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Robert Antonetti Sr.; Elections Chief in Pr. George's, Howard

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Robert J. Antonetti Sr., 70, the chief administrator of election boards in Prince George's and Howard counties who presided over technological innovations but also attracted criticism for conflict of interest and other concerns, died Feb. 24 at Southern Maryland Hospital Center in Clinton after a heart attack. He had a triple-bypass operation about a year ago.

Mr. Antonetti spent 30 years with the Prince George's County Board of Elections, overseeing the daily operations of the office before accepting a similar job in Howard County in 2000.

During his tenure in Prince George's, the county started registration by mail, inaugurated a 24-hour voter hotline and took steps to make registration easier online and at motor vehicles offices. He was also regarded as a leading authority on election laws in the state.

He returned to Prince George's last year as interim elections administrator, a position he held until his death and which he and his supporters saw as vindication after a 2001 ruling by Maryland's highest court that he violated conflict of interest rules.

Prince George's Board of Elections President S. John di Stefano yesterday called Mr. Antonetti the "best administrator in the state."

The court case stemmed from Mr. Antonetti's work in Prince George's, when he hired his wife and children for part-time elections board work, paid them about \$14,000 and did not disclose their employment records. Although two lower courts found in his favor, the Maryland Court of Appeals upheld the initial ruling by the State Ethics Commission.

He reportedly paid a fine of more than \$7,500 to the State Ethics Commission but maintained he had done nothing improper.

"We settled the dispute, I paid my fine and that's it," Mr. Antonetti told the Baltimore Sun. "I can't keep paying money out [in legal fees] forever. That's the way the state does things. They run you into the ground."

Robert John Antonetti Sr., an Upper Marlboro resident, was a native of New Haven, Conn., and a 1960 graduate of the University of Notre Dame. He received a master's degree in music education from Chicago's VanderCook College of Music. He also was in a Catholic teaching order, the Holy Cross Brothers, from 1954 to 1970.

He settled in the Washington area in 1964 to teach history and direct the band at Bishop McNamara High School, a Catholic preparatory school in Forestville for which he continued to do fundraising and serve on the board of directors. He was a member of St. Mary of the Assumption Catholic Church in Upper Marlboro.

He was briefly a bodyguard and driver for Francis J. Aluisi, chairman of the old Prince George's County

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Commission before becoming elections administrator (then called chief clerk) in 1970.

The job itself brought controversy over the years, touching on matters as divisive as race and fairness to political parties. Mr. Antonetti made news in 1998 when his office sent out sample ballots with multiple errors, including the wrong election date.

Some voting machines also left out the names of two unopposed Republicans. This prompted criticism of Mr. Antonetti from state senators, County Council members and former elections board members.

"I just don't understand why all of a sudden because we had a little problem in 1998 -- some minor problems due to new staff we had in place, after we'd lost long-term employees who retired," he told The Washington Post in 2000. "You have days when you have a few glitches. The integrity of the elections process was never in danger."

In December 2006, the state elections administrator criticized the Prince George's Board of Elections for providing too few voting machines across much of the county on Election Day and causing long lines of frustrated voters. One-third of the county met the state law requiring one machine for every 200 registered voters.

Mr. Antonetti said he blamed an employee and said the county had outdated voter registration information that led to the apportionment problem. Di Stefano said yesterday that the state elections administrator's complaints were overstated.

During his brief tenure in Howard, Mr. Antonetti reached an undisclosed settlement over a salary dispute.

Survivors include his wife, Mary Catherine Nooney "Casey" Antonetti of Upper Marlboro, whom he married in 1974; four children, Theresa Trigiani of Burtonsville, Robert J. Antonetti Jr. of North Potomac, John Paul Antonetti of North Beach, Md., and Edward Antonetti of Upper Marlboro; two sisters; a brother; and three grandchildren.

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