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Heed Jimmy Carter on the Danger of Mail-In Voting

'Absentee ballots remain the largest source of potential voter fraud.'

By John R. Lott Jr.
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Election workers prepare ballots for a mail-sorting machine in Renton, Wash., March 10.

PHOTO: LINDSEY WASSON/REUTERS

'Absentee ballots remain the largest source of potential voter fraud.' That quote isn't from President Trump, who criticized mail-in voting this week after Wisconsin Democrats tried and failed to change an election at the last minute into an exclusively mail-in affair. It's the conclusion of the bipartisan 2005 report of the Commission on Federal Election Reform, chaired by former President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary of State James Baker III.

Concerns about vote-buying have a long history in the U.S. They helped drive the move to the secret ballot, which U.S. states adopted between 1888 and 1950. Secret ballots made it harder for vote buyers to monitor which candidates sellers actually voted for. Vote-buying had been pervasive; my [research](#) with Larry Kenny at the University of Florida has found that voter turnout fell by about 8% to 12% after states adopted the secret ballot.

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You wouldn't know any of this listening to the media outcry over Mr. Trump's remarks. "There is a lot of dishonesty going on with mail-in voting," the president said Tuesday. In response, a CNN "fact check" declares that Mr. Trump "opened a new front in his campaign of lies about voter fraud." A

[New York Times](#) headline asserts: "Trump Is Pushing a False Argument on Vote-by-Mail Fraud." Both claim that voter fraud is essentially nonexistent. The Carter-Baker report found otherwise.

Intimidation and vote buying were key concerns of the commission: "Citizens who vote at home, at nursing homes, at the workplace, or in church are more susceptible to pressure, overt and subtle, or to intimidation. Vote buying schemes are far more difficult to detect when citizens vote by mail." The report provides examples, such as the 1997 Miami mayoral election that resulted in 36 arrests for absentee-ballot fraud. The election had to be rerun, and the result was reversed.

There are more recent cases, too. In 2017 an investigation of a Dallas City Council election found some 700 fraudulent mail-in ballots signed by the same witness using a fake name. The discovery left two council races in limbo, and the fraud was much larger than the vote differential in one of those races. The case resulted in a criminal conviction.

In a 2018 North Carolina congressional race, Republican Mark Harris edged out Democrat Dan McCready by 905 votes. Fortunately, the state had relatively complete absentee-ballot records. Election officials became suspicious when they discovered that the Republican received 61% of mail-in votes, even though registered Republicans accounted for only 19% of those who had requested mail-in ballots. A Republican operative, L. McCrae Dowless Jr., had allegedly requested more than 1,200 absentee ballots on voters' behalf and then collected the ballots from voters' homes when they were mailed out. Mr. Dowless's assistants testified that they were directed to forge voters' signatures and fill in votes. A new election was required, but Mr. Harris didn't run. Mr. Dowless faces criminal charges for absentee-ballot fraud in both the 2016 and 2018 elections and has pled not guilty.

It is often claimed that impossibly large numbers of people live at the same address. In 2016, 83 registered voters in San Pedro, Calif., received absentee ballots at the same small two-bedroom apartment. Prosecutors rarely pursue this type of case.

Mail-in voting is a throwback to the dark old days of vote-buying and fraud. Because of this, many countries don't allow absentee ballots for citizens living in their country, including Norway and Mexico. Americans deserve a more trustworthy system.

Mr. Lott is president of the Crime Prevention Research Center and author, most recently, of "The War on Guns."

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