



Background Reading for Is Voter Fraud a Big Deal?

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 didn’t 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, 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.