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Nasty campaign tactics: Phony voting instructions



The Associated Press

This handout photo provided by Joel Gilbert, taken Sept. 19, 2012, shows Mr. Gilbert at the film screening for his movie "Dreams from My Real Father" in Bellmore, NY. With a week until Election Day, the nasty campaign tactics are coming out. The film was mailed for free to some seven million homes. The film claims that Obama's real father was Frank Marshall Davis, a communist agitator, author and poet who lived in Hawaii, not the former Kenyan goat herder who share's the president's name. Both men are deceased. (AP Photo/Joel Gilbert, HO)

By Curt Anderson, The Associated Press

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MIAMI (AP) With a week to go until Election Day, the nasty campaign tactics are coming out.

People in Florida, Virginia and Indiana have gotten calls falsely telling them they can vote early by phone and don't need to go to a polling place. In suburban Broward County, Fla., a handful of elderly voters who requested absentee ballots say they were visited by unknown people claiming to be authorized to collect the ballots.

And there's a mysterious DVD popping up in mailboxes that purports to be a documentary raising

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questions about the true identity of President Barack Obama's father.

It's one more indication of just how close this presidential election is. Voting rights advocates say reports of political deception and underhandedness are on the rise.

"Unfortunately it seems like the shadowy individuals that want to prevent people from voting are doing things earlier," said Eric Marshall, legal mobilization manager at the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. The organization is part of a coalition called Election Protection that is monitoring voting access and rights nationwide, including a toll-free hotline set up to take complaints.

"Each American's vote matters. It's important to them and it's important to the community," Marshall said.

Indiana's secretary of state launched an investigation of the phony voting instructions being phoned to homes in that state, and Virginia officials issued a warning to voters there asking them to report any such calls.

In the Broward County, Fla., case, elderly voters "were told, 'I'm an official and I'm here to pick up your absentee ballot,'" said Alma Gonzalez, a senior Florida Democratic Party official working on voter protection efforts. "There is no official who picks up your ballot."

In addition to those cases, garish billboards warning that voter fraud is a crime punishable by jail time and fines were put up in minority neighborhoods in Ohio and Wisconsin. They were recently taken down amid complaints they were aimed at intimidating African-American and Latino voters. The people behind the billboards have not come forward.

"It's hard to believe that these were just public service announcements," Marshall said. "Those neighborhoods were specifically targeted."

"It doesn't pass the smell test."

Independent Florida voter Jane Bowman smelled something bad, too, when she recently discovered a DVD in her mailbox questioning the identity of Obama's father.

"I think it's just a dirty trick. It just astonished me," said Bowman, a Jacksonville resident who says she plans to vote for Obama as she did four years ago. "I think they're doing everything they can to win Florida. It's a sorry situation."

The DVD's director, who says he has mailed some 7 million copies to homes in swing states, says that he is unaffiliated with political campaigns or their supporters and that the film reflects his own painstaking research into Obama's family background.

The DVD, "Dreams from My Real Father," posits that the president's true father was a communist agitator, author and poet living in Hawaii named Frank Marshall Davis not the Kenyan man who shares the president's name. Both men are now dead.

The title is a reference to Obama's book about his family history. That book does mention a poet named "Frank" who was a friend of Obama's maternal grandfather.

In an interview, DVD director Joel Gilbert described himself as a nonpartisan independent who seeks only to tell what he views as an extremely important story. Gilbert said he did not coordinate distribution of the DVD with any political entity and also took no political contributions to finance it. Yet the DVD was targeted at voters in key battleground states, including 1.5 million in Florida and 1.2 million in Ohio, according to Gilbert's website.

"It's a publicity measure," he said of the free mail distribution. "This has been an effort to force and embarrass the media into covering the content of the film."

Gilbert declined to disclose how the DVD and its distribution were financed, saying his production company is private and not required to. He has also made what he calls "mockumentaries" exploring whether former Beatle Paul McCartney might really be dead as was rumored in the 1960s and finding Elvis Presley alive and living as a federal agent in Southern California. He has also done films on Islamic-Jewish relations and Iran's strategic ambitions.

Obama campaign spokesman Adam Fetcher declined comment on the DVD.

Another mysterious batch of mailings to voters in at least 23 Florida counties is being investigated by the FBI and state officials. These anonymous letters, which were postmarked from Seattle, raise questions about the voter's citizenship and provide a form that supposedly must immediately be filled out and returned to elections officials. Otherwise, the letter says, the voter's name will be purged from the rolls.

"A nonregistered voter who casts a vote in the State of Florida may be subject to arrest, imprisonment, and/or other criminal sanctions," warns one of the official-looking letters complete with eagle-and-flag logo, which appear to have been aimed mainly at registered Republicans.

Florida Secretary of State Ken Detzner has asked all of the state's supervisors of elections to report any similar letters. There could also be federal charges against those responsible.

Voting rights advocates also say there have been scattered complaints of bosses ordering employees to support a particular presidential candidate or face job repercussions. And in the past, students and other groups have been the targets of robocalls falsely saying they can vote on the day after Election Day if the lines are too long.

Marshall said such misinformation tactics surface election after election because it's not illegal in most states to deceive someone about the timing or place of an election, or to lie about a candidate's political affiliation. Most laws, he said, are more geared toward preventing voter intimidation and ensuring physical access to polling places. Those who do get caught in deception usually claim it was all a big misunderstanding.

"It's very difficult to stop," he said. "The tactics have evolved but the law hasn't."

Election Protection voter complaint hotline: 1-866-OUR-VOTE

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