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## Two Wilcox women admit vote fraud

By Michael Sznajderman  
News staff writer

MONTGOMERY — Two Wilcox County women pleaded guilty Monday to vote fraud charges, the latest development in long-running investigations by state and federal authorities into voting irregularities during the 1994 elections.

Johnita Mason, 25, pleaded guilty in Wilcox County Circuit Court to five counts of illegal absentee voting. Her mother, Doris Mason, 43, pleaded guilty to one count. The two Pine Hill women, who had no prior convictions, were each given a 12-month suspended sentence, plus two years probation. They also were ordered to pay court costs.

Charges against a third defendant, Brady Mendenhall of Pine Hill, were dismissed after a handwriting expert failed to link Mendenhall to falsified absentee ballots.

All the charges involved the forging of voter names on absentee ballot affidavits in an attempt to shift the outcome of a local election.

"Honest government begins with honest elections," said Attorney General Bill Pryor in a news con-

ference announcing the guilty pleas.

"To those that say ballot fraud doesn't exist in Alabama, I say wake up and smell the coffee," Pryor said. He said the guilty pleas also throw cold water on critics who say vote fraud cases aren't being prosecuted in the state.

Next month, state and federal prosecutors will bring to trial in Birmingham federal court two Greene County officials on election fraud charges. A federal magistrate last month refused to throw out the case against Greene County Commissioner Frank "Pinto" Smith and county employee Connie Tyree.

State vote fraud indictments also are pending in Hale County against a former police officer and a former city council candidate.

Still, nearly two years after authorities launched vote fraud investigations in several counties, principally in the Black Belt, only a handful of cases have been brought.

Pryor said vote fraud cases can be tough to prosecute because of the difficulty in convincing witnesses to testify. He said the victims in the cases are often the friends or relatives of the suspects.

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