

Popular Support for Disenfranchisement in the United States: Voting on Constitutional Referendums

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At the turn of the twentieth century, Southern states disenfranchised millions of voters—most African Americans and many poor Whites—through devices like poll taxes and literacy tests. While existing accounts focus on the actions of Democratic elites, we examine a largely overlooked source of backsliding—voters themselves—as many disenfranchising provisions were directly decided by popular referendums. We consider fourteen constitutional referendums across nine Southern and border states between 1892 and 1916. We find that these referendums were most successful in counties with the largest Black populations. We also find suggestive evidence that electoral manipulation occurred in a small but significant percentage of counties, such that the outcome of two referendums was likely fraudulent. Finally, Populist tradition did not inhibit disenfranchisement: in former-Populist counties where the Black population was on par with the White population or exceeded it, the presence of poorer Whites was associated with greater referendum success.

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(A) AI was not used for anything that appears in the main manuscript. AI was used to create the maps that appear in the revised appendix (Appendix 4). The AI was tasked with writing code to convert already collected county-year data into color-coded choropleth maps of states using the county lines corresponding to the given year of their referendum vote. It wrote the code that produced those maps, and the map output was saved and used in Appendix 4. AI was not used for anything else, nor for writing, editing, or analyzing any graph in the manuscript.

(B) Claude Opus 4.8 by Anthropic was used for this task.

(C) One of the two co-authors managed the AI's work and inspected both the generated code and the output.

Introduction

The legitimacy of elections and the protections of voting rights have become central concerns for many politicians and citizens in the contemporary United States. Some on the political right question whether election fraud and illegal voting are on the rise in ways that disadvantage Republican candidates. Some on the political left believe that voting is being made more difficult for poorer and more marginalized citizens in ways that disadvantage Democratic candidates. Taken seriously, these concerns raise questions about the quality and health of American democracy and whether we are in fact “backsliding.”

These concerns, of course, would only influence elections at the margins. In an era of razor-close national elections, however, marginal effects could swing an outcome. That said, using references like “Jim Crow 2.0” to characterize the current era is misplaced. There was in fact a “backsliding era” in American politics—roughly the last decade of the nineteenth century through the first decade of the twentieth century—in which millions of voters were disenfranchised and participation in national, state, and local elections declined significantly.

During the backsliding era, Democratic politicians in the ex-Confederate states placed severe limitations on who could vote. To single out African Americans—but comply with the Fifteenth Amendment—they designed legal provisions to target the poor and the illiterate and thus were ostensibly race neutral. The result was that most African Americans in the South, and many rural Whites as well, lost their suffrage rights.

While the political history of this period is generally well known,¹ one aspect of the backsliding era has received far less attention: the “popular” component of the process. That is, while Democratic leaders often designed constitutional amendments or the drafting of new

¹ See Kousser (1974); Wang (1997); Perman (2001); Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski (2018), Greenberger (2022); Olson (2025); Gray and Jenkins (2025a).

constitutions to disenfranchise, state legislatures could not carry out these strategies on their own. Constitutional changes typically required approval through a statewide referendum. Stated differently, significant democratic backsliding often depended not only on elite preferences but also on a state's voters to approve.

This institutional feature provides the basis for our research design. Most studies of Southern disenfranchisement necessarily infer mass preferences indirectly—from legislative behavior, elite rhetoric, party competition, or subsequent political outcomes. Constitutional referendums, by contrast, allow us to observe county-level votes on the disenfranchising proposals themselves. Rather than asking whether political elites sought to restrict suffrage—a question already answered by the historical literature—we examine where citizens officially supported these restrictions and whether the reported referendum returns are consistent with what one would expect from a freely conducted election. The referendum cases therefore provide unusual inferential leverage: they allow us to distinguish between elite-led efforts at democratic backsliding and the extent to which those efforts rested on recorded popular approval.

The referendum setting also generates observable empirical expectations. If these elections were conducted freely and fairly, county-level support should broadly reflect local demographic conditions together with established theories of racial politics, such as racial threat. White support for disenfranchisement should increase where African Americans constituted a larger share of the local population, but such dynamics should not produce overwhelming referendum victories in places where African Americans themselves made up most of the population. Systematic departures from these expectations are therefore informative. They motivate our subsequent analyses of electoral manipulation and allow us to assess whether the

reported referendum returns plausibly reflect voter preferences or instead bear the hallmarks of coercion, voter suppression, or fraud.

We know almost nothing about the popular component of backsliding. But because most Southern states pursued disenfranchisement through constitutional change, referendums played a decisive role. Thus, we collect county-level vote totals on all constitutional referendums involving suffrage restrictions—convention calls, constitutional amendments, and ratification of new constitutions—and conduct the first systematic analysis of citizens’ role in the disenfranchisement process.

Our empirical analysis proceeds in three stages. We first examine whether county-level referendum returns conform to the demographic patterns that would be expected under freely conducted elections. We then investigate whether systematic departures from those expectations are consistent with long-standing historical claims of electoral manipulation. Finally, we examine whether counties with stronger Populist traditions were less supportive of disenfranchisement, thereby assessing whether interracial class-based political coalitions constrained—or failed to constrain—the erosion of voting rights.

We find three principal results. First, we find the referendums were most successful in locations where the targets of disenfranchisement lived. This outcome can only partly be explained by “racial threat”—that is, White voters who lived in diverse communities were more likely to vote to disenfranchise their Black neighbors. Second, we find substantial evidence to suggest that many county-level elections were not fairly conducted, with voter suppression and fraud the most likely methods of Democratic success. In some counties—especially in Alabama and South Carolina—the results were so anomalous that outright fabrication is the most plausible explanation. Third, in places where the Black population was equivalent to or larger than the

White population, we find that the presence of poorer Whites was associated with greater success for the referendums. This reflects the failure of Populism—the formation of a fusion coalition of African Americans and poor Whites—and is likely the result of one of two things: either Democratic elites successfully drove a wedge between their two possible political opponents or poor Whites still favored the oppression of African Americans (their potential allies) over an actual and potentially successful fusion arrangement.

Finally, while our cases of disenfranchisement by popular referendum are more than a century old, the strategy itself has not been confined to the dustbin of history. Indeed, we are living during a time when the modern Republican Party in various states in which it has majority control—and not simply in the South—is putting before the people referendums to change the qualifications for voting. Two prominent examples include stipulating that U.S. citizens must possess identification to vote and that only U.S. citizens can vote in U.S. elections at any level. Whether these contemporary constitutional referendums indeed seek to restrict voting right (as argued by those on the political left) or reduce fraudulent behavior in the voting process (as argued by those on the political right) is a matter of debate. What is true is that the American people today, just as they did more than a century ago, possess the ability to decide who participates in elections. We return to this modern parallel in the conclusion.

The Cases

We examine fourteen referendum votes across nine states, spanning the years 1892 to 1916. Seven states of the ex-Confederacy—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia—are represented.² Two Border states—Maryland and

² Louisiana adopted a new constitution in 1898 that involved ratification by popular referendum (Cunningham 1966)—but we have been unable to find the county-level vote totals. Florida and Tennessee pursued

Oklahoma—also pursued disenfranchisement via constitutional referendum, a fact that is less well known in the historical literature.

Of the fourteen votes, three are calls for a constitutional convention, ten are constitutional amendments, and one is ratification of a new constitution. Ten of the fourteen were successful – with the three amendment votes in Maryland and the second amendment vote in Oklahoma representing the failures. Table 1 provides the details of the voting in each state, along with key disenfranchising changes that a positive vote would have produced. More detail on the disenfranchising provisions appears in Appendix 1.

To provide context for the popular voting results, we provide short case studies of the nine states in Appendix 2. Here we summarize the timing of the disenfranchising efforts as well as their content—and identify the common features across the separate referendum attempts.

disenfranchisement solely through statutory changes (Kousser 1974; Perman 2001). Mississippi adopted a new constitution without any popular component of the process (Pratt 2018).

Table 1: Key Disenfranchising Changes Pursued Via Constitutional Referendums

State	Election Date	Type	Vote	Outcome	Key Disenfranchising Changes
Arkansas	9/5/1892	Amendment	75,940-56,601	Approved	Poll Tax
	9/14/1908	Amendment	88,386-46,835	Approved	Poll Tax
South Carolina	11/6/1894	Convention Call	31,402-29,523	Approved	--- [Poll Tax; Literacy Test (w/Temp Understanding Clause exemption); Property Tax]
Virginia	5/24/1900	Convention Call	77,362-60,375	Approved	--- [Poll Tax and/or Literacy Test [w/Old Soldier Clause exemption]]
North Carolina	8/2/1900	Amendment	182,217-128,285	Approved	Poll Tax (w/Grandfather Clause Exemption)
Alabama	9/23/1901	Convention Call	70,305-45,505	Approved	---
	11/11/1901	Constitution	106,613-81,734	Ratified	Literacy Test and Poll Tax (w/Old Soldier Clause exemption)
Texas	11/4/1902	Amendment	200,650-107,748	Approved	Poll Tax
Maryland	11/7/1905	Amendment	70,227-104,286	Rejected	Literacy Test (w/Understanding and Grandfather Clause exemptions)
	11/2/1909	Amendment	89,801-106,512	Rejected	Literacy Test (w/Property and Grandfather Clause exemptions)
	11/7/1911	Amendment	46,220-83,920	Rejected	Property Test for non-White citizens
Georgia	10/7/1908	Amendment	79,968-40,260	Approved	Literacy Test (w/Understanding, Old Soldier, and Property Clause exemptions)
Oklahoma	8/2/1910	Amendment	135,443-106,222	Approved	Literacy Test (w/Grandfather Clause exemption)
	8/2/1916	Amendment	90,605-133,140	Rejected	Literacy Test (w/Old Soldier Clause exemption)

Note: For South Carolina and Virginia, we note in brackets what disenfranchisement provisions the convention ultimately adopted. The people of neither state voted on the actual constitution.

Reconstruction as a Republican policy enterprise ended in 1877, with individual Southern states being “redeemed” by White Democrats beginning in the early-to-mid-1870s (Calhoun 2006; Heersink and Jenkins 2020). Formal disenfranchisement of Black voters did not follow immediately, however, as White Southern Democrats for a generation used violence and intimidation to maintain the patina of a democratic system while controlling the outcomes. Two related factors prompted White Democratic leaders in the South to adopt formal institutions to maintain control. The first was the attempt by Congressional Republicans to resuscitate Reconstruction by empowering the federal courts to intervene in elections that showed evidence of manipulation. The Federal Elections Bill—initiated by Rep. Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. (R-MA)—passed in the House in 1890 but was defeated by a filibuster in the Senate in early 1891 (Jenkins and Peck 2021). The Federal Elections Bill was a clear factor in the formal disenfranchising strategy pursued by White Democrats in Mississippi in 1890 and Arkansas in 1892, for example (Ogden 1958; Pratt 2018).

While federal intervention in Southern elections was something of an existential threat for White Democrats in the ex-Confederacy, it became considerably less concerning as the 19th century was coming to an end. With William McKinley’s election to the presidency in 1896—following a substantial GOP victory in the 1894 midterms—the Republicans for the next two generations found themselves competitive or dominant in every region of the country outside of the South (Brady 1988). As a result, McKinley—believing his economic policies, which encouraged industrial growth, would eventually win over White support in the South—set aside efforts to rekindle Reconstruction and pursued instead a policy of national “reconciliation.” In doing so, he was content leaving Southern politics in local (White) hands, a policy his successors (Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft) also pursued (Sherman 1973).

Rather than fears of continued federal intervention, a second factor precipitated the move to formal disenfranchisement in the South: the local electoral threat to Democratic control. With White Democrats fully “redeeming” the South by the late-1870s, the “glue” that helped defeat the GOP Reconstruction governments—“Whiteness” as a cohesive identity—began to weaken. White Democratic leaders in the South often represented landed and business interests, and once in power, these “Bourbon” elites proceeded to reduce taxes and slash funding for public services like education. As a result, many poor Whites were left holding the bag. And while they were generally unwilling to support Republicans—the “Black Party” and the “Party of Northern Aggression”—poor Whites were receptive to third-party movements that emerged by the late-1870s to represent popular discontent.

In the early-to-mid 1880s, these third parties – like the Readjusters in Virginia and the Greenbackers in Arkansas and Texas – caused the Democrats some ills, but normal tactics (like violence and intimidation) eventually brought them to heel (De Santis 1959; Hirshson 1962). By the late-1880s, however, a new party—the Populists—emerged that proved cohesive across states in the South and West. The Populists were an agrarian-based organization that was open to biracial economic appeals and fusion arrangements (when convenient) with Republicans. The Populists challenged Democratic electoral dominance (to varying degrees) through the mid-1890s in Arkansas, Alabama, Texas, and Georgia and wrested control of North Carolina from the Democrats in 1896 thanks to a fusion arrangement with the GOP. And while a Populist threat did not emerge to the same degree in Virginia and South Carolina, internal Democratic Party fissures led minority factions to work openly with African American voters to win elections.

In these Southern states, Democratic leaders viewed the answer to the electoral threat in racial terms. That is, to eliminate the Populists – and any potential fusion arrangements with Republicans or any within-Democratic opposition factions – the key was to remove African Americans from the voting rolls.³ Once Black voters were disenfranchised, they believed, all potential threats to traditional Democratic leadership in the South would disappear.

Hence, changes to voter qualifications in state constitutions were sought. They generally took two forms. The first was a poll tax, a fee that a citizen would have to pay to register to vote. For many farmers who were sharecroppers or tenants, this fee—often a dollar or two, equivalent to \$60 or more in terms of 2025 purchasing power—was a non-trivial cost. The second was a literacy test, whereby a citizen was required to read or write any section of the Constitution chosen by an election administrator as a requirement for voting. These two, complementary techniques were successful in preventing a large majority of African Americans from voting. And, in collateral fashion, many poor, illiterate Whites were also barred, although exemptions (like the grandfather, old soldier, and understanding clauses) allowed them to exercise their franchise in some cases.⁴

³ In the case of Alabama, Taylor (1949: 410) says: “the Constitution of 1901 was the direct result of the threats of populism in the 1892 and 1894 gubernatorial elections; and that the cry of ‘Negro domination’ both prior to and during the Convention was but a ‘red herring’ designed deliberately to obscure the real motive of the professional Democratic leadership.” And Ogden (1958: 31) remarks more generally on the poll tax: “Although the tax was primarily portrayed as ... a way to disenfranchise the Negro, it appears that the leaders of the movement regarded it mainly as a method of discouraging from voting that class of whites which was beginning to challenge their control of southern politics.”

⁴ The grandfather clause stipulated that anyone who was able to vote in 1867 or 1869 (or whose direct ancestor was able to vote in that year) would not be denied the right to register and vote at any election; African Americans in the South could not vote before 1870—and the passage of the Reconstruction Act—so this effectively disenfranchised them. The old soldier’s clause allowed veterans of 19th century wars and their descendants to register to vote despite not fulfilling the other requirements. The understanding clause allowed a citizen to register to vote if they could convince an election official that they “understood” a section of the constitution that was read to them. See Appendix 2 for how these exemptions were employed in different states.

Because poll taxes and literacy tests changed voter qualifications—which were specified in state constitutions—they typically required constitutional amendments to enact.⁵ This meant supermajority votes in both chambers of the state legislature and (importantly) a simple majority vote on a referendum by the citizens of a state. Arkansas was the first to go down this road in 1892, with the enactment of a poll tax amendment. North Carolina followed with a literacy test + poll tax amendment in 1900. Texas enacted its own poll tax amendment in 1902, while Georgia opted for a literacy test amendment in 1908.⁶ South Carolina, Virginia, and Alabama, by contrast, adopted entirely new constitutions in 1894, 1900, and 1901, respectively—with stringent disenfranchising provisions—rather than amend their existing ones.

Maryland and Oklahoma also sought to disenfranchise. But they were different than their Southern cousins, in that no serious third-party movement precipitated the effort. Instead, Democratic leaders saw an electoral threat in the existing Republican Party. In Maryland, the GOP had always been a weak, second party until the McKinley wave of the mid-1890s elevated them to the majority. By 1899, the Democrats had regained control of the state government and sought to prevent a Republican resurgence. They tried but failed on three occasions between 1905 and 1911 to enact a disenfranchising amendment—as White and Black Republicans, along with foreign-born Whites and their descendants (who feared that native Whites would restrict their suffrage), beat back all Democratic efforts. The story was similar in Oklahoma. Republicans had not yet come to power but were gaining momentum, and Democratic leaders sought to stop their ascendance by adopting a literacy test amendment (with a grandfather clause

⁵ Tennessee and Florida adopted a poll tax by statute, based on provisions within their state constitutions that authorized such action (Ogden 1958).

⁶ The 1868 Georgia Constitution—adopted under a Republican majority—included a poll tax provision. Republicans quickly realized that a poll tax could be a detriment to their electoral success and suspended it. When the Democrats took over in 1871, they immediately put the poll tax into effect (Kousser 1974).

exemption)—which the citizens of Oklahoma approved in 1910. This victory proved short-lived, however, as the U.S. Supreme Court in *Guinn v. United States* (1915) struck down the grandfather clause as violating the Fifteenth Amendment’s guarantee of voting rights regardless of race. Oklahoma Democrats sought to reinstitute a literacy test in 1916—this time with an old soldier’s clause exemption—but the state’s citizens (spurred on by an alliance between Republicans and a growing Socialist Party) voted it down.

Case-Based Implications

Based on the case studies of the nine states that pursued disenfranchising referendums, what might we expect in a systematic analysis of the county-level voting data? We posit three things, which we detail below.

First, there were widespread claims that voting on the referendums was not fairly and freely conducted. For example, secondary studies (based on primary sources) include Warren (2011) stating that passage of the referendum on the Alabama Constitution in 1901 “was the result of considerable fraud in the Black Belt counties, which were predominantly African American”; Reece (2001: 241) contending that disenfranchisers in South Carolina “not only used their control of the election apparatus to prevent many African-Americans from voting, they also massaged the results, fraudulently pulling victory from the jaws of defeat”; and Kousser (1974: 206) arguing that in Texas “there was a great deal of fraud and/or intimidation in the counties of high Negro concentration.” How much of these anecdotal claims ring true in a more comprehensive analysis within and across states?

To assess these claims of fraud, we need a relevant baseline. Given the racial overtones on the disenfranchising referendums, we might expect to observe—in a free and fair election—a pattern of vote returns in which White voters exhibited evidence of vote choices shaped by

“racial threat” dynamics.⁷ The basic idea is that White voters who lived in geographies that featured larger shares of African American voters—who thus had greater potential to exert political, economic, and social power locally—would be more willing to take hostile action, such as voting to disenfranchise. In such a case, there would have been two simultaneous pressures pushing vote returns in opposite directions: an increasing rate of support (and potentially turnout) from White voters coupled with a declining share of the White population. However, White support for disenfranchisement could only go to 100% of the voting-eligible White population. Meanwhile, that 100% would become progressively smaller in locations that had increasing African American population shares. In most cases, this would produce an inverse-U-shaped graph, in which areas that were racially diverse would have the highest rates of support for disenfranchisement while those that were overwhelmingly White or Black would have lower rates (see, e.g., Kousser 1973). The specific shape depends on several moving parts, but most cases would feature this inverse-U.⁸

To illustrate, we present a graphical representation of this effect. In Figure 1, we show the overall referendum result given a specific county racial split covering the full range from 100% White to 100% Black. One line shows the result with no “racial threat” dynamics in which White and Black support are constant, with only the demographics varying from county to county. For

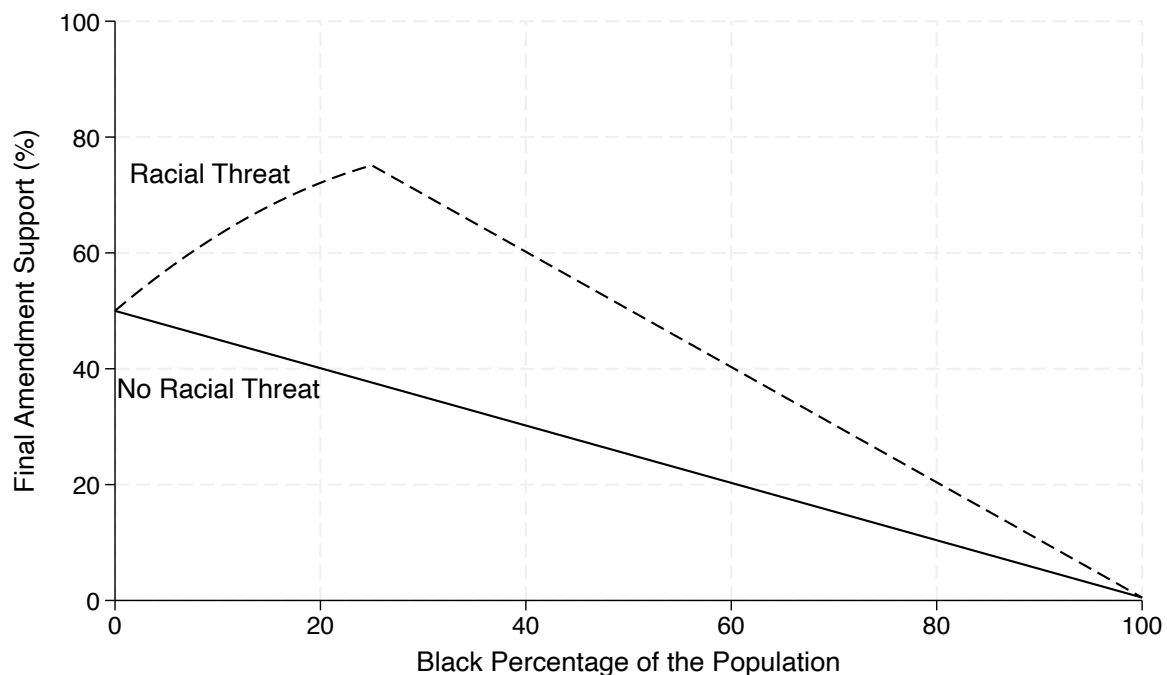
⁷ Foundational work on racial threat theory includes Key (1949), who noted that White political mobilization and support for discriminatory policies were highest in areas with large Black populations; Blumer (1958), who argued that prejudice was a defensive reaction by a dominant group to protect its collective position and privileges; and Blalock (1967), who formalized the theory that as a minority group grows in size or power, the majority perceives it as a threat to their economic, political, and social status, leading to increased social control measures.

⁸ This inverse-U relationship is found in other race-based studies where the outcome is not electoral. Examples include Feigenberg and Miller (2021), which finds Black population share and punishment severity in Southern courts follows an inverted-U relationship, and Duxbury (2021), which finds that the hazard of sentencing policy adoption across the 50 states increases with the size of Black population until it reaches a threshold, where the relationship inverts.

the purposes of this display, we set this constant support at 50% for White voters and 0.5% for Black voters and presume equal turnout.

A second line with shows the results with one possible “racial threat” pattern, in which White support is set at 50% in the absence of any racial diversity, and then increases linearly with increasing diversity at a slope of two (White voters’ support increases by two percentage points for each one percentage point increase of the Black share of the population). While there is an infinite range of possible functional forms, slopes, and intercepts for these calculations, plausible values yield the same general pattern: an inverse-U (or inverse-V) shape in which the overall result peaks in the “Racial Threat” case in areas which contain diverse demographics, not in homogenously White jurisdictions.

Figure 1. Racial Threat and Non-Racial Threat Support Patterns by County Demographics



Second, as the Populist electoral threat to local Democratic control was a critical factor in many of these referendums, it raises the question of whether referendum success was inhibited in counties with strong Populist traditions. Stated differently, did counties with histories of supporting the Populist Party actively oppose the disenfranchising referendums? As noted, Democratic leaders sought to eliminate any electoral competition, and disenfranchising African Americans would remove any lingering Republican threat, any biracial Populist threat, any kind of fusion arrangement, and any splinter movement within the Democratic Party. But a lingering question, especially in terms of the Populists, is whether class interests could overcome racial interests. That is, the Populists could only hope to succeed in the South by rejecting “White supremacy” and establishing an agrarian-based alliance across the racial divide. But, for many poor Whites, resisting racial calls to action was difficult—as they valued *some* social status in an often unfair and oppressive labor-capital regime.

Finally, to the extent that some of the referendum votes displayed evidence of voting that was not freely or fairly conducted, were there consistent techniques that disenfranchisers used within and across states? While historical “election forensics” will not provide a definitive answer to this question, we can leverage county-level turnout data to suggest that some techniques were more or less likely. Specifically, we can examine vote totals in counties that were unusually low or high—and might suggest too much support for the disenfranchising referendum given the African American population share—that could be explained by vote suppression or ballot-box stuffing, respectively.

Analysis of Referendum Votes

In this section, we analyze the county-level voting data on the fourteen disenfranchising referendums listed in Table 1. We seek to understand the relationship between racial

demographics and voting for these referendums,⁹ as well as to ascertain whether the elections were freely and fairly conducted. We find suggestive evidence of substantial election manipulation in some, but not all, of the referendums.

We analyze a single state referendum vote to illustrate the data and then move on to display curves for all of the disenfranchising referendums together. Our unit of observation is the county. For each county in a given election, we rely on two pieces of information: the “Yes” percentage for the disenfranchising referendum in that county and the share of that county that was African American in the immediately preceding decennial census.¹⁰

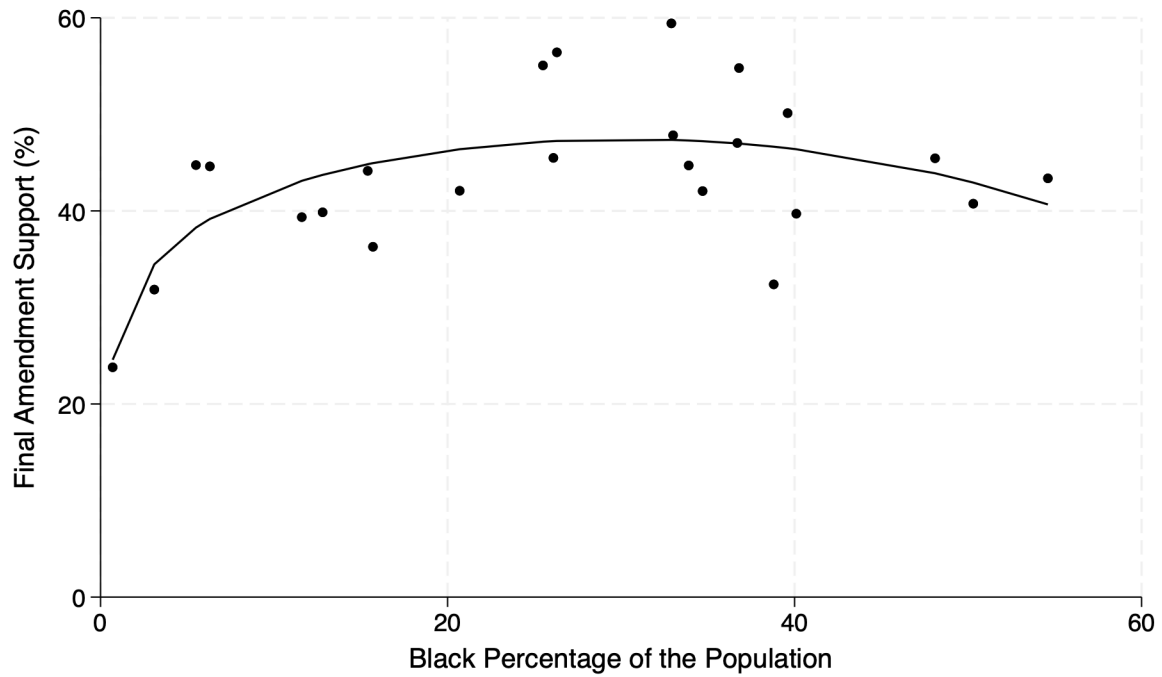
We begin with Maryland’s failed 1905 vote to adopt a literacy test. In Figure 2, we plot the county-level results (plus Baltimore City, which is administratively equivalent to a county within Maryland’s governing structure) relative to each county’s Black population share reported in the 1900 Census. As discussed previously, this vote failed in the state, but it did reach majority support in Howard, Kent, Somerset, Wicomico, and Worcester counties. Those counties all fell in a band between 25% and 40% of the population being African American. The vote failed to achieve a majority in any county under 25% Black or greater than 40%. Though somewhat muted, the fit curve applied to the data has the inverse-U shape that is distinctive of a “racial threat” explanation of voting outcomes. Notably, the county with the lowest “Yes” vote share was also the county that was most homogenously White. Because Maryland had no counties that were overwhelmingly populated by African Americans, we do not observe the full possible range of county demographics.¹¹

⁹ In Appendix 4, we provide county-level maps for each of the 14 referendum votes to compare Black population share with support for disenfranchisement.

¹⁰ We could instead use annual interpolated estimates. But this has minimal effect on the results and can introduce additional bias and error, especially for the 1910s, given World War I and the Spanish flu, which simple interpolation would partially distribute into the earlier years of the period.

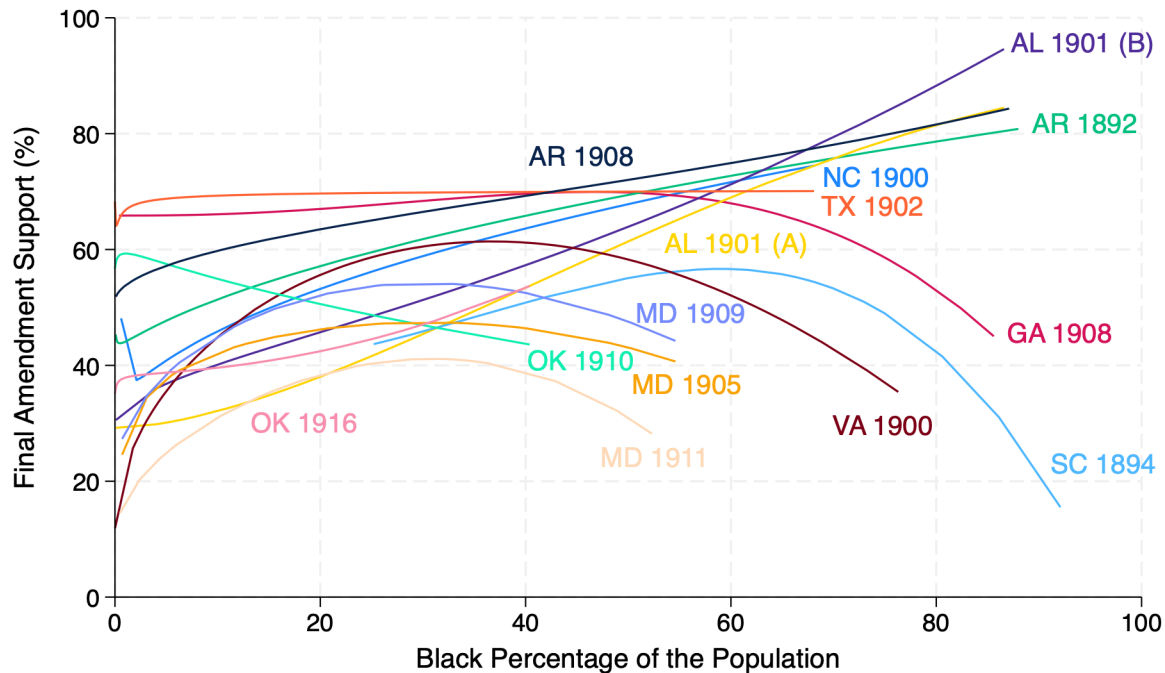
¹¹ For a deeper dive into the disenfranchisement attempts in Maryland, see Gray and Jenkins (2025b).

Figure 2. County-Level Vote Results in Maryland's 1905 Referendum



In Figure 3, we present the fit curves for all fourteen votes that we analyze. Each line represents a fit plot (fractional polynomial) of the county-level results over the Black percentage of the population. (Other fit specification yield similar curves).

Figure 3. Fit Curves of County-Level Results in Various State Referendums



Our set of results yield four distinct types of graphs. First, there is the 1910 Oklahoma amendment vote, which has a downward sloping pattern of results that is almost exactly linear. This is the one case that shows no evidence whatsoever of a racial-threat dynamic. Second, there are a set of inverse-U-shaped curves in which diverse counties voted more in favor of the referendums than did homogenously white or Black counties. South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, and all three Maryland votes generally fit this shape. Save for Georgia, all six notably increase in support as the Black share of the population increased, before distinct drops in counties with very large Black populations.

The third type of graph is Texas's 1902 disenfranchising amendment vote, which is almost a flat line, implying a near constant level of support regardless of racial demographics. Finally, there are a group of states, including both Alabama votes, both Arkansas votes, Oklahoma's second vote (in 1916), and North Carolina's vote, which have linear positive slopes.

Each state's county-level results increased linearly with the share of the population that was African American, with the lowest rates of support coming in the most homogenously White counties, and the highest support coming in places with the largest shares of Black voters.

The latter two categories are implausible on their face. To believe these are the results of fair and genuine elections, one would need to believe that either White turnout vastly outstripped Black turnout (voluntarily on the part of the non-voting African Americans) or that many thousands of African Americans voted for a referendum that was widely described as seeking to take away their effective right to vote. Neither of these possibilities is highly plausible in an election free of fraud or coercion. It is hardly surprising that popular elections in the Southern states between 1890-1920 may not have been fully free and fair elections. But it is notable that there was variation.

Investigating Election Fraud and Coercion

We consider evidence for possible vote manipulation or coerced non-participation by analyzing what the outcomes and demographics imply about the rate of White support for the referendum and turnout. We maintain that it is implausible that large numbers of African Americans freely voted for their own disenfranchisement without either coercion or inducement. Thus, we assume that 0.5% of Black votes were in favor.¹² Given that assumption, what would

¹² We acknowledge there are arguments that the rate should be higher. For example, Sidanius and Pratto (1991; 1999) have argued that systems of oppression often depend on the support of some of the oppressed. And, during the late 19th century, Booker T. Washington and his supporters argued that African Americans should focus on economic development and education as the most viable path to full equality, even if it meant temporarily accepting (at least publicly) the denial of political rights (Norrell 2009). While we are still skeptical about African Americans voting for their own suffrage restriction, we explore whether a move to a Black support rate of 5% or 10% would materially change our results. We find that it does not. In Appendix 3 (Figures A3-3 and A3-4), we present analogous versions of Figures 4 and 7 that are estimated assuming 10% of African American votes were cast in favor of disenfranchisement, rather than 0.5%. They are substantially the same as Figures 4 and 6, with slightly lower slopes in each case. In the same Appendix, we also show that a number of counties required African American support well over 50% to attain the reported results.

be a naïve estimate of the level of support among White voters necessary to obtain the overall support level we find in the counties? We illustrate this calculation with an example.

In North Carolina's 1900 successful poll tax referendum vote, Bertie County voted 73.73% in favor – even though it was 57.6% African American in that year. If we assume that Black and White turnout were equal and that only 0.5% of African American voters voted “Yes,” then the White support needed to be 173.2%. This was clearly impossible.

There are several ways that this number could be reached. First, Black voters could have voted in favor at much higher rates than 0.5%. This seems unlikely absent coercion, but even if we assume that 10% of Black voters voted for policies seeking their own disenfranchisement, White support would still have needed to have been 160.3%. Alternatively, assuming equal turnout between the races and 100% White support, we would have to observe about 55% Black support in Bertie County for the ultimate result to be mathematically possible. That is highly unlikely in a truly “free and fair” election.

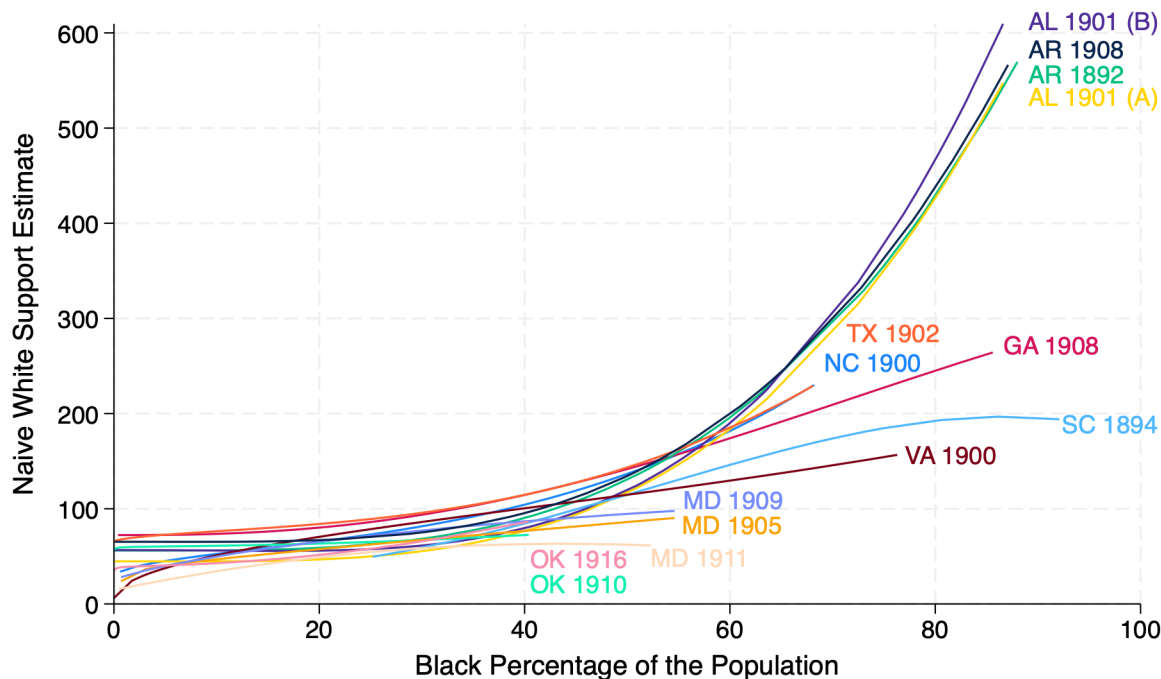
A second possibility was that White turnout was dramatically higher than Black turnout. If we assume that White support was 100% in Bertie County (likely incorrect, but plausibly close to the truth), then White turnout would have needed to be 73.2% higher than Black turnout to yield the results we find. In practice, that means that if Black turnout was 50%, White turnout would have needed to be about 87%. If Black turnout was 60%, then even 100% White turnout would not have been enough to yield the reported Bertie County result from 1900. Note also that any reduction from uniform White support would necessitate even greater turnout disparities between the races to produce the reported figures.

It is conceivable that White turnout could have been considerably higher than Black turnout, but there is no precedent for such a large gap between Whites and African Americans in

free elections. The most plausible explanation for the outcome in Bertie County is that large numbers of Black voters were coerced or prevented from voting, depressing their turnout and leading to an overrepresentation of White voters, who then carried a supermajority in the county despite being a minority of the citizens.

With Bertie County in 1900 as an illustration, we now apply this same logic to all counties in all fourteen of our analyzed votes. We present the plot of all fourteen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Naïve Estimates of the White Support Levels for the Referendums in Figure 3



We see considerable variation here, but several important commonalities. First, in places with few Black voters (<30% of the population), results appear to be plausible. Though the estimated “naïve” White support rates range between nearly 0% and nearly 100%, all are completely possible. These results indicate that in mostly homogenous, White-dominated areas, our assumptions (of parity in turnout rates and low Black support) were likely close to accurate.

The next notable feature is that the lines slope upward. This is in line with the racial threat hypothesis and indicates that as the racial demographics became less homogenously White, White voters supported disenfranchising referendums more. The slope of this increase varies from state to state, but the opposite pattern did not occur in any state.

It is after passing approximately a 30-40% African American share of the county population that the states began to diverge. Both Oklahoma votes and all three Maryland votes remain beneath 100% for the entire range of county demographics. Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, and North Carolina all go beyond 100% after 30% Black share of the population, maxing out around 200-250% in our naïve measure. At the highest range, these are implausible. Finally, both votes in Alabama and Arkansas reach values exceeding 500%.¹³ It is impossible to have a turnout advantage that high without Black turnout being kept beneath 25%, while White turnout approached 100%. Such a disparity has never existed in free American statewide elections.

From Counties to States: Did Suspect Counties Affect Statewide Outcomes?

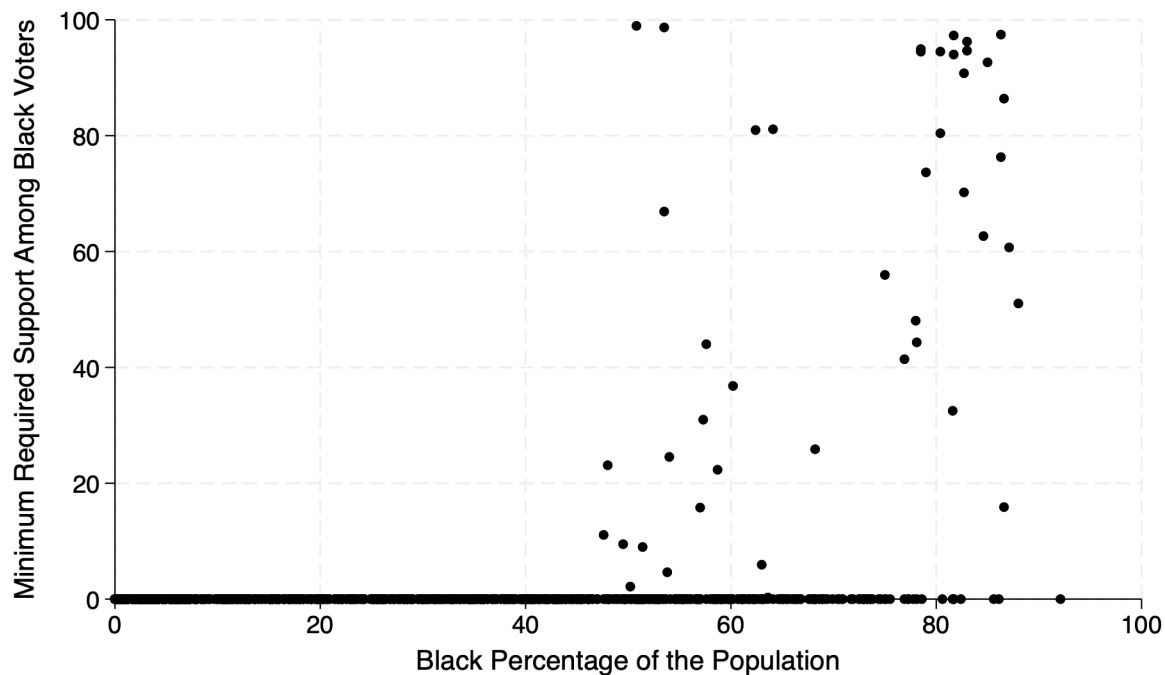
We argue that some reported county-level results are implausible based on county demographics and turnout. They either require turnout advantages for White voters that are incredible absent voter intimidation and/or coercion, or they require a level of African American support that is equally incredible given the explicit goal of these referendums to disenfranchise Black voters. While we are limited in how much we can say about voter intimidation, we can analyze the data with a test that poses a very high bar.

¹³ The top 10 counties for naively estimated White support come from these two states, with 7 from Alabama and 3 from Arkansas. See Table A3-1 for more information.

We calculate the mathematical minimum necessary support among voting African Americans in each county. That is, we assume all voting eligible White men turned out and voted for disenfranchisement. We recognize that this is a completely unrealistic assumption. However, assuming it is instructive about the most egregious cases. Assuming all eligible White voters voted for the referendum, turnout and total vote results leave clear remainders, and they must have come from African American voters. Thus, we can know how many African Americans must have voted to yield the reported turnout and how many of them must have votes “Yes” and “No” to yield the outcome of the referendum.

In 95.8% of all county-referendum observations, this number is 0% for both turnout and support. Mathematically, no African American vote was necessary to achieve the reported result. This is unsurprising because the test is incredibly exacting given that it assumes 100% White turnout and support. However, what is remarkable is that despite these unrealistic assumptions, 4.2% of county-referendum observations still required African American support – even under the absolute White support assumption. And in some counties, overwhelming Black support was required to achieve the stated results. We present these data (for counties with population of at least 5,000) in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Minimum Support Necessary from Voting African Americans



In 47 observations, a non-zero number was required, and in some cases, greater than 50% support was required to get to the reported results (even with perfect White turnout and support). We think this is strong additional evidence that these counties likely suffered from considerable voting manipulation or coercion and that the results were not legitimate.

While 4.2% of observations is a small amount, this reflects the stark assumption of 100% White turnout and support. In practice, the numbers were surely less. Consider all counties that had a White population greater than 95%, which make up about a quarter of our observations. The average turnout in these counties was only 60% and the average support was only 54.7%. Thus, this test poses a very high bar—and yet still some counties cleared it. It simply was not possible in a number of counties to lawfully achieve the reported results without substantial African American support.

In addition to the 4.2% of counties that mathematically required African American votes to reach reported results, an additional 4.7% of the total county-referendum observations required at least two-to-one turnout advantages for White voters. In total, that is about 8.9% of counties that either mathematically required African American support or required an unprecedented turnout advantage for White voters. While this is less than ten percent of counties, that does not mean it was negligible. This is because the offending counties were not spread evenly across states, and not all counties were of equal size. We investigate the rate of these dubious results within each referendum, and then the share of the state's deciding margin owed to those counties. This is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The Impact of Implausible County Results on Overall Referendum Margins

State	Year	% Counties Requiring Black Support	% of Total Margin in Counties	% Counties Requiring Black Support or Exceptional White Turnout Advantage	% of Total Margin in Counties
AR	1892	9.3	27.7	10.7	38.2
SC	1894	0	0	17.1	228.1
NC	1900	15.5	45.8	15.5	45.8
VA	1900	0	0	0.9	1.7
AL	1901a	12.1	77.9	21.2	91.6
AL	1901b	16.7	117.2	20.2	136.1
TX	1902	1.8	1.5	4.1	5.2
MD	1905	0	0	0	0
AR	1908	2.7	4.0	12.0	21.4
GA	1908	0	0	16.8	17.2
MD	1909	0	0	0	0
OK	1910	0	0	0	0
MD	1911	0	0	0	0
OK	1916	0	0	0	0

The set of counties that featured these suspicious patterns was not uniform across states. While no county in either Maryland or Oklahoma referendum met these marks, about a fifth of

Alabama counties did. Most strikingly, two referendums (South Carolina's in 1894 and Alabama's ratification in 1901) drew their entire winning margin from suspect counties. In counties whose results were more plausible given their demographics, "No" got more votes than "Yes" on the referendums. We believe that this indicates—and thereby supports many journalistic and academic claims—that the winning side of these two referendums was fraudulent. This had long range consequences: the Alabama Constitution of 1901 was the (often amended) governing constitution of the state for exactly 121 years, until its replacement in 2022. In addition to the two referendums that received their entire winning margin from suspect states, Alabama's first 1901 referendum (calling for the Constitutional convention) received more than 90% of its voting margin in suspect counties.

We note that our approach is highly conservative. By looking at the share of the vote margin that came from these suspect counties, we implicitly compare the observed world to one in which "Yes" and "No" received equal votes in the county (thus, the margin would be zero). But, in fact, the most plausible results in these heavily African American counties would have been substantial negative margins, with "No" carrying the day, putting even more results in question. We also assume in these tests that no fraud was committed in any other county, another conservative assumption. We set up these demanding tests to show that, even under such assumptions, the irregular voting patterns mattered and likely changed at least some final outcomes even if most counties across the south look broadly valid in their reported vote totals.

Later in the paper, we explore turnout data to gain extra insight into what possible methods may have been used, but we can only rule out certain explanations. For example, it is unlikely that the most extreme states simply discouraged (up to and including by force) African Americans from voting and otherwise counted votes fairly. Our evidence points us to either a

combination of manipulation techniques or completely fabricated results in the most extreme majority-Black counties.

Populist Legacy and Referendum Success

In this section, we investigate to what extent poor, populist Whites were able to work together with African Americans in fusion arrangements to combat the disenfranchising referendums. To reiterate, there is substantial historical evidence that White Democratic elites feared the formation of a fusion coalition of African Americans and poor Whites. As a result, disenfranchising efforts often occurred after a wave of non-Democratic voting by poorer Whites. This is most notable in the brief success of the Populist Party in the 1890s. Democratic elites may have been motivated to target disenfranchising not just at the GOP-supporting African Americans, but also at the poorer Whites who supported the Populists. Methods such as poll taxes and literacy tests could, if implemented to do so, exclude many illiterate and indigent White voters as well. The combination of these would undercut any fusion against conservative, anti-populist Democratic elites.

However, a well-known problem for this potential fusion was the racial antipathy felt for African Americans by those same poor Whites that would need to ally with them. These divisions existed and were inflamed by Democratic elites in the Southern states as a means of keeping their potentially daunting enemy divided. Race baiting and appeals to White supremacy were often effective in places where any returns to social status were highly valued.

We consider to what extent this second group (Populist Whites) helps explain the success or failure of these disenfranchising referendums. We analyze the success of the referendums relative to the vote share of the Populist presidential candidate in the 1892 election in that given county, as well as the Black share of the population, to determine this relationship. The Populist

Party in 1892 was arguably the most successful third party in American presidential history. The Populist standard bearer, James B. Weaver, was a credible presidential candidate, as he was a Civil War veteran and a three-term U.S. House member from Iowa representing the Greenback Party (Mitchell 2009). He was on the ballot in nearly every state and managed to win five states and twenty-two Electoral College votes, along with more than a million popular votes. Because Weaver was a constant candidate across the country—as opposed to Populists running for governorships or House seats—in a high-profile election, his support in 1892 is a great comparable measure of Populist sentiment across counties.

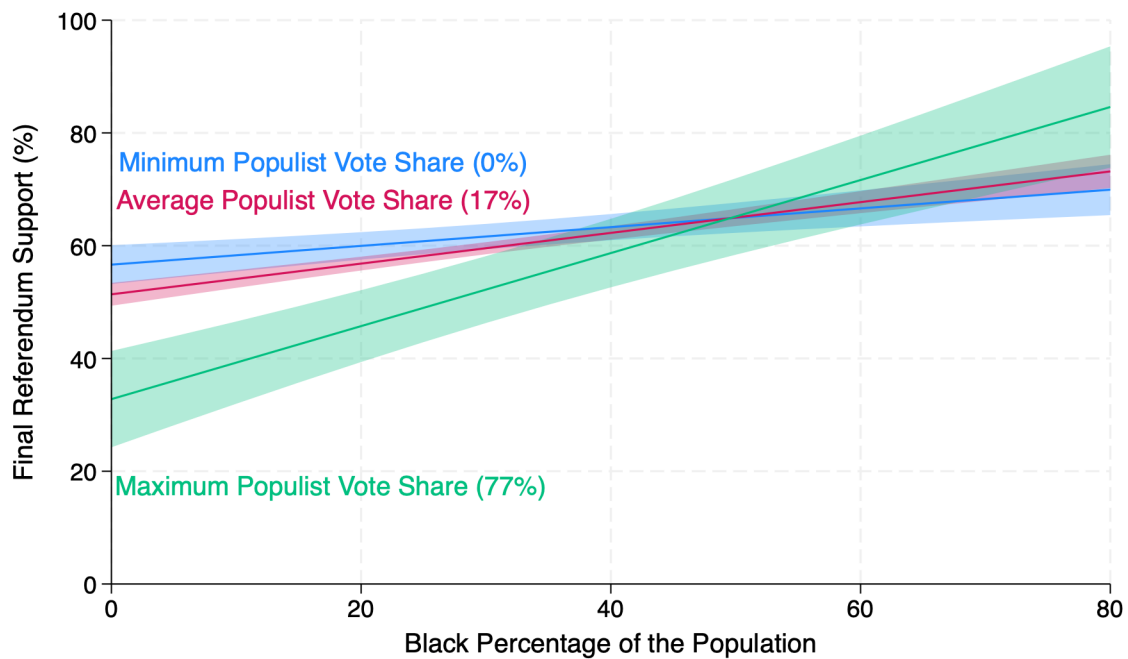
We estimate linear regression models where the outcome is the Yes Percentage that the disenfranchising referendum received in a given county. The main independent variables are the Black Share of the Population, the Populist Vote Share in 1892, and an interaction of the two. Finally, we also add a fixed effect for each referendum. Data issues necessitate differing approaches to measuring Populist Vote Share in 1892, and thus we have three different models. In Model 1, we treat counties where there were zero recorded Populist votes as the equivalent of 0% support. In Model 2, we soften that assumption and instead treat those as missing data, as it is possible that the Populists were not on the ballot in some counties and thus the lack of support is more indicative of ballot access. Finally, in Model 3, we drop all counties from Texas, Virginia, and Georgia, which had made significant changes to county boundaries—adding new counties—between 1892 and the year of their referendum vote. These changes in boundaries introduce measurement error, so dropping those states reduces that error. We also drop the set of counties identified in Table 2 as having highly suspect results. Finally, in all three models, the referendums for Oklahoma are dropped (as it was not a state in 1892), and the first referendum in Arkansas is also dropped, as it occurred several months before the 1892 presidential election.

Results appear in Table 3. As the models are interactive, and their component pieces push in different directions, we interpret them in their combined marginal effects. Figure 6 plots predicted outcomes over ranges of observed outcomes for both Black Share of the Population and Populist Vote Share in 1892. We use the results in Model 1, but graphs for Models 2 and 3 are substantially similar.

Table 3. Estimating Support for Disenfranchisement Referendums

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)
Black Share of the Population	0.17** (0.04)	0.15** (0.04)	0.25** (0.06)
Populist Vote Share in 1892	-0.31** (0.07)	-0.35** (0.07)	-0.24* (0.10)
Black Share of the Population X Populist Vote Share in 1892	0.01** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)
N	870	816	351
R ²	0.30	0.33	0.41

Figure 6. Predicted Outcomes Based on the Interactive Model (1) in Table 3



The blue band in Figure 6 corresponds to the minimum level of Populist support in a county in 1892 (0%). The red band corresponds to the mean support across counties in our dataset (17%). Finally, the green band represents the expectations at the maximum observed level of 1892 Populist support in a county (77%). Thus, the association of Populist support can be understood by observing the change moving from the blue to red to green bands at a given point on the x-axis. The association with the Black Percentage of the Population and the support for the referendum can be understood as the slope of the individual lines.

We find that Populist support was associated with decreases in support at low levels of Black share of the population—and higher support at the highest levels of Black share. This indicates that in the absence of a sizable Black community in the county, Populist-supporting Whites (largely poor) opposed the referendums. But in places where the Black population was near parity with the White population—or exceeded it—the presence of poorer Whites corresponded with greater success for the referendums. This may reflect success by Democratic elites in driving wedges between their two possible political opponents. It may also reflect the racial politics and animus of the time: poor Whites still favored systems of oppression of their potential allies over an actual fusion coalition.

Of course, earlier in the paper, we cast doubt on the veracity of election results in some counties, especially those with large Black populations. It is worth questioning then to what extent we can interpret these model results credibly. It may simply be that more fraud and vote manipulation was committed in the places where the fusion coalition was most possible. While we cannot eliminate this possibility, we note that in Model 3 of Table 3 we dropped the set of highly suspect counties identified in Table 2 and the main result held: there is no evidence of fusion coalitions.

Exploring Turnout in Disenfranchising Referendums

We consider one final question: what can we say about how these results may have been obtained? More than a century removed, it is impossible to conduct sophisticated, modern election forensics. We must, admittedly, base our analyses on plausible assumptions and reasoning from limited information. Still, the data used in this paper can help us rule out some explanations, narrowing the set of possible strategies that yielded the results we find.

An important question is turnout. If we assume that a non-trivial portion of counties engaged in electoral manipulation of some kind, then turnout may help us narrow in on a more precise story of how this was achieved. For example, if African American voters were prohibited from voting informally, through terror, violence, or other inducement, and votes were otherwise recorded accurately, we would expect to see unusually low turnout in the counties with anomalous referendum results. Alternatively, if African Americans were allowed to vote, but many additional votes were created to “stuff” the ballot boxes, we would expect unusually high turnout. If, however, we saw very typical turnout in these counties with improbable results, that would be evidence for either the combination of the two methods or voting numbers that were completely made up and unconnected to any actual ballots at all. Again, we cannot definitively prove any of these. Our data simply help point us toward one or the other as more likely.

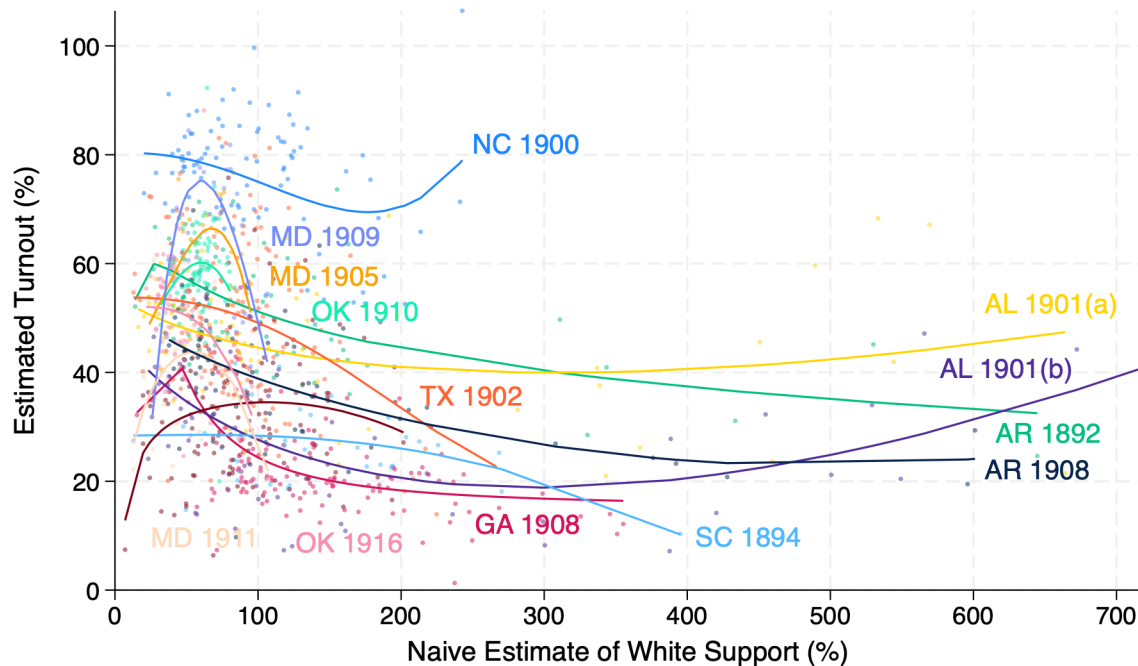
To conduct our analysis, we create an estimate of Turnout in each disenfranchisement vote. Ideally, this would be percentage based on a numerator of combined “Yes” and “No” votes and a denominator of the voting-eligible population. This faces a significant data problem as we do not, in fact, know the number of eligible voters in each county for each vote. These data are more readily available and in reliable quality in some states, such as Maryland, than in other states in our dataset. We instead use a workable estimate of the voting eligible population by

multiplying the state's total population by the percentage of the state that was voting eligible in the preceding decennial census.

For example, Alabama held two disenfranchisement votes in 1901. We multiply each Alabama county's total population in 1901 by the percentage of all Alabama residents in 1900 who were native-born American men of voting age (22.2%). This product then becomes the denominator in our turnout calculation. This is measured with some error (as not every county in Alabama will have had an identical age distribution as the state as a whole a year prior) but reflects the best level of precision possible. Thus, for example, in Alabama's first 1901 vote in Baldwin County, 922 votes were cast, representing about 6.6% of the total population of 14,004. But we estimate that this reflected a 29.7% turnout relative to the voting-eligible population.

We conduct this estimation for each county in each vote, and plot in Figure 7 the estimated turnout on the y-axis against the Naïve Estimate of White Support from the preceding section on the x-axis. Because estimating very low populations was (and is) inherently noisy and small errors can yield large changes in turnout percentage estimates, we present only those counties with an estimated population of at least 5,000.

Figure 7. Estimated Turnout Relative to the Naïve Estimate of White Support, Counties with Populations of 5,000 or Greater



We learn several things from Figure 7. First, there was incredible variation in turnout both between states and within states. North Carolina saw turnout above 75% in most of its counties in 1900, while most Georgia counties (in 1908) and South Carolina counties (in 1894) had turnout below 40%. This may reflect variation in the timing of votes, what other elections they coincided with, as well different intensities of vote encouragement (and discouragement) in the states. Within states as well, there is considerable variation. Some Georgia counties approached 40% turnout, while others were below 10%. Additionally, no county with very anomalous results (indicating extreme turnout advantages for White voters) had exceptionally high turnout. However, in those states that did see anomalous results in some counties, the reported turnout in those counties was, on average, lower than in counties that reported more plausibly fair results. For each state, there were numerous counties reporting realistic results with

similar turnout to those reporting implausible results. The bivariate correlations are negative, but generally weak.

We interpret these results as indicative that, in most places, there was not a straightforward story of discouraging African American turnout but otherwise counting votes fairly. Some of the most egregious offenders, in Alabama and Arkansas, had turnout very much in line with that in the rest of their states in the same vote. Turnout was also sufficiently high in most places that the kind of turnout advantages for White voters required to obtain the reported results are functionally implausible – and in some cases statistically impossible.

Consider Lowndes County, Alabama. In 1901, the county was about 87% African American, with a population of about 36,000 people, of which about 22% were eligible to vote.¹⁴ In the constitutional ratification vote in 1901, Lowndes County voted against the referendum, 54% to 46% with about 37% turnout. Even this is a surprisingly positive result given that the population was overwhelmingly African American, and the provision was very clearly intended to disenfranchise Black voters. We would estimate that, given our assumptions of uniform support among Whites and near uniform opposition among Blacks, White turnout would need to be about 3.5 times as high as Black turnout to obtain the reported results. This was just about possible, if we assume 100% White turnout, and about 30% Black turnout. Though it would stretch credulity to believe that this level of turnout disparity was likely in the absence of illegal election interference.

The question goes from implausible to impossible with the other referendum vote in Lowndes County in 1901 – the one that called for the convention. That time, the county reported 90.5% yes votes on turnout of 44%. The White turnout advantage would have needed to be 6.72

¹⁴ The overall portion of the population eligible to vote was so low because of the exclusion of women and the younger age distribution of the time.

times that of Black turnout. Simply put, that is mathematically impossible given the demographics of the county at the time and the 44% turnout. To achieve the vote results reported, given our assumption of minimal African American support, Black turnout would have needed to be no greater than 5.9%. But to achieve the reported turnout, it needed to be at least 36%, even if every eligible White voter in the county turned out to vote. Thus, the necessary level of White turnout advantage simply was not possible. One of two things must have been true in Lowndes County in 1901: either large numbers of African Americans voted for their own disenfranchisement—or they were induced to do so through some form of election interference—or the results are wholly fabricated through miscounting or faking ballots. No other possibility can yield the results reported.

It is possible to determine how high African American support for the referendum in Lowndes County would have needed to be to achieve the reported results. If we assume 100% White turnout and 100% White support, then we can set a lower bound on the level of African American support necessary to yield the reported results. That would be 86.4%. Any deviations from perfect turnout and support by White voters would necessitate even higher rates of support by Black voters.

Conclusion

Standard accounts of disenfranchisement in the ex-Confederate South usually focus on the actions of White Democratic elites: those in power sought to restrict the suffrage rights of African Americans (and some poor Whites) in order to consolidate power. These accounts largely ignore the role of the voting public. Yet popular support was critical in passing the state constitutional referendums—and thus approving poll taxes and literacy tests as additional qualifications of voting—that made disenfranchisement possible.

In this paper, we collect county-level vote totals on all constitutional referendums involving suffrage restrictions in the late-19th and early 20th centuries and conduct the first systematic analysis of citizens' role in the disenfranchisement process. We begin by connecting the disenfranchisement provisions considered by referendum to the voters who participated in those elections. When we do, we find an implausible outcome in many states: the referendums were most successful in precisely the locations where the targets of disenfranchisement lived.

While this outcome can partly be explained by the idea of “racial threat”—that White voters who lived in diverse communities were more likely to vote to disenfranchise their Black neighbors—it is inadequate in many contexts. Digging deeper, we find substantial evidence to suggest that these elections were not fairly conducted. Voter suppression and fraud were likely key methods of succeeding in these popular referendums. In some counties, the results were so anomalous that outright fabrication is the most plausible explanation. Most notably, the entire winning margins of two referendums (one in Alabama and one in South Carolina) were entirely made up by the most anomalous counties. This is hardly surprising, given what we know of the South in this period. But it is an important addendum to our efforts to shine a spotlight on the popular role in disenfranchisement.

Finally, in places where the Black population was similar in size to or larger than the White population, the presence of poorer Whites was associated with greater success for the referendums. This reflects the failure of Populism—the formation of a fusion coalition of African Americans and poor Whites. This failure could have been accomplished by Democratic elites successfully dividing their two possible political opponents. It may also reflect the racial politics and animus of the time: poor Whites still favored the oppression of African American—their potential allies—over an actual (and potentially successful) fusion arrangement.

Coming full circle, while this has been an historical account of how popular support made disenfranchisement possible in the ex-Confederate South at the turn of the twentieth century, it also has parallels to today. As noted, some on the political left are concerned that new attempts at voter restriction are being pursued in the contemporary United States, and the mechanisms once again allow the people at times to play a role. For example, constitutional referendums have been pursued in a variety of states over the last two decades stipulating that U.S. citizens must possess identification to vote. From 2004 to 2025, voters decided on 13 ballots measures (in 12 states) to add language that voters must present specific forms of identification before casting a ballot—and six additional ballot measures (in six states) were set to be decided in 2026.¹⁵ Constitutional referendums have been pursued in a variety of states over the same timespan stipulating that only U.S. citizens can vote in U.S. elections (at any level). From 2018 to 2025, voters decided on 15 ballot measures (in 15 states) to add language about citizenship requirements for voting—and four additional ballot measures (in four states) were set to be decided in 2026.¹⁶

Whether these contemporary constitutional referendums indeed seek to restrict voting rights (per some on the political left) or reduce fraudulent behavior in the voting process (per some on the political right) is a matter of debate. What is true is that elites are not the exclusive decision makers on these questions—voter qualifications at the state level are established in constitutions, and any changes require a state’s citizens to weigh in. Popular referendums give people the ability to decide who participates in elections. This was critical in the U.S. South at

¹⁵ 2004-2025: AZ (2004, approved); OK (2010, approved); MS (2011, approved); MN (2012, rejected); MO (2016, approved); AR (2018, approved); NC (2018, approved); AZ (2022, rejected); MI (2022, approved); NE (2022, approved); NV (2024, approved); ME (2025, rejected); WI (2025, approved). 2026: AZ, CA, NV, NC, OH, OK.

¹⁶ 2018-2025: ND (2018); AL (2020); FL (2020); CO (2020); OH (2020); LA (2022); IA (2024); WI (2024); KY (2024); ID (2024); SC (2024); MO (2024); OK (2024); NC (2024); TX (2025). All 15 of these were approved by voters. 2026: AR, KS, SD, WV.

the turn of the twentieth century and led to significant democratic backsliding that persisted for generations. Ballot measures defining voting eligibility are occurring today in a variety of states across the nation—not just in the South—and their effects are both considerably smaller in magnitude and highly contested in their interpretation.

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