



Is Voter Fraud a Big Deal?

Uses Vote Worthy Part 1 Segment 3 [Listen](#)

Background Reading

Past United States elections were no strangers to voter fraud. The Gilded Age of the late 1800s was fraught with corruption, and voter fraud ran rampant. Unlike today, there was no secret ballot, so who you voted for was public knowledge and political machines often intimidated or bribed people into voting for their preferred candidate. The results were rigged elections and corrupt government officials.

It was common knowledge that the voting system needed to be fixed. So, reformers during the Progressive Era sought to fix many of the Gilded Age voter fraud problems. They worked to make elections more “free and fair” by introducing the “Australian Ballot,” commonly known as the secret ballot, to protect voters from political machine intimidation. The secret ballot protected voters’ privacy by keeping who they voted for a secret. Kentucky was actually the last state to adopt the secret ballot, which it did not do until in 1891! Before 1891, voting in Kentucky was done out loud by voice, making voters vulnerable as their vote was public knowledge. Minorities, the poor, and vulnerable people were sometimes pressured into voting against their conscience, as powerful political players pressured them to vote out loud for certain candidates. After the secret ballot was introduced, voter fraud decreased dramatically.

The 2020 election brought voter fraud back into the spotlight as accusations were made of large amounts of voter fraud happening via mail-in ballots. Chants of “stop the steal” could be heard behind reporters covering precinct workers counting ballots. These accusations caused Americans to question what they thought they knew — that elections were free and fair. Some Americans even questioned the validity of the election process itself. Across the U.S., legislatures introduced hundreds of bills designed to either expand and protect voting rights or restrict voting access and protect election integrity.

This podcast segment delves into voter fraud, past and present, and discusses the tension between measures to make our elections fair by safeguarding against fraud and making our elections free by safeguarding against voter suppression.

Using the podcast as a starting point for students to listen and engage in these important issues, this lesson takes a look at voter fraud during the Gilded Age and examines the effectiveness of Progressive Era reforms and our current voting system. Ultimately, students will answer if they think voter fraud is still a big deal.

Discussion Questions

1. How prevalent was voter fraud in the past?
2. What measures have been taken to reduce voter fraud?
3. How prevalent is voter fraud presently?
4. Is there enough voter fraud to consider it an issue which threatens the validity of our election process?
5. How has fear of voter fraud impacted voter suppression?

Key Vocabulary

butterfly ballot: a ballot used in Palm Beach County, Florida, during the 2000 presidential election; the space that voters pressed to mark their choices was misaligned with the row of the given candidates, causing some people to accidentally vote for a candidate other than the one they intended to vote for

Free and fair election: an election in which voters can decide whether or not to vote and can vote freely for the candidate or party of their choice without fear or intimidation and in which all voters have an equal opportunity to register and have their votes counted

Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-1973): the 36th President of the United States; among his achievements was signing into law the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which prohibits racial discrimination in access to voting

political machine: in U.S. politics, a party organization, often headed by a single boss or small group, that controls the votes of supporters to maintain political and administrative control of a city, county, or state

regulatory safeguards: laws or regulatory measures put into place to help ensure that elections are fair and free

Shelby County vs. Holder: a landmark 2013 U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down the constitutionality of a provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act

voter fraud: an intentional corruption of the election process in which an individual voter or voters engage in activities such as duplicate voting, impersonation of another voter in order to vote twice, vote selling, or voting where or when not eligible to vote

voter suppression: activities intended to influence the outcome of an election by discouraging or preventing specific groups of people from voting

Suggested Activity

Compare the occurrence of voter fraud in the past (i.e., the Gilded Age) to the present using the suggested sources and evaluate the effectiveness of measures taken to reduce voter fraud during the Gilded Age.

Students can explore sources in small groups and share with the class. The teacher may record student responses in a Venn diagram on the board.

Evaluation Criteria for Student Work

Students will construct an argument backed with evidence from the sources to address the question: Is voter fraud a big deal?

Optional Extension

Students may create public service announcements informing the community about the actual prevalence of voter fraud in modern elections and/or ways in which the vote might be suppressed and how.

Suggested Sources

Voter Fraud Map at the The Heritage Foundation website:

<https://www.heritage.org/voterfraud>

Associated Press article on 2020 election voter fraud:

<https://apnews.com/article/louisville-kentucky-voting-2020-a9b7e2f33a94ec269b31f0e9e88b5d70>

Congressional Research Institute article on measures to curb voter fraud (Gilded Age):

<https://congressionalresearch.org/SecretBallot.html>

YouTube video The History of Voter Fraud:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_YnP3mz4dg

Brennan Center for Justice article on Voting Laws Post-2020 Election:

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-february-2021>

Ballotpedia resources on 2020 Election Disputes:

https://ballotpedia.org/Ballotpedia%27s_2020_Election_Help_Desk:_Tracking_election_disputes,_lawsuits,_and_recounts

Kentucky Academic Standards

Social Studies

HS.C.PR.3 Evaluate intended and unintended consequences of public policies locally, nationally and internationally.

HS.UH.CH.2 Analyze changes to economic policies, the size of government and the power of government between 1890-1945.

HS.C.PR.2 Analyze the role of elections, bureaucracy, political parties, interest groups and media in shaping public policy.

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