



Evidence that Negative Views of Minority Voters Influence Public Worries about Election Fraud

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Disputes about voting rights and election laws are frequently understood in purely partisan terms. Republicans tend to support more restrictive voting laws in the name of combatting fraud, while Democrats call for reforms that make registration and voting easier. But the partisan conflict masks an ugly underside on many ongoing disputes about voting rules. Researchers have discovered that public support for restrictive voting laws and public concerns about possible voter fraud are heavily influenced by racial animus and negative attitudes about immigrants. Leaders who spread allegations of voter fraud and push for restrictive voting rules may well be capitalizing on widespread public prejudices about racial and ethnic minorities.

Public Concerns about Voter Fraud

The claim that voter fraud is rampant figures prominently in ongoing debates. Over the past decade many states have passed new restrictive rules – such as requirements that would-be voters present specific kinds of photo identification or documents proving citizenship. Widespread fears about fraudulent voting are often used to mobilize support for such steps. In 2008, slightly more than 70% of Americans expressed support in a national survey for a law requiring all voters to show photo identification. It is likely that many supporters are worried about fraud at the ballot box. In a 2012 *Washington Post* poll, 48% of respondents said that voter fraud is a major problem in the United States. In another 2012 survey, only one-third of respondents believed that votes are very often counted fairly in our nation's elections.

Why do so many Americans suspect widespread voter fraud? It is a good question, because there is considerable evidence that actual fraud is now extremely rare.

- The Justice Department under the Bush administration devoted substantial resources to voter fraud investigations throughout the country, yet produced very few indictments or convictions.
- A coalition of journalists called “News21” recently compiled a database of all U.S. election fraud cases since 2000. Few instances were found, and cases where a voter impersonates someone else – the type of fraud that photo ID rules are meant to deter – almost never happen.
- Public concerns appear to be unrelated to the frequency of actual cases of fraud in people's own states. Furthermore, public concerns about voter fraud do not recede after the adoption of state laws requiring voters to show photo identification.

False Fears and Negative Attitudes about Minorities

Scholars have mulled why large segments of the American public believe that voter fraud is rampant despite evidence showing that lightning strikes are more frequent. One possibility is that racial animus and ethnocentrism affect public worries and lie behind much of the public support for restrictive voting laws. Studies have indeed found considerable evidence of deep reservoirs of prejudice tapped by politicians pushing new voting restrictions.

- A recently published study by David Wilson and Paul Brewer in *Public Opinion Quarterly* found that people with high levels of resentment toward African Americans are more likely to believe that voter fraud is common and more likely to support photo ID requirements.
- A 2012 survey conducted by researchers at the American National Election Studies group found that roughly forty percent of American adults believe it is very likely that recent immigrants take away jobs from people already living in this country, and one third of those anxious about immigration believe

that votes are not counted fairly in U.S. elections. By contrast, among respondents who did not express worries about immigrants taking away jobs, only 12 percent believe that votes are not counted fairly in American elections.

- In a 2008 national survey, 90 percent of respondents who identified immigration as the most important issue facing the country supported a photo ID requirement for voting, while only 70 percent of the remaining respondents professed such support.

Over the past two decades, the share of racial and ethnic minority citizens voting in U.S. presidential elections has more than doubled – from 13 percent in 1992 to 28 percent in 2012. As the electorate has changed, backlashes have mounted against the rising number of non-white voters. In one instance after another, politicians and organized groups link minority turnout with voter fraud. Here are a few examples, and recent books by election experts such as Richard Hasen and Lorraine Minnite document many additional instances.

- In January of 2014, Paul Broun, a Republican congressman running for a U.S. Senate seat in Georgia, stated that Democrats can only win elections in the state with the votes of “illegal aliens.”
- Months before the 2012 election, Doug Preis, a member of the board of elections and chairman of the Republican Party in Franklin County, Ohio, argued that voting procedures should not “accommodate the urban – read African American – voter-turnout machine.”
- As the 2012 election approached, Republican Secretaries of State in Colorado, Florida, Iowa, and Kansas alleged that thousands of non-citizens were illegal voters in their states. In each state, subsequent investigation revealed that only a tiny fraction of the alleged suspects were non-citizens. Nevertheless, public fears were aroused and the facts about almost non-existent fraud usually were not reported until after the election.

The evidence seems clear. A portion of the American public, nudged by some politicians, has come to link increased minority voting with rising voter fraud – without empirical evidence of any real connection. Such a dynamic in public opinion can undercut the principle of one person, one vote. A recently published study by political scientists Keith Bentele and Erin O’Brien finds that restrictive voter laws are more likely to be proposed and passed in states with large African American populations and high levels of minority voter turnout. In short, active voting by growing minorities may stoke negative public attitudes that are, in turn, used by politicians and groups pushing new restrictions on full and equal voting. This trend should disturb all Americans who care about the health of our democracy in an increasingly diverse society.