosalina Roman-Christy, center, look over absentee ballots during a recount of results from last week's primary at the Margaret Morton Government Center in Bridgeport, Conn. on Wednesday, September 23, 2015. Photo: Brian A. Pounds / Hearst Connecticut Media

Editor's note: This story was written and reported by staff writers Bill Cummings, Ken Dixon, Meghan Friedmann, Kelly Kultys, Ignacio Laguarda and DJ Simmons.

BRIDGEPORT — Rhonda Latham wanted to support state Sen. Marilyn Moore last week but instead — under pressure from an absentee ballot “helper” — voted for Mayor Joe Ganim.

“I did not want to vote for Ganim,” said the 67-year-old East Side resident. “These people push you into voting... and they do it for you.”

Absentee voters pressured into voting for the incumbent, who narrowly won on the strength of absentee ballots, was one of the many problems uncovered by Hearst Connecticut Media in an examination of mail-in voting for the Democratic Party primary.

In a sampling of records, at least 10 people who were not listed in the state voter registry, and two others who were not Democrats, were among those who requested, received and submitted their absentee votes for Democratic races.

Two convicted felons out on parole and ineligible to vote were also among those whose ballots were accepted by city officials.

Voters said they received absentee ballots they didn't request. At least one person may have voted twice, once by absentee and then again in person.

In several neighborhoods, residents said strangers swarmed elderly housing complexes seeking votes, a common practice in Bridgeport elections.

At least one person didn't cast a vote for mayor because they were confused by the lack of absentee ballot instructions.

Records show sloppy bookkeeping by election officials, including voters listed with incorrect birth dates. Numerous ballots were marked as received on Sept 28, 2019 —18 days after the primary.

Unregistered individuals should not have received absentee ballots, said Assistant Town Clerk Christina Resto, when reached by phone Thursday evening. But, in the face of a large volume of absentee applications, human errors can occur, she added.

"We try the best that we can," said Resto, who was at a conference.

A ballot marked as received is no guarantee it was counted, Resto said. The registrar of voters can reject problematic ballots, like those cast by ineligible voters, decisions which would not be marked in the town clerk's list of absentees, she said.

A lopsided absentee margin carried the day for Ganim. He lost to Moore at the polls, 4,721 to 4,337, but won the absentee total 967 to 313. The final totals were 5,304 for Ganim and 5,034 for Moore, who claims there was fraud in the absentee ballot process, and has announced a write-in campaign for November.

Ganim said Thursday he could not speak to the specifics of what Hearst found, stressing he has no personal involvement with absentee ballots.

But because of issues raised since the election, he is asking Secretary of the State Denise Merrill for state supervision of the November election in Bridgeport.

Ganim noted a person who was paid \$1,400 by the Moore campaign previously pleaded guilty to election fraud.

“One could wonder if some of these irregularities could be tied to the Moore campaign,” Ganim said.

Moore on Thursday blasted Ganim, who four years ago, prior to winning a second stint as mayor, apologized to city voters for the public-corruption violations that sent him to prison for seven years.

“Joe Ganim is more of a hypocrite than I ever thought,” Moore said. “Second chances are not just for white-collar crime.”

Moore said that transparency and “doing things the right way” have been hallmarks of her campaign. “We have no indication that we did anything wrong in our distribution of absentee ballots.”

She said that in the days after the primary, systemic abuse of the absentee ballot system, including the intimidation of vulnerable elderly voters, has emerged throughout the city.

Parolees voted

Under state law, an inmate’s confinement or parole must end before their voting rights can be restored. The state Department of Correction submits a monthly report of inmates in custody or on parole to the Secretary of the State, who manages the state’s voter registration database and in turn notifies towns and cities.

Yet, at least two parolees cast absentee ballots in apparent violation of state law.

Records show that Deon Edmonds, 26, listed as a voter on the East Side, submitted a ballot that was received by the city Sept. 3.

DOC records show that Edmonds is currently on parole for a narcotics charge and has a release date of 2020.

Records also show that Troy Chappell, 34, of the East End, submitted an application for an absentee ballot on August 27 that was received by the city on Sept. 6. Chappell is on parole after serving time for narcotics.

Edmonds and Chappell could not be reached for comment. The DOC did not immediately respond to requests for comment Thursday.

Under pressure

Latham is a resident of Harborview Towers, an apartment complex for seniors and the disabled on East Washington Avenue. She was assisted in filling out her absentee ballot by a neighbor who objected when Latham said she intended to vote for Moore.

“What do you have against Ganim?” Latham said the helper asked. “What did Marilyn Moore ever do for you?”

“What did Ganim ever do for me?” Latham replied. But Latham said that didn’t sway the neighbor, who still filled in a vote for Ganim.

State law prohibits anyone from completing a ballot for others, unless the voter is physically unable to do so. In that case, the person filling out the ballot must sign the document attesting to their involvement.

Another woman, a resident of the P.T. Barnum public housing complex in Black Rock who asked not to be identified, felt pressured into voting for Ganim. The woman said she had no reason to vote absentee because she could have gone to the polls in person. But a ballot came in the mail.

Shortly after the ballot arrived, a person knocked on her door and offered to help her fill it out, the woman said, noting that the visitor stayed with her as she voted and pointed to the bubble next to Ganim’s name as the one to fill in.

“People are, like, not being fair,” the woman said, adding she wanted to vote for Moore. “We just want them out of here,” she said of the many advocates who were asking residents to cast ballots.

But Ronald Black, another P.T. Barnum resident, said that although people do go door-to-door asking residents to fill out their ballots, no one pushed him into voting for Ganim. “We do it ourselves,” he said. “They don’t help you ... nobody is forcing you.”

Black said he believes the city has his address and sends him a ballot automatically each election cycle.

Ballots just show up - or don’t

Under state law, a voter must request an absentee ballot.

Yet numerous voters contacted in districts throughout the city said they received unrequested ballots in the mail. Some voters said they’ve always gotten ballots in the mail, while others said this year’s was the first.

Edna Council, an East Side resident, said she has voted for over 60 years and cast her ballot last week in person, at the polls.

But she is listed in city records as having voted absentee. “I make sure to get up and vote in every election,” said Council, who was worried because her name appeared on the absentee ballot list.

Jessenia Rios, a 13-year-resident of P.T. Barnum, said that for as long as she can remember her ballot has just showed up in the mail, even though she could easily go to the polls in person, at the nearby Aquaculture Center.

Another resident there, April Keitt, offered a similar story. Keitt said it didn’t feel right to fill out the ballot that arrived in the mail because she didn’t think she was supposed to vote absentee.

“I thought that those were for handicapped people,” she said, adding that she only agreed to fill out the ballot after Wanda Geter, a Ganim supporter, knocked on her door and asked her to do so.

Keitt handed the completed ballot to Geter, she said, however it was not received by the town clerk’s office.

In a Thursday phone interview, Geter said she did not remember interacting with Keitt and declined to comment on whether she gave Keitt a ballot or handled it after it was completed. Geter then ended the phone call.

Delays and snafus

Some residents said they encountered problems in voting by absentee ballot, while others said they received ballots in the mail the day of the primary.

Gladys and Jose Nieves, who are in their 70s and live in Harborview Towers, said they got their absentee ballots in the mail the day of the election.

Others, like East Side residents Generosa Gonzalez and her son Orlando Lopez, said they requested absentee ballots that never arrived.

Sonia Kirkland, 61, of the Upper East Side, said she had difficulty filling out her ballot due to the lack of instructions. “How does it help if you don’t inform voters?” she said.

Kirkland said she supported Moore but was unable to figure out how to vote for mayor, so she only voted for her City Council members. According to data from the Secretary of the State, 111 absentee ballots did not contain votes for mayor.

She said she knows of other Moore supporters, including family members, who encountered similar difficulty trying to vote absentee. “My grandson, my son, my daughter — there were all these votes she was unable to get,” Kirkland said.

CORRECTION: A previous version of this story incorrectly stated a Moore campaign worker was fined \$1,400 after she pleaded guilty to election fraud. The \$1,400 was the amount the

worker, who was convicted of absentee ballot fraud in 2018, was paid by the campaign, although Moore has argued the woman did not work on seeking absentees.