Some Indian River voters take issue with mailer they say flirts with violating privacy

By Scott Wyland

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INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — Barbara Reed says she was miffed that an out-of-state group sent mailers with her name and voting history to some of her neighbors on the barrier island.

Then she spotted an inaccuracy that really upset her.

The mailer stated she hadn't voted in 2004. In fact, she did vote that year, but in Pennsylvania not Florida, she said, adding she'd taken part in every presidential race since 1972.

"It kind of puts a little bit of a stigma on me," said Reed, 71, who moved to Vero Beach in 2008. "I think it's sort of an infringement on my privacy."

Americans for Limited Government, a conservative, nonprofit political group based in Virginia, mailed 2.75 million of the fliers to registered Republicans and independents in 19 states with the aim of pressuring them to vote. The group gathered voter data that was public record, such as a person's home address, party affiliation and participation in past elections.

Each flier lists the names and addresses of six or seven voters in a small radius and notes whether they voted in 2004 and 2008, with 2012 marked as "pending" for everyone. It states that as a "further service" the group will update records after this election and send out notices to "you and your neighbors" showing who participated.

John Myers, a Fellsmere resident, complained the mailer incorrectly claimed he and his wife skipped the 2004 election. They voted in 2004 but lived in Miami while owning property in Fellsmere.

Myers, 65, a registered independent, said he didn't like being portrayed as someone shirking his civic duty.

"Especially since it's inaccurate information," he said. "It's almost like they're trying to embarrass you to go out to vote."
The group acknowledged some mistakes happened, but didn't apologize.

"The data came from a contractor's compilation of publicly available voter records, and inevitably an extremely small percentage had entry errors," said Richard Manning, the group's spokesman, in a written statement. "It was in our interest to have 100 percent of the data correct."

In a separate statement, the group said people who sit on the sidelines and don't choose their political leaders not only abandon their right to have a say, but diminish everyone's rights.

"Using publicly available information, we have been able to identify voters who have a tendency to vote, but for whatever reason have failed to do so at the most critical moments," the statement said. "We unapologetically urge these voters to exercise their right to vote, a goal which we are confident everyone applauds."

The group's website trumpets its mission to shrink government and defeat President Obama.

One academic expert said he has never seen anyone use this kind of peer-pressure tactic.

"That doesn't strike me as a particularly useful strategy," said Kevin Wagner, associate professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University. "Americans feel it is their right not to vote. My suspicion is that it will get people angry rather than shame them into voting."

Leslie Swan, the county supervisor of elections, said she personally found the mailers distasteful.

It's wrong to suggest a person failed as a citizen because they missed an election, Swan said. A person might have been gravely ill or got caught in a bad storm like Hurricane Sandy and was unable to carry out an absentee vote, she said.

Disseminating false information makes it worse, Swan said.

Some people probably will think she supplied the group the data, even though she did not, she said.

Myers called the group's research shoddy and said its attempt to minimize the errors was "pathetic." Eight years have passed since the 2004 election, so there's a good chance people like him have moved, he said.

"Whether it's one person or 100, it's wrong," Myers said.

Thomas Getzendanner, 70, said he was taken aback to see a mailer with his voting history and his wife's. It is public record, he said, but he feels it's none of his neighbors' business.

"It was a bit upsetting, disturbing," Getzendanner said.

Besides, they'd already voted early by the time the mailer arrived, Getzendanner said.
"So receiving this missile from the arch-conservative Virginia organization made no difference," he said.