

TOOLS OF CORRUPTION

Corruption:

- dishonest or illegal behavior especially by powerful people (such as government officials or police officers)
- inducement to wrong by improper or unlawful means (such as bribery)
- a departure from the original or from what is pure or correct

Some of the worst (or “best”, depending on how you look at it) examples of corruption in the American democratic process are tied to the voting process. What follows are some of the most notable examples of corruption and interference within the American model of democracy.

Post-Reconstruction Southern Voting Restrictions

After the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 that gave African Americans the right to vote, several Southern states put voting restrictions in place to deny them suffrage. Two of these efforts included:

- **Poll Taxes**

Poll taxes, also known as “head taxes” or “soul taxes,” are taxes that are imposed upon individuals as a requirement for voting. In the United States, poll taxes date back to the colonial era. However, in the post–Civil War era, the poll tax served as one of the techniques used by Southern whites to disenfranchise African Americans. In order to be eligible to vote, an individual had to pay a poll tax. In some cases, the poll tax had to be paid almost a year in advance of the election, and in other cases the tax had to be paid for a certain period of years. This meant states could say they were denying folks the right to vote based on their non-payment of poll tax, rather than their race, while still having the effect of disenfranchising African Americans.

- **Literacy Tests**

From the 1890s to the 1960s, many state governments in the United States administered a difficult literacy test to prospective voters. Several tests were intentionally written to be confusing and unclear. Then, the grading was subjective, and passage was up to the person administering the test. As most African Americans had been denied an education while enslaved, and then Southern States created separate and inadequate schools after slavery ended, a large population of them could not pass the tests.

However, since it was illegal for the Southern states to explicitly create restrictions for just African Americans, the above efforts technically disenfranchised poor and illiterate whites as well. In order to circumvent that, states created what are now called **Grandfather Clauses**. A grandfather clause is a provision in which an old rule applies to existing situations while a new rule applies to future cases. For instance, states exempted those whose ancestors (grandfathers) had the right to vote

Signature in the Schools: UnResigned

before the Civil War from the voting restrictions. Therefore, formerly enslaved African Americans and their descendants were subjected to the literacy test and poll taxes, but whites were not.

Gerrymandering

States use different ways to define their voter districts, but the majority are drawn by state legislatures. A voting district is a geographical area used to elect representatives. Each voting district elects one representative and people cannot switch districts unless they move their residence. However, when state legislatures get to draw their own districts, sometimes they use a practice called gerrymandering to create results that are deliberately unfair. Gerrymandering is a practice intended to create a political advantage for a particular party or group by manipulating voting district boundaries. The term is named after Elbridge Gerry, who, as Governor of Massachusetts in 1812, signed a bill that created a partisan district in the Boston area that was so specifically drawn to benefit his party that it made no logical sense. In addition to its use to achieve desired election results for a particular party, gerrymandering has also been used to boost or hinder the voting power of a particular demographic, by either isolating or spreading out political, ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious or class groups. By defining who elects them, some political strategists describe it as politicians picking their voters instead of voters picking their politicians.

Inequality in Election Day Resources and Information

Part of the 1965 Voting Rights Act subjected several states to obtain federal approval before they could change their voting rights and practices. This was to prevent those states from suppressing minority voters. However, after the 2013 Supreme Court decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* gutted that section saying it was no longer relevant, many of those states began to target minority voters by interfering in the voting process. Since the provision was struck down a total of 1,688 polling locations have closed – the majority in African American locations. Fewer polling locations means some voters either wait hours to cast a ballot or to forgo their right to vote in that election entirely when they cannot wait the required amount of time to vote and must leave before casting their ballot. However, voters in well-funded areas with enough voting capacity may face minimal or no waiting time. Furthermore, voters in those districts were not always informed their polling place closed, leading to massive confusion when it was time to vote. Other recent restrictions have included voter photo ID laws, purging infrequent voters from the registration rolls without notification, and reducing early voting days – all these efforts impact low-income or minority populations much more than wealthy whites.