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# Opinion Voter turnout is low on purpose — and it has been for more than a century

By Jon Grinspan

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In the debate over restrictive new voting laws, many have warned about what President Biden called "[backsliding into the days of Jim Crow](#)." But there is a stronger, subtler parallel: the deliberate discouragement of working-class voters, around 1900, by wealthier Americans scared that "[hordes of native and foreign barbarians, all armed with the ballot](#)" would replace them at the polls.

This nearly forgotten panic caused a century of low turnouts.

Voter participation hasn't always been lousy in America: Although for the past century it has averaged just [56 percent of eligible voters in presidential elections](#), in the second half of the 1800s, an average of 77 percent of voters turned out, and often exceeded 80 percent. And participation didn't always correlate with wealth or education. In our own time, Americans who did not finish high school vote at [less than half the rate](#) of those with a postgraduate degree. But in the late 19th century, poorer voters predominated.

This was still a deeply flawed democracy, bigoted when it came to race and gender, but it was surprisingly inclusive across class, boasting a diverse working-class electorate of native-born and immigrant voters. Election days mobilized farmhands, butchers and streetsweepers — what Teddy Roosevelt called America's real "[governing class](#)."

Meanwhile, the wealthy stayed home, repeating the mantra "a gentleman never votes."

Those gentlemen finally targeted working-class politics in the Gilded Age, fearful about talk of unions, strikes, maybe even socialism. Though often hailing from old abolitionist families, Northeastern elites began to argue in the 1880s and '90s that they were the new enslaved people, with an impoverished, immigrant electorate as their

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Often, the well-to-do complained that working-class voters lacked education, but at a time when only a prosperous minority could afford to finish high school, let alone college, the class implications were obvious. These attacks rejected the principle of equality, as when a writer in *The Washington Post* complained that the ballots of “illiterate foreigners ... count as much as those of college professors.”

The historian [Francis Parkman](#) hissed that “an invasion of peasants” was drowning the republic in a “muddy tide of ignorance.” Democracy, he asserted, was perpetuating the notion that “the weakest and most worthless was a match, by his vote, for the wisest and best.” Some innovation was needed to stop this siphoning of power “from superior to inferior types.”

This fight took place as Southern states were stealing the vote from African Americans. After the mid-1870s, America began to backslide from the principles of equality and majority rule nationwide. In the three-quarters of the country outside the South, however, “reformers” could not simply disenfranchise their lower classes. But perhaps, they schemed, they might make participation unappealing enough to discourage turnout.

Under the guise of “good government,” reformers targeted the three pillars of working-class democracy: the saloon, the rally and the ballot box. Saloons had served as party headquarters, intellectual salons and even polling places for poor voters. By shutting them down on Election Day, “reformers” [stifled a key institution](#). And by introducing permit requirements for demonstrations, they helped quiet the noisy rallies that had once energized public opinion.

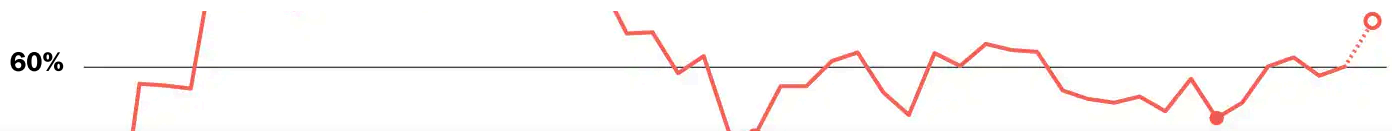
Most important, “reformers” attacked the election process itself. States passed new registration laws and literacy requirements, moved polling places into unfriendly neighborhoods, and most employers stopped letting their workers take time off to vote. Authorities switched from the tradition of casting color-coded ballots in a public box — to private voting with dense, text-heavy, government-printed “secret ballots.” None of these changes amounted to anything like the brutality of Jim Crow, but they were enacted with what [one pastor called](#) “the secret cause” of ending “unqualified suffrage.”

And so turnout crashed, falling by nearly one-third from the 1890s through the 1920s, until fewer than half of the eligible were voting. It fell especially among populations who were poorer, younger, immigrants or African Americans. Election Day in the 19th century was a thrilling holiday. In the 20th century, it required literacy, identification papers, education, leave from work and, most of all, the confidence to move through elite-dominated political spaces.

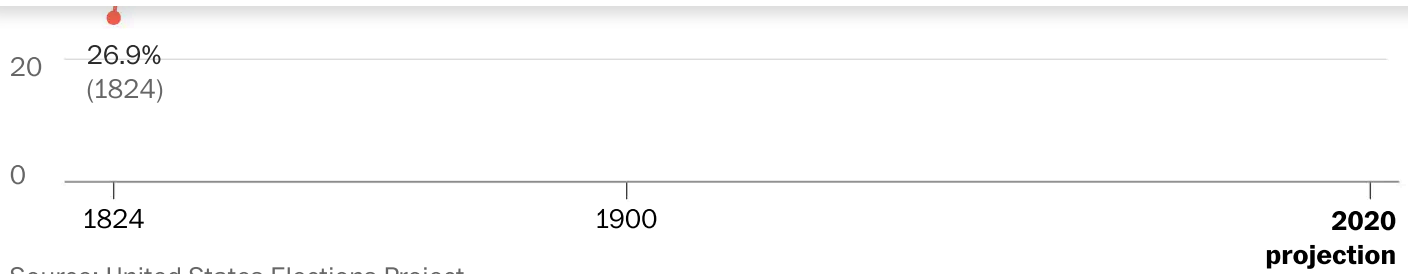
## Presidential election turnout

Percentage of voting eligible population who voted.





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Source: United States Elections Project.

The harm to turnout lasted for a century. While the Voting Rights Act of 1965 fought racial discrimination in voting, the discouragements preventing low-income participation have never been addressed. In 2020, heated voter turnout reached 66 percent for the first time since 1900. But it's as if this new engagement triggered some automatic alarm, and we're met with renewed talk about purifying the ballot.

This history shows that even small discouragements can do grievous harm to participation. And it reminds us that we should be prepared for such suppressions to continue, until Americans can accept the basic principle that there is no such thing as an “inferior type” of voter.

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