

THE POLITICS OF VOTER FRAUD

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KEY FINDINGS

- ***Voter fraud is the “intentional corruption of the electoral process by the voter.”*** This definition covers knowingly and willingly giving false information to establish voter eligibility, and knowingly and willingly voting illegally or participating in a conspiracy to encourage illegal voting by others. All other forms of corruption of the electoral process and corruption committed by elected or election officials, candidates, party organizations, advocacy groups or campaign workers fall under the wider definition of **election** fraud.
- ***Voter fraud is extremely rare.*** At the federal level, records show that only 24 people were convicted of or pleaded guilty to illegal voting between 2002 and 2005, an average of eight people a year. The available state-level evidence of voter fraud, culled from interviews, reviews of newspaper coverage and court proceedings, while not definitive, is also negligible.
- ***The lack of evidence of voter fraud is not because of a failure to codify it.*** It is not as if the states have failed to detail the ways voters could corrupt elections. There are hundreds of examples drawn from state election codes and constitutions that illustrate the precision with which the states have criminalized voter and election fraud. If we use the same standards for judging voter fraud crime rates as we do for other crimes, we must conclude that the lack of evidence of arrests, indictments or convictions for any of the practices defined as voter fraud means very little fraud is being committed.
- ***Most voter fraud allegations turn out to be something other than fraud.*** A review of news stories over a recent two year period found that reports of voter fraud were most often limited to local races and individual acts and fell into three categories: unsubstantiated or false claims by the loser of a close race, mischief and administrative or voter error.
- ***The more complex are the rules regulating voter registration and voting, the more likely voter mistakes, clerical errors, and the like will be wrongly identified as “fraud.”*** Voters play a limited role in the electoral process. Where they interact with the process they confront an array of rules that can trip them up. In addition, one consequence of expanding voting opportunities, i.e. permissive absentee voting systems, is a corresponding increase in opportunities for casting unintentionally illegal ballots if administrative tracking and auditing systems are flawed.
- ***There is a long history in America of elites using voter fraud allegations to restrict and shape the electorate.*** In the late nineteenth century when newly freed black Americans were swept into electoral politics, and where blacks were the majority of the electorate, it was the Democrats who were threatened by a loss of power, and it was the Democratic party that erected new rules said to be necessary to respond to alleged fraud by black voters. Today, the success of voter registration drives among minorities and low income people in recent years threatens to expand the base of the Democratic party and tip the balance of power away from the Republicans. Consequently, the use of baseless voter fraud allegations for partisan advantage has become the exclusive domain of Republican party activists.



- ***The historically disenfranchised are often the target of voter fraud allegations.*** Fraud allegations today typically point the finger at those belonging to the same categories of voters accused of fraud in the past – the marginalized and formerly disenfranchised, urban dwellers, immigrants, blacks, and lower status voters. These populations are mostly found among those still struggling for full inclusion in American life.
- ***Better data collection and election administration will improve the public discussion of voter fraud and lead to more appropriate policies.*** We need better data, better election administration, transparency and more responsible journalism to improve public understanding of the legitimate ways in which electoral outcomes can be distorted and manipulated. This will help ensure that new laws and rules to prevent fraud are narrowly targeted to solve legitimate problems rather than used as a strategy to shape the electorate for partisan advantage.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lorraine C. Minnite holds a Ph.D. in political science and teaches courses on American and urban politics at Barnard College, in New York City. In 2003, she co-authored (with David Callahan), *Securing the Vote: An Analysis of Election Fraud* for Dēmos: An Network for Ideas and Action, and is currently finishing a book on the politics of voter fraud in contemporary American elections.





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