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OPINION

Voter fraud and the disenfranchisement of voters



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— *Editor's note: Tanya Amador-Daigle is reporting for Florida Weekly on the national primaries until the presidential candidates are chosen this summer. She has a unique perspective on the primaries and the process for choosing a candidate, having traveled the country reporting on primaries and caucuses for the Purple States project. To learn more about Purple States go to www.purplestates.tv.*

I love the Internet. I recently Googled "voter fraud" and found that there were scores of stories surrounding a very real concern.

What I found was that, in general, Republicans support a system in which voters are required to show a state identification, while Democrats believe that this will disenfranchise certain voters. In April, the Supreme Court voted to uphold a strict Indiana law that requires voters to show a voter ID when they show up to vote at the polls. This signaled a strong setback for Dems whose base holds a significant amount of people who could potentially be barred from voting.

Who are these people you ask? According to opponents of the law, these folks represent minorities, the elderly, the disabled and the poor. These people are less likely to have driver's licenses because they cannot or do not drive. Why can't they get a state ID card you ask? As Hilary Shelton, NAACP director in Washington pointed out, an Indiana state identification card costs \$35. I was thinking, perhaps the NAACP should think about petitioning the state to lower that to, say, \$10. Also, if they are so con-

cerned about it, why not set up a program that helps those who want to vote get the required identification.

When it comes to the elderly, in many cases, they don't have birth certificates or any way of obtaining them. This was the case in Indiana's primary when a group of about 12 elderly nuns were not allowed to vote because they didn't have ID cards. I can understand that. I don't think my grandmother, god rest her soul, would have been able to find her birth certificate. However, even though she didn't drive she had gotten herself a state ID card years ago. Needless to say my grandma voted in every election. I know because I drove her there after my grandfather passed away.

When I say she was able to vote, clearly I mean when she was alive, right? That doesn't appear to have been the case with Jane Drury who voted last year in Connecticut. Apparently Jane voted from the great beyond, perhaps channeled in by the famous psychic, John Edward, because Jane had been dead for eight years. Many argue that these stories are too few and far between to matter. They may be right. It just depends on your perspective.

A recent investigation, done at the University of Connecticut by 11 students, showed that there were over 8,558 dead folks still registered on the state's polls. Over 300 of these people voted after they had died. The Secretary of State of Connecticut, Susan Bysiewicz, insists that they were simply clerical errors and that none of these people had actually voted. That's a lot of clerical errors. Who is manning the polls over there?

Although I think voter fraud exists, many of these stories may simply be cases of human error. In 2004, in the governor's race in Washington State, 19 dead people cast ballots in a very close race. The problem was that Republican Dino Rossi lost by only 133 votes. Republican presidential candidate, Ron Paul was cheated out of 31 votes

in the New Hampshire primary because of a miss-count. That was weird. I can understand a couple of votes not being counted, but 31 seems a little shady to me. In any event, this is why Republicans want people to be carded at the polls. They claim that the potential for fraud is a valid concern.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why each political party has a reason for their stance on this issue. As I said before, Democrats rely very much on votes from those who are less fortunate. Therefore the law in Indiana represents a threat to them and to Senator Obama since, as the NAACP pointed out, it disproportionately affects two of Obama's big supporters, African-Americans and younger voters. Both of these groups are crucial to Obama's campaign.

For Republicans the Indiana law signifies a victory and a step towards taking those same votes away from Democrats. At the moment, 19 other states are contemplating laws that would require voters to show proof of citizenship before they can cast ballots. If this happens before the general election, I wonder how it will affect McCain and Obama. Will it take votes away from Obama and give McCain an edge?

I have rationalized it quite a bit on both sides.

With regards to the elderly who can't find their birth certificates, I understand that they might be deprived unfairly of the right to vote. Also, I'm not really too concerned with illegal immigrants showing up at the polls, they usually try to live under the radar. Here is what I'm confused about: If some of these other "disenfranchised" voters want to vote, how do they get to the polls anyway if they can't even get to the state identification agency to get an ID? In other words, how can it be said that they can get to one place but not to another? Do they really WANT to vote? If I was capable of getting to the grocery store, the bar, or to work, then I think I could probably go get an ID to vote. ■

GUEST OPINION

Children are our most precious resource

BY BOB JANES
Lee County Commissioner

Many of us are not taking care of our children. It's a sad nationwide reality, one we don't like to think about. In this age where there are bumper stickers everywhere that tout marriage and children and the promises we make to our families, there is a hidden reality underneath these platitudes.

Each year in the United States, more than 20,000 children age-out or "graduate" from the nation's foster care system. There are so few services to help these teen-agers transition to independent adulthood and they end up in despair, turning to a life of drugs or crime. Think about it. Would you send your 17-year-old son or daughter out into the world without shelter, money or food? Would you just close the door and walk away? That's exactly what happens to these youth-without-homes. So many of these teens do not have family or other dependable adults to help them out, or provide them with life assistance. These abandoned young adults end up being high risk for homelessness, joblessness, illness, incarceration, welfare dependency, early pregnancy, and sexual and physical victimization.

According to the Child Welfare League

of America, 25 percent of these youth who graduate from the "system" become homeless, 56 percent are unemployed, and 27 percent of the male teens end up in jail. Some other facts that may surprise you include:

- An estimated 40,000 of these children will be involved in some form of sexual exploitation and victimization by predators.
- Many child victims of prostitution are abandoned or neglected children, who have not been reported missing to law enforcement or have run away from their homes or foster care.
- The average age at which a child enters into prostitution is 14 years old. However, children as young as 9 years old are being exploited.

Homelessness is a major problem among former foster youth; it is estimated that as many as 30 percent of the nation's homeless adults were once in foster care. And according to the U.S. Department of Justice, in a one-year period, an estimated 1.6 million children either ran away from or were thrown out of their homes.

While in Florida the state runs the foster-care system, counties can and should play an important role. For instance, in 13 states nationwide, county governments operate the child welfare system. While the responsibili-

ties of counties differ, all counties in the U.S. are responsible for providing access to a social safety net that young adults aging out of foster care will desperately need to succeed in their lives and their communities.

County governments should be at the forefront of providing services to former foster youth, including access to housing, education, training and job placement, as well as health care, which includes treatment for mental and psychological illness, general life counseling and substance abuse.

Recently, Lee County put forth a resolution supporting the Campaign Against Sexual Exploitation sponsored by the National Association of Counties, Inc. on behalf of these children, in a pledge to keep these issues in the public spotlight. It also indicates Lee County's dedication and understanding of this terribly sad and real plight of young children.

By dedicating time, money and effort in this area, we as a society will benefit. We will see a decrease in mental health issues, substance abuse and young men and women becoming involved with illegal activities. Society will spend less money because these lost youth will be deterred from spending a lifetime circling in and out of the legal system. ■