

Bridgeport absentees case bares similarities to 1986 investigation

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Daniel Roach, a top adviser to Mayor Joe Ganim, successfully fought his 1986 arrest on absentee ballot charges. Four others filed guilty pleas. Photo: Ned Gerard / Hearst Connecticut Media

BRIDGEPORT — A contentious late-summer primary between two bitter Democratic rivals ending with irregularities and likely state law violations in absentee voting, including charges of the illegal handling of ballots.

That's part of the fallout in the state's largest city after a [Hearst Connecticut Media investigation](#) into the recent primary election between Mayor Joe Ganim and state Sen. Marilyn Moore.

It's a story reminiscent of the aftermath of an election 33 years ago. On Sept. 24, 1986, five Democratic workers were arrested and charged with illegally collecting and possessing absentee ballots, including Daniel Roach, now a top adviser to Mayor Joe Ganim and a longtime member of the city's Police Commission.

Roach, then and now the Democratic leader for the city's Black Rock district, was a member of the city council at the time and the only elected official arrested. He took his case to trial, successfully fighting single charges of collecting and possessing an absentee ballot. During the 1988 court case where he was found innocent, a young lawyer named Joseph P. Ganim occasionally attended the trial in his support.

At the time of his arrest, Roach called the charges "ridiculous." He was defended by Ganim's uncle, Raymond Ganim, and when evidence was presented, the chief witness against Roach couldn't tell the difference between an absentee ballot application and the actual ballot, which is illegal to handle.

Roach on Saturday recalled that the trial witness testified it was someone else, not Roach, who handled the absentee ballot.

The case underscored a bizarre chapter in the city's political history, in which a political pathfinder, state Sen. Margaret E. Morton, happened to see the campaign manager of her opponent stuff 45 absentee ballots into a mailbox on the sidewalk in front of the Middle Street post office on the morning of the Sept. 9 primary. Morton immediately called police, who seized the ballots and investigated.

A subsequent probe by reporters on the two Bridgeport newspapers at the time, The Telegram and the Bridgeport Post, found that at least 17 voters said they gave their completed ballots to campaign workers for Morton's challenger, [Laurayne Farrar-James](#), at the time a member of the city council, who died this year at 92. Reporters also found city records indicating a deceased voter cast an absentee ballot and also voted in person on that 1986 Primary Day.

Those arrested included a city employee and two residents of the P.T. Barnum housing complex, including the vice president of the tenants' association. The four didn't fight the charges, and did not get prison terms. The campaign manager Morton saw with the absentee ballots — John J. McNamara, an attorney — apparently escaped prosecution, claiming that he deposited only office mail in the mailbox.

At the time, police investigating the issue had seized only the ballots and let other mail through to get processed at the post office.

While only 45 absentee ballots were the focus of that investigation, an [anticipated state probe](#) into the city's recent Sept. 10 primary between Moore and Ganim would likely center on the 1,280 absentees cast, 967 of which went to Ganim and 313 for Moore.

Ganim won the election 5,304 to 5,034, according to Secretary of the State Denise Merrill, who last week referred the Hearst Connecticut Media reports to the State Elections Enforcement Commission, which is expected on Monday to launch its own probe into the allegations of irregularities.

Morton was elected to the state House of Representatives in 1972, at age 48. Eight years later, she became the first African American woman to serve in the state Senate. She retired in 1992

and died in 2012 at 87. In 2012, the City Hall Annex, which houses several city departments, including the registrars' and mayor's offices, was [named in her honor](#).

Nowadays, the contraction of the U.S. Postal Service has ended same-day delivery within the city of Bridgeport. Mail taken to the Bridgeport post office gets sent to Westchester County, N.Y., for processing, often taking three days to forward a letter mailed in Bridgeport, back to the recipient in Bridgeport.

Roach took out 10 absentee ballot applications for the primary, according to city records. He said they were for elderly neighbors of his in Black Rock.

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