

Firm hired by Florida GOP knew weeks ago of possibly fraudulent voter registrations

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TALLAHASSEE — Nathan Sproul was hardly unknown when his firm, Strategic Allied Consulting, was hired over the summer to register voters for the Republican Party.

In 2004, employees with his previous firms were accused of a wide assortment of infractions: destroying voter registration forms of Democrats, duping college students into registering as Republicans, refusing to register Democrats or independents. Nevada, Oregon and Arizona opened investigations but closed them without charging anyone.

On Tuesday, new details emerged that Strategic Allied Consulting knew of problems in Florida weeks ago in what is now a case of possible voter registration fraud in a dozen counties.

Top Democrats are saying the GOP should have known better.

"I have grave concerns not just about the Republican National Committee's decision to retain this company, but also about what the company has allegedly done," said U.S. Rep. Elijah E. Cummings of Maryland in a statement to the *Times/Herald*. "Contrary to a 'zero-tolerance' policy, it appears that the RNC knew exactly what it was doing when it hired this company as the only one it uses to conduct this kind of work across the country."

Cummings, the ranking Democrat on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee is asking that Sproul make himself available for an Oct. 12 interview and provide copies of correspondence with state and national Republicans. Sproul's firm was the only vendor hired by the RNC to register voters in seven battleground states and was paid \$3 million.

Sproul, 40, and his associates say Democrats are bound to criticize his work, which he says has signed up 500,000 voters since 2004. But Republicans aren't standing by him, either. The state Republican parties in Florida, North Carolina, Colorado and Virginia fired the firm Sept. 25, and the Republican Party of Florida filed an election fraud complaint last week that is now part of a criminal investigation by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

Up until this summer, RPOF ran an in-house voter registration program that used paid staff to collect voter registrations. The RNC goal was a national voter registration effort targeting key states like Florida. The RNC already had an arrangement with Strategic Allied Consulting, so the state party says it followed the national party's lead.

Company representatives have said they kept Florida Republicans informed once they were alerted of questionable registration forms in Palm Beach County and fired the employee responsible on Sept. 18.

Republicans say they didn't hear about the flawed forms until a week later when told about them by a *Palm Beach Post* reporter.

But Cheryl Johnson, Lee County's voter registration director, told the *Times/Herald* on Tuesday that she noticed some odd applications that came quite a bit earlier, on Aug. 28. It looked like someone had checked Republican in a number of party registration boxes in a manner that didn't match the way the rest of the application was filled out. Four of the forms appeared to have been filled out by the same person.

Johnson called the person who dropped them off, a Strategic Allied Consulting employee named Danielle Alvarez. On Sept. 6 — 12 days before they learned about the Palm Beach forms — Johnson met with Alvarez and a man named Jack Reed.

"They said they were shocked," Johnson said. "They told me that they fired someone and it wouldn't happen again."

Johnson said they took copies of the questionable forms and promised they would call back. But that was the last Johnson heard from them.

Fred Petti, an attorney for Strategic Allied Consulting, failed to mention the Lee County problem to the *Times/Herald* last week as the news broke.

During a phone interview Friday, as he explained that one employee was responsible for the flawed registration forms in Palm Beach, he said he didn't know about reports of other flagged forms in other counties.

"This is the only person we've fired for this," Petti said, referring to the Palm Beach employee. "The only thing we've seen are the forms in Palm Beach."

When asked about Lee County on Tuesday, however, Petti apologized. "I'm sorry," Petti said. "I was running around like crazy that day. If I said something that was inaccurate, I didn't do it intentionally. I was so focused on Palm Beach County. I wasn't purposely trying to mislead you."

It's unknown how extensive the registration form problem is in Florida. David Leibowitz, spokesman for Strategic Allied Consulting, said many thousands more filed by the firm are legitimate. The FDLE is reviewing the forms for possible criminal misconduct.

But it poses a crisis for Sproul, a Tempe, Ariz., native who also owns Lincoln Strategy Group, which received about \$70,000 from Romney for President Inc.

After graduating in 1994 from the Pillsbury Baptist Bible College in Minnesota, Sproul went to Washington as an intern for then-U.S. Rep. Jon Kyl of Arizona. Later he became director of the Christian Coalition Arizona branch, then executive director of the Arizona Republican Party. In 2002, he started his own consulting firm, Sproul & Associates.

During the 2004 election, when the RNC paid him \$7.9 million, Sproul gained national attention. In Oregon, a TV news reporter interviewed a canvasser working for one of Sproul's firms who said he threw away Democratic registrations. In Nevada, a disgruntled employee told CBS News and other outlets that his supervisor ripped up and threw Democratic registrations into the

garbage. In Pennsylvania, students at several colleges complained that they were tricked into signing petitions for causes like the legalization of medicinal marijuana, low insurance rates and stricter rape laws, only to be pressured to register as Republicans or their signatures would be deemed invalid.

Students at the University of South Florida in 2004 complained about a similar ruse, but that registration drive was linked to a different firm, which was also working with Republicans.

Officials with Strategic Allied Consulting point out that Sproul was never charged. Leibowitz said he expects a similar outcome this time around as well.

"There were a couple thousand contractors doing this across Florida," he said. "There were bound to be some problems. I agree, the allegations keep coming up. But essentially, the findings are groundless."

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